Portfolio submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology

Bridging the gap: Parent-child communication in separated households

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I would like to start by thanking each of my participants for taking part in my research by patiently and generously sharing your experiences with me. I hope that I have done justice to your experience and that through giving a voice to your stories that this research will increase awareness of the journey that many shared custody parents find themselves on.

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Preface

"We think we listen, but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy. Yet listening, of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know." (Rogers, 1980, p.116)

At the start of my clinical practice journey, I became acutely aware of the difficult process that family members go through when undergoing parental separation or divorce. I was able to see the extent to which changing family structures can significantly impact parent-child communication, as well as intra-family relationships and interactions. In my own life and through my own personal journey of seeing my family grow, I was able to see the extent to which communication constantly changes and evolves, especially when family members undergo life events or various developmental stages. When coming to the final stages of writing this portfolio, I reflected on the transitional processes that I had undergone in the past four years and was struck by some of the parallels between my own journey of becoming a mother, and a counselling psychologist, and the journeys of my research participants and some of my clients.

Through my own life, my client work and my research, I have learnt the extent to which family communication can be one of the biggest factors in influencing the quality of family relationships. Hence this portfolio will unfailingly recognize the systemic impact of parent-child communication, together with the ways in which professionals working in the field of psychology may support family members undergoing difficult transitions or struggling with communication.

This section briefly introduces each component of my portfolio, the central theme of which is communication and its crucial role in parent-adolescent relationships. The portfolio comprises three parts: a piece of original qualitative research; a combined client study and process report; and a publishable research paper. When describing each part, I also outline their key themes and explain how the broader portfolio topic evolved.

Section A: Doctoral Thesis

This doctoral research utilises Braun and Clarke's (2019) Reflexive Thematic Analysis to explore the experience of parents in communicating with their adolescent children in shared custody households. The research was inspired, and largely driven, by my fascination with

the changes I have perceived in the post-separation communication of parents and their adolescent children. Over the last fifteen years I have witnessed such communication transitions in my personal life and wanted to understand them further. Accordingly, I chose to explore the role of communications technology in adult children's relationships with their divorced parents for my MSc thesis. Both the findings and the limitations of this research prompted me to pursue the subject further and after completing my MSc, I thought about how I could expand on this research topic at doctorate level.

Moreover, in my first counselling psychology adult placement, I worked therapeutically with two separated parents, both struggling to communicate with their adolescent children. This further spurred my curiosity and I determined that it would form the subject of my doctoral thesis. My continued interest kept me curious and engaged throughout each step of the research process.

A review of current literature confirmed that although divorce, separation, and shared custody are well-researched, the experience of parents' communication, specifically with adolescent children, within shared custody households has not been adequately considered in the research. The literature review also confirmed that the impact on parents and their adolescent children of reliance on remote communication had rarely been considered. This research therefore aims to fill the gap in the literature by asking the following question:

How do parents communicate with their adolescent children in shared custody households?

For this research study, twelve parents with shared custody arrangements participated in individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews to discuss their experience of communicating with their adolescent children. The inclusion criteria were as follows: shared custody (minimum 33% time with their children); at least one adolescent child; and a smartphone, enabling participants to engage in the research. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) was used to analyse the transcripts of the interviews. Four master themes emerged, each with several sub-themes. The master themes generated and explored below were the following: Communications technology sustains the parent-adolescent relationship; Live communication is irreplaceable; Communicating with a developing adolescent child; and Parents' revaluation of their communication in light of their separation.

The analysis includes both experiences common to all participants and some which were specific to only a few. Novel findings are identified, and where relevant, the discussion also relates the findings to current research. As many aspects of this topic were found to be

under-researched in the literature, I also offer suggestions for future research and exploration.

My choice to pursue this form of qualitative research wherein I had the opportunity to speak to a group of individuals about their experiences, reflect my wish to give individuals a voice, and a platform, in which their stories can be heard. As a clinician, I have seen how validating it can be for clients to share their stories and through writing this piece of original research I have been able to listen to my participants' experiences, as well as sharing them, in order to support others in the future. Thus, similar to my clinical work, my research study echoes my desire to offer meaning to my participants' personal experiences.

In addition, the aim of my research is to enhance the practice of clinicians working with clients who have undergone a family separation. Moreover, I hope my research may inform psychologically oriented educational programmes for parents who are undergoing, or have undergone, a separation. Lastly, I hope that publication of my findings will support parents who are considering, or are in the process of, undergoing a separation, as well as parents who are already separated or divorced.

Section B

In this section, I present a clinical case study and process report. I chose this particular piece of work for inclusion in my portfolio as key aspects of the case resonate strongly with themes and issues of my research study and publishable paper.

This case study outlines the therapeutic journey of an adolescent girl, aged 17. One of the client's primary goals of therapy was to explore her relationship, and communication with her divorced parents. In working with this client, I used an individual systemic therapy model in order to allow her the space to think about her struggles and goals more broadly, within the context of her family relationships and interactions.

The process report focused on a therapy session which took place over Zoom. This complex experience itself highlights the role of communications technology in contemporary, necessarily distanced, communication during a time of Covid-19. In the case study and process report, the difficulties associated with communicating remotely were regularly discussed and these struggles echo themes raised by the participants in the research study and featured in the publishable journal article.

The process report extract in the transcript focuses on a phone call my client had with her father. Her father lives abroad, so she only communicates with him remotely, primarily by phone. The extract demonstrates some of their communication difficulties and the client's feelings about her experiences in communicating with her father. This ties in with the rest of the portfolio by exemplifying through empirical observation the difficulties of parent-adolescent communication that can arise in a divorced household; remote communication, although at times helpful, can also be difficult and marred by other complexities associated with lack of face-to-face intimacy. This section also offers an adolescent's perspective on parent-adolescent communication in a divorced household. This study therefore offers a useful alternate perspective to that of the participants in the research study and publishable paper, all of whom are separated parents with adolescent children. The struggles of this client confirmed the extent to which parent-adolescent communication difficulties can negatively impact both the individuals in the relationship and the relationship itself. Additionally, working with this client systemically, and experiencing the ways her presenting problems were intertwined with her family interactions and communication, significantly helped me to develop professionally as a novice systemic practitioner.

I chose this particular case study and process report as appropriate for my portfolio as it is particularly helpful in exhibiting my professional development as a clinician. Over the three years of clinical training I have had the honour of seeing many different clients within numerous, diverse placements. When first learning about the Rogerian principles of therapy, I remember viewing empathy as an action. Looking back at these past few years, I now consider empathy as my primary and key therapeutic tool, one which is always with me and no longer requires a specific thought or action. This is evident in my presented clinical case study, as well as some examples of the challenges which I came across when working therapeutically with this particular client. I also demonstrated the various ways in which working through these challenges improved on mine and my client's therapeutic relationship as well as my general clinical practice. Negotiating through some of these clinical challenges taught me a lot about what it means to be a Counselling Psychologist and how to consider and justify which clinical orientations and therapeutic tools best suit the requirements of each individual client.

Section C: Publishable Paper

This paper is based on an analysis of the most original of my research study's findings, which I hope to share with other researchers and clinicians. The publishable journal article is titled:

‘Shared custody Parents’ Experience of Using Communications Technology to Communicate with their Adolescent Children: A Qualitative Study.’

My literature search revealed that the role of communications technology in parent-adolescent communication in shared custody households is under-researched and under-reported. This in part motivated my decision to present this particular segment in my journal article for the international *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage.*

I also chose to explore this theme further in my publishable paper for a more personal reason. After completing several of the interviews, I had ‘off the record’ discussions with some participants, who shared with me their reasons for agreeing to participate in my research and offered suggestions for future research in the field of communication in separated households. Many spoke about wanting to better understand the role of communications technology. There seemed to be a stigma around depending on technology for communication and a few of them suggested that if research could demonstrate its benefits for parents’ communication with their children, this would be both helpful and validating for them. This motivated me to focus on one specific theme from my research study, which explores the role of communications technology in shared custody household communication, in the hope that it would benefit both the relevant parents and clinicians or practitioners working with them.

Reflections

When reflecting on my journey in completing this professional doctorate in Counselling Psychology, I realise that although at times it was an extremely lengthy, difficult, and challenging mission, I have nonetheless developed enormously on both a personal and a professional level. This portfolio aims to reflect my commitment, both professional and personal, to counselling psychology’s core humanistic principles, by giving voice to my research study’s participants and clinical client.

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Section A: Doctoral Research Study:

How do parents communicate with their adolescent children in shared custody households?

Abstract

Separation and divorce can be a difficult and disruptive transition for all members of the nuclear family requiring family members to adapt to new forms of interacting with one another. Parents with shared custody arrangements undoubtedly spend a significant amount of time away from their adolescent children, more so than in two-parent households. Thus, this research investigates how shared custody parents communicate with their adolescent children, both face-to-face and apart. In the 21st century, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) can be defined as the technological devices used by individuals as well as their corresponding applications and softwares (Rudi et al., 2014). ICTs are now a fundamental component of family communication therefore, communications technology is included in the research's definition of communication and the research aims to understand how parents feel about using different communication platforms to communicate with their adolescent children. Twelve parents took part in in-depth, semi structured interviews to discuss their experience of communicating with their adolescent children in their shared custody homes. Parents were required to have shared custody, at least one adolescent child and a smartphone in order to take part in the research. Thematic Analysis was used throughout the research process, with Braun and Clarke's (2013) step-by-step method being used to analyse the interviews. Four master themes emerged, each with several sub-themes. The master themes generated include: Communications technology sustains the parent-adolescent relationship; Live communication is irreplaceable; Communicating with a developing adolescent child; and Parents' revaluation of their communication in light of their separation. These themes are examined and discussed within the study alongside links between the literature and the participants' experiences. The research outlines the strengths and limitations of the study as well as proposing ideas for further research in addition to discussing the implications of the study on the field of Counselling Psychology.

Keywords: Shared custody, parent-adolescent communication, ICTs, Communications Technology, video-calling, adolescent development.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Review of Existing Literature

1.1 Chapter Overview

Separation and divorce can be a difficult, disruptive, and painful process for all members of the nuclear family (Afifi et al., 2006). Since the 1990s, in the UK, Europe and the USA, divorce and separation rates have increased dramatically with approximately 50% of first marriages being terminated, this has transformed social perceptions of family structures (Eurostat, 2018; Williamson, 2017; Torres, 2010; Amato, 2010). According to Eurostat (2018) the number of divorces in the UK per 1,000 people has almost doubled from 1970 to 2017. Thus, many more individuals live in separated homes, requiring a stronger understanding of the impact this can have on communication. The changes being made to the parental structure through separation impact on all of the other family subsystems with parents dissolving their roles as spouses whilst maintaining their role as parents (Frank, 2008). The splitting of the family nucleus into two separate parental households requires each parent to establish a new independent relationship with each of their children, as well as creating a new single-parent family dynamic (Frank, 2008). Parental separation and divorce has been found to impact on the psychological wellbeing and communication of family members (Afifi, Huber and Ohs, 2006; Portugal and Alberto, 2013; Westberg, Nelson, & Piercy, 2002), thus requires a closer look.

This topic is particularly relevant to consider now as the world of instant communication is constantly expanding and advancing. The currently available forms of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), defined as the technological devices used by individuals as well as their corresponding applications and softwares (Rudi et al., 2014), provide ample opportunity for instant communication. This may impact on both parents' and their adolescents' communication abilities and mental health thus requires further exploration. For individuals working with this client group, a deeper understanding of parents' and their adolescent children's communication, and the impact that ICTs can have on their interactions, is fundamental as positive communication between parents and children has been regularly associated with higher psychological well-being for all family members (Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2007; Smyth, 2009; Portugal and Alberto, 2019).

Therefore, the research question being investigated is:

How do parents communicate with their adolescent children in shared custody households?

Although parental separation, divorce and family communication are all well researched subjects, this specific research question is worth considering since it focuses on a phenomenon that many families experience yet current literature has not sufficiently examined. Investigating the communication struggles associated with separation, shared custody arrangements and adolescent development offers an insight into how closely family communication is associated with family well-being and the quality of family relationships in post-separation homes. Additionally, this research uses a contemporary and evolving view of communication and its various mediums through investigating its role in families who have undergone developmental and structural transitions.

This chapter aims to explore the literature on parents' communication with their adolescent children in shared custody households. The presentation and synthesising of definitions of key terms is offered, followed by an overview of Family Systems Theory (FST) and its relevance to this study together with other helpful evidence-based clinical approaches; next a comprehensive critical review of the relevant literature, identifying limitations and significant gaps is explored. The chapter ends with a rationale justifying the research topic, based on the pre-existing literature and explains why this research is relevant and important to the field of counselling psychology.

1.2. Key Concepts and Definitions

1.2.1 Shared Custody

Kelly (2007) offers a clear, useful, well-researched account of joint physical custody. She argues that a 50/50 split is not necessary for the definition of 'shared custody' to apply, but children should be spending a substantial amount of time with each parent for a household to be defined as having joint physical custody. A minimum of 33% of time with each parent is suggested as adequate for a separation arrangement to be defined as shared custody. Reviewing the existing literature on children in shared custody homes, Nielsen (2011) concurs that children must live at least 33-35% of the time with each parent for a separation arrangement to be defined as 'shared custody'.

1.2.2 Communication

'Communication' stems from the Latin root 'commun', meaning to make common (Bohm, 2014). Communication is defined as a "transactional process from which individuals create,

share and regulate meanings" (Segrin and Flora, 2005 p. 15). The American Psychological Association dictionary defines communication as: "The transmission of information, which may be verbal (oral or written) or nonverbal. Humans communicate to relate and exchange ideas, knowledge, feelings, and experiences and for many other interpersonal and social purposes." (APA, 2021)

'Communication' is thus a polysemic term with many levels of meaning. In the present study the focus is on family-specific communication, including verbal and non-verbal communication, and communication within the context of ICTs.

1.2.3 Family Communication

Communication allows family members to recognise, understand and respond to each other's needs (Carr, 2006). Parents' communication with their children often centres on parenting, and encouraging their children's development and psychological, behavioural, and emotional adjustment (Bornstein, 2002).

Portugal and Alberto (2013, 2014) identified what they perceived as the main characteristics of parent-child communication. These included: (a) Supportive expressions of emotions and affection; (b) Parents' availability to communicate openly, honestly, and sensitively with their children; (c) Metacommunication – parents' willingness to communicate about their communication; (d) Parents' and their children's ability to confide in one another, sharing personal struggles when appropriate (for example, regarding work, relationships, friendships, family); and (e) Negative aspects of parent-child patterns of interaction.

These characteristics usually remain relatively stable; nevertheless, normative events, such as transitional developmental stages like adolescence, or unintended events such as changes in family structure, including parental separation, can trigger significant changes in parent-child communication (McManus & Nussbaum, 2011; Afifi et al., 2014). Divorce or parental separation can complicate parent-child communication and interaction patterns as parents and children may no longer dwell under the same roof (Neustaedter, Harrison and Sellen, 2013).

1.2.4 Verbal versus non-verbal communication

"The essence of lying is in deception, not in words" (Ruskin, 1860).

It is still widely believed that speech is our main form of communication, although it is thought that before the development of speech, feelings and communication were conveyed through body language and non-verbal sounds (Pease and Pease, 2017). It has been suggested that over 90% of communication is nonverbal 'micro-communication'; this includes posture, tone of voice, eye movement, and use of space, touch, and silence (Periyakoil, 2018). Birdwhistell (1952) studied nonverbal communication and estimated that humans can make and understand approximately 250,000 facial expressions. He also found that over 65% of conversational communication is non-verbal, with most messages conveyed through body-signals (Birdwhistell, 1952). Words convey specific information while body language can be a substitute for verbal communication that also allows emotions, attitudes, and other messages to be expressed (Pease and Pease, 2017).

Moreover, words are often inadequate to convey meaning. Paralinguistics (the way words are expressed) and non-verbal elements of communication, such as facial emotions, are also forms of communication. Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson (1993) explain that all behaviours can translate into a communication, suggesting that it is impossible not to communicate. Relational theories assume the importance of individuals sharing the same physical presence and face-to-face communication, allowing them to share non-verbal signals and indicators. Regarding relationship formation, Wang et al. (2015) suggest that social presence is often essential to create a trusting relationship; without it, emotional content can be easily misconstrued. Relational strategies for family members include behaviours that require spending time together on activities or tasks (Ramirez and Broneck, 2009).

1.2.5 ICT

Information and Communications Technology (ICTs) refers to the "technological devices individuals use, such as desktop or tablet computers, smart phones, and webcams as well as the software and applications used on these devices" (Rudi et al., 2014, p.78). The speed of technological change in the twenty-first century is unprecedented; in addition to the proliferation of devices and services available, the choices ICTs now offer in terms of how individuals within a system can connect and communicate are extraordinary (Neustaedter, Harrison and Sellen, 2013).

In the late twentieth century, communication was limited to face-to-face contact, telephone conversation, letter- writing and emails; face-to-face contact was the central mode of communication within families (Carvalho, Franciso, Relvas, 2014). Today, ICTs, especially

smartphones, have become highly adaptable, affordable, and accessible. Individuals can communicate through social and mobile media devices including voice-calls, email, text, instant messaging, videoconferencing (such as FaceTime, WhatsApp Video Call and Skype), and numerous social-media platforms. ICTs are efficient, affordable, practical, and user-friendly – immune to the barriers of location, distance, space and time (Rudi et al., 2014; Carvalho, Francisco, Relvas, 2014).

The internet thus extends social life into an online world. Eurostat (2019) reports 96% of UK households have computers or similar ICT hardware, with internet access. The increasing use, and convenience, of ICTs means that members of the same family system constantly face new ways to connect with others. The recent expansion of ICTs into daily life has meant that the scenarios for interaction have had to be readjusted, with current social and family connections reflecting our networked society (Carvalho, Francisco, Relvas, 2014).

But not all forms of communication will translate well in these new media. For instance, Mehrabian (1981) discusses the importance of taking greater care when using audio-only communication to convey important messages as these lack visual channels. Although not completely generalisable, Mehrabian (1981) suggests that only 7% of messages relating to attitudes or feelings are vocalized. In contrast, approximately 38% of these messages are expressed through paralinguistics (for example, tone of voice) and 55% through facial expressions. Although not without limitations, his model suggests that written communication can result in confusion, while telephone communication does not allow for facial expressions, which may make it less desirable for conveying sensitive or emotional issues. Video-calling is arguably a ‘substitute’ for face-to-face conversation, allowing both verbal speech and the opportunity to see others. Nevertheless, based on Mehrabian’s indicators, video-calling’s reliance on stable internet connection, intermittent images, and freezing make it less accurate than face-to-face conversation at expressing non-verbal signals.

There can thus be little doubt that family communication is being affected by the rise of ICT. Yet, as the following sections will show, the literature on family communications post-divorce and separation has yet to include these new trends.

1.3 Family Systems Theory

Family Systems Theory (FST) has been chosen as a helpful and appropriate theory to underpin this study because of its effective and informative methods of understanding family dynamics and observing family communication. FST sees the family as the principal context for relationships, this is where behavioural patterns are learned and fortified (Johnson and Ray, 2016). Within FST, emotions and behaviours of each individual are linked back to interactions and communication that takes place between family members (Kerr and Bowen, 1988), with these interactions being examined in order to offer information to assess the nature of familial relationships.

Unlike psychological theories of behaviour which are lineal causal through focusing on what is happening within an individual, FST uses a circular approach of causality, suggesting that each person's 'problem' behaviours are intrinsically linked to their surrounding environment and the behaviours of family members around them (Johnson and Ray, 2016). Through using FST, both theorists and clinicians can view all forms of family interaction as a mutually causative system in which the interactions and communications that take place strengthen and emphasise the nature of the family members' pre-existing interactions.

Within families who have undergone a separation or divorce, FST can be exceptionally helpful as all members of the family unit are systematically affected by the separation (Beal, 1979). FST often refers to the concept 'emotional attachment' when exploring the emotional systems that take place within family relationships and how they are managed (Kerr and Bowen, 1988). Within all family networks important emotional attachments exist, this is especially true around substantial family events such as marriages and births. Family relationships all have an emotional attachment equilibrium that can be reached, but different events in the family cycle can shift and cause variations in the intensity of the emotional attachment among family members. An emotional equilibrium is reached when relationships, such as the parent-child relationship, reflect a balance of both emotional fusion and emotional autonomy, but all relationships vary with regards to where on this spectrum they fall.

Parental separations, among other family ruptures, are capable of causing a deep imbalance in the family system whilst at times also distorting the emotional attachments within various family relationships (Beal, 1979). Although emotional attachments can be resolved after parental separation, this can be difficult and full resolution between parents is rare (Beal, 1979). Nevertheless, parents maintain a relationship, even after their separation, as they are

ultimately still parents to the same children. Thus, some form of emotional attachment persists regardless of the quality of and contentment with the relationship. From a FST perspective, when conceptualising parental separation in terms of therapeutic support, it is suggested that the family as a unit takes part in therapy, especially as relationships, communications and attachments need to be explored with the relevant members of the unit that have been affected, rather than through isolating individuals (Beal, 1979).

When considering the applicability of FST from a Counselling Psychology perspective, it is evident that parental separation can significantly impact on all members of the family system, and on the relationships and communications that take place within the system. These challenges can be adequately explored within a FST framework. FST is also relevant and appropriate to this particular research question as it can help us to understand family interactions and their implications as well as offering a lens through which communication patterns can be observed. Using FST as a theoretical and clinical lens can thus help scientists-practitioners explore how communication patterns can facilitate or disrupt harmony within separated families, and promote more adaptive approaches.

1.3.1 Putting theory into practice: clinical approaches

As reflected in the theoretical section on FST, there can be many occasions within family systems wherein attachments, relationships and as a result communication, can break down. Even more so, during the separation process, emotional attachments and communication between parents and their children can be obstructed and may suffer tremendously. Therefore, as well as understanding what this looks like and why it may take place from a theoretical perspective, it is also productive to have a sense of how clinical work can benefit these families.

The rupture resulting from parental separation can negatively impact familial relationships. Although some family members may adapt quickly, for some parents and their children, the consequences of parental separation can be long lasting (Coulter, 2013). Family therapy can provide the space for family members to understand the ways in which they are still connected to one another and how they can best develop their relationships within the context of their post-separation family structure. Some families choose to attend therapy as a unit whilst others prefer to attend as individuals, although this can still be done systemically. Within the context of separation, therapy for family members can be exceptionally helpful in allowing individuals to perceive the separation as a family transition

rather than an ending; the relationship between parents and their children will continue, it simply has to evolve (Nichols, 1985).

The problems presented in therapy by parents and their children often gravitate around family contextual factors such as separation, divorce and remarriage as these can impact on parent-child relationships (Lengua, Honorado, & Bush, 2007). Research exists on the efficacy of different approaches in restoring family communication and well-being after a separation. The evidence-base of psychological interventions for separated families varies, some studies suggesting family interventions whilst others find in favour of child-only or parent-only ones. Some of these interventions will be described below.

> "Divorce is a family problem. Systems theory indicates that the family has an investment in maintaining the homeostasis that includes that problem. When the child is treated individually the family will often develop counter-moves to maintain that homeostasis. Even with individual treatment, work with the parent is essential. It is generally more effective to assess and intervene with the family directly, rather than work with individuals within the family" (Hodges, 1986 p.327).

Hodges's sentiments have been echoed by numerous psychological researchers who found family therapy to be extremely effective for family members who are undergoing or have undergone divorce or separation. Marotta (2000) investigated the effectiveness of systemic family therapy in alleviating some of the negative effects of divorce on children. Each participating family included one custodial parent and one child aged 8-16 all of whom underwent several weeks of a family therapy intervention together. The study reported clinically significant results, finding that the intervention alleviated some of the children's negative symptoms associated with the divorce. This echoed previous findings (Stolberg and Mahler, 1994) which also found that family-based therapy interventions were able to yield significant positive results in alleviating pathological symptoms.

Marotta (2000) explains why he perceives systems and family therapy as being so effective in helping families post-divorce. He suggests that family therapy techniques assist family members in hearing one another. This is especially important for children, enabling an atmosphere of empathy to be cultivated. Additionally, in reframing the divorce as a life transition wherein families become bi-nuclear, clinicians can effectively focus on how family members are interacting in order to develop suitable interventions to assist them in adapting to their post-separation situation (Marotta, 2000).

1.3.2 Alternative clinical interventions

Other non-family therapy-based interventions which were found to be useful when working with separating or separated families include different forms of psycho-education groups or programmes, and several parent-only interventions were researched for their efficacy in post-separation households (Huff and Hartenstein, 2020). Wolchick et al. (2002) found that when working with divorced mothers of adolescent children, evidence-based therapeutic programmes for the mothers only, and for the mothers with their children, were effective in improving the adolescent children's overall mental health and well-being. Velez, Wolchick and Sandler (2011) note two effective evidence-based post-separation parenting programmes which both improved the parents' parenting and led to better adjustment for the children. A randomised control trial of the Parenting Through Change (PTC) programme led to a decrease in adjustment problems three years after participation (Velez, Wolchick and Sandler, 2011). Furthermore, two randomised control trials found that the New Beginnings Program (NBP) had a significant positive effect on the relationship quality between parents and their children. The second trial found at the initial follow-up, a six-month follow-up, and then a six-year follow-up, that improvements in mother-child relationship quality were maintained, as well as a reduction in children's mental health problems (Velez, Wolchick and Sandler, 2011).

Fackrell, Hawkins, and Kay (2011) wrote a meta-analysis of 19 studies and found that educational groups for separating, or recently separated, parents can have a moderate to significant effect on improving parent-child relationships and children's well-being. Similar results were found in Keating et al.'s (2016) and Laufer and Berman's (2006) international studies. Recent work on the effectiveness of online separation- or divorce-related material also showed that such material resulted in positive change for the parents with regards to their communication and relationship with their children (Bowers et al., 2014; Ferraro et al., 2016).

Huff and Hartenstein (2020) suggest that the aforementioned evidence-based studies can be valuable to clinicians working with this client group as they enable therapists to be more aware of how parents relate to one another and to their children, and of the impact of these interactions. Additionally, clinicians can offer parents new skills in order to improve on their communication.

Lastly, several evidence-based reports found that child intervention programmes for children of divorce can also be helpful to children's adjustment post-separation. Velez, Wolchick and

Sandler (2011) investigated experimental trials and found that the Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) and the Children's Support Group (CSG) were both effective in reducing children and early adolescents' post-separation adjustment difficulties and separation-related stressors, and that their adjustment improvements were maintained at the one-year follow-up.

Perhaps due to the many possible variables, the literature on effective empirical interventions for separated or divorced families remains limited. Nevertheless, as well as all of the above-mentioned studies, there has also been overwhelming support over the last few years with regards to the effectiveness of systemic family therapy, for adults and adolescents, individually and as groups, struggling with various internal and external difficulties including those related to separation, divorce and communication (Carr, 2009; Huff and Hartenstein, 2020). Parental separation can bring about critical disruptions to the psychological well-being of parents and their children, with the relationships between family members often being negatively impacted on. Thus, psychological intervention programmes, as well as therapy for individual family members or group family therapy can bring about long-term improvements to the family relationships, as well as alleviating family members' distressing symptoms.

While FST is thus well established as an approach to family interactions and well-being post-separation, the way in which these are affected, or not, by the emergence of new forms of communication, remains relatively under-researched. Yet a better understanding of new and evolving patterns of communication between parent and child post-separation would arguably enable clinicians, including those using FST, to better tailor their interventions to the modern age. This is the topic of interest here.

1.4 Literature Search Strategy

It is clear that the topic of interest sits on the intersection of a range of sub-topics, including: Family communication and family well-being in separated or divorced households; adolescent development and parent-child communication in separated households; the value of shared custody arrangements; family communication in the era of ICTs; and clinical approaches to improving family communication post-separation. Each of these topics will be explored adequately in order to contextualise the research question.

Various search engines were used in order to find pre-existing relevant literature. These included City University Library, JSTOR, Wiley Online Library, Google Scholar and several relevant psychology journals databases including Taylor and Francis's Journal of Divorce and Remarriage and Journal of Family Communication. Search terms included: 'Parent-Child Communication', 'Parent-Adolescent Communication', 'Family Communication', 'Shared custody', 'Intact Families', 'Joint Physical Custody', 'Shared Parenting', 'Family Well-Being' 'Communication Technology and Family', 'ICTs and Family', 'ICTs and adolescents', 'Adolescents Development', 'Parent-Adolescent Attachment'. The search criteria were limited to research written between 1999 and 2021, with only journal articles and books being included, all of which had to be in English. Some of the terms that were searched such as 'shared custody' produced almost 20,000 results, whilst other searches such as "ICTs and Family' produced 8,500 results. In order to delve further, the researcher searched within the initial results to find literature which was more specifically relevant to the research topic through looking for papers with more than one key search term such as refining the search on 'shared parenting' to include 'shared parenting' and 'communication'. This technique was used numerous times to refine each search category in order to enable the researcher to find the most relevant research articles. Once more specific pieces of research were extracted, an exhaustive set of literature remained.

The researcher read through abstracts of relevant papers before thoroughly analysing approximately fifty research articles. It was found when delving deeper into the existing research that few papers focused on the exact issue of parent-child communication within shared custody households; even fewer consider the topic of parents and their adolescent children's communication within shared custody households. This research uses a working definition of communication which includes communication technology**.** The researcher found no papers on this subject, or which investigated the role of modern forms of communication such as ICTs within shared custody households. Nevertheless, the following literature review offers an overview of some of the relevant research in the field. It would be impossible to include all the existing literature, but the papers selected were chosen for their relevance, recent date, their conceptual interest, and methodological application.

1.5 Family communication and children wellbeing in separated households

The Routledge Handbook of Family Communication (Branje, Laursen and Collins, 2012) describes communication as the "foundation of a family because it is the means through which family members construct and maintain their relationships with each other" (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999). Communication is thus the 'glue' that binds a family; it is

often remarked that a marriage has not broken down as long as the couple are still arguing – it is the wall of silence that completes the split. Positive communication is thus key to the wellbeing and even survival of the family. While covering general family communication, the book also reviews much of the literature on family communication during and after divorce or separation.

1.5.1 The impact of parental separation on family communication and children's wellbeing

One of the most relevant studies cited is Afifi, Hutchinson and Krouse's (2006) paper classifying 15 stressors experienced by parents and adolescents during divorce. At times family communication itself was a source of stress and this strain as well as the other stressors directly or indirectly impacted on parent-child communication. Koerner, Jacobs, and Raymond (2000) studied the impact on family relationships of discussing divorce-related topics and found that openness helped both parents and their adolescent children cope better with the changes associated with divorce and fostered bonds between them. Arditti (1999) and Westberg, Nelson, & Piercy (2002) similarly found that parental openness following divorce allowed adolescent children to feel closer to their parents and improved their psychological well-being. Ferguson & Dickson (1995) highlight that parental frankness reduces the uncertainty which is damaging to children's psychological welfare. All these findings showed that although divorce can disrupt the lives of family members, regular, constructive communication and sharing rituals and activities such as dining together (Griffin et al., 2000), which promote face-to-face communication, provides stability, strong bonds, and family cohesion.

The way in which family communication around the divorce can affect children's wellbeing, is further illustrated in Afifi, Huber and Ohs' (2006) investigation into how divorced parents and their adolescent children communicate about divorce-related stressors and how this affects the way they cope with the divorce. The authors had noticed that communication is often impaired when parents and/or children are stressed, a common by-product of divorce, and they used a mixed methods design, combining group interviews with a self-report questionnaire of 50 custodial parent-adolescent dyads, to explore this further. A main finding was that children who were able to communicate their struggles with their parents openly coped better with the divorce. Children more comfortable listening to their parents communicate their own stressors also proved better able to cope with other difficult effects of the divorce. This is one of very few studies focusing on parents and their adolescent children's communication post-divorce and it provides useful insight into the complexities and value of constructive communication for these families. Nevertheless, a limitation of this

study is the failure to specify the custody arrangements of its participants. Additionally, its exclusive focus on divorce-related communication makes its findings non-generalizable to other forms of parent-adolescent communication.

Despite an extensive literature on the impact of divorce or separation on children's well-being and psychological and behavioural adjustments, there is comparatively little on the impact of divorce or separation on the nature and quantity of parent-child communication. Portugal and Alberto (2013, 2014) investigated various dimensions that parents, school-aged children, and adolescents defined as vital features of parent-child communication. These included: 1) expressions of affection and empathic, emotional support; 2) parents' openness, responsiveness, and overall availability; 3) being able to communicate about communication; 4) confiding in, and sharing issues with, one another; and 5) being able to discuss problems within their communication patterns.

In the absence of published research into parent-child communication and divorce, Portugal and Alberto (2019) followed their study of parent-child communication with an investigation into this issue. Using a sociodemographic questionnaire and the Perception Scale of Parenting Communication, they compared 100 participants from 'intact nuclear families' to 102 participants from divorced families. Portugal and Alberto recorded parents' and children's observations on their reliance on the various communication characteristics identified in their 2013-14 study of different family structures (divorced versus intact households). Contradicting earlier findings, they discovered no statistically significant differences in parent-child communication in divorced versus intact households. They suggest that their findings may disprove the idea that families having undergone separation or divorce necessarily adopt less constructive communication patterns than their intact nuclear-family counterparts.

Although directly relevant to the present research, Portugal and Alberto's (2019) study has several limitations. First, the results of a study of Portuguese families are not necessarily generalizable outside Portugal. The post-divorce sample includes parents with custody as well as parents without custody but does not clarify if the parents with custody have sole-custody or share it with their ex-partner. This lack of distinction between shared custody and sole-custody households among divorced families is a significant limitation since these different types of arrangements can have a potentially significant impact on family communication. Moreover, although communication was defined in terms of the features Portugal and Alberto (2013, 2014) identified as necessary characteristics of parent-child communication, there was no mention of the means and mediums used for communicating.

For a twenty-first century study, the lack of mention of mobile phones and technology having a role in parent-child communication is a significant limitation. Last, their participants' ages range from 7 to 16 with no breakdown of results by age, so differences between pre-adolescent and adolescent children cannot be inferred. Yet a child's developmental stage matters when it comes to understanding family communications.

1.5.2 Adolescent development and parent-child communication in separated households

The Routledge Handbook of Family Communication (Branje, Laursen and Collins, 2012) suggests that the challenges many parents face when communicating with adolescent children stem from the adolescents' transition from childhood to adulthood. This transition can modify interactions between parents and their adolescent children, often including less frequent contact and changed conversation content and tone (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Conceptual models of developmental change highlight that these communication changes are mainly due to the adolescent's biological development and cognitive maturation (Branje, Laursen and Collins, 2012).

As part of detachment, adolescents often strive for more autonomy and are less willing to self-disclose to parents, creating new boundaries around their communication, often keeping 'personal' information secret (Finkenauer et al., 2008). To continue meeting children's and adolescents' developmental needs, parents must continuously adapt their communication patterns; this requires stark age-related differences in parent-child communication (Rudi et al., 2014). Most families experience reduced parent-adolescent closeness and interdependence; nevertheless, families which have undergone significant change or ruptures are likely to undergo a far more significant reduction in intimate communication between parents and their adolescent children (Branje, Laursen and Collins, 2012).

Thus, households that experience conflict, divorce, or any significant rupture are likely to experience less parent-adolescent closeness, warmth, and intimacy, than equivalent 'intact' households (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002). Contextual variables, such as separation, divorce and remarriage can create differences in how parents and their adolescent children communicate, regardless of adolescents' developmental transition (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002). Inter-parental struggles can also damage the parent-adolescent relationship. Family structure disruptions mean that parents and their adolescent children are likely to communicate less frequently, with a significant change in content, than pre-disruption; nevertheless, this could also be partly a result of the maturation process (Collins & Laursen, 2000).

Indeed, the biological perspective as well as psychoanalytic theory (Erikson, 1968) suggests that puberty is central to the transformations that occur within parent-adolescent communication. Both suggest that adolescents stop idealising their parents and become able to think for themselves more independently, causing a split with parents. The huge hormonal changes experienced by adolescents aggravate this further (Williamson, 2017). Thus, many see a deterioration in communication as inevitable. However, once puberty and the individuation process are complete, parents can re-establish a close connection with their adolescent children, one wherein communication patterns resemble those of an interdependent adult relationship.

Parents can benefit from this adolescent maturation process by encouraging meaningful, sustainable communication which is not dependent on daily interactions. These more significant communications nurture a supportive psychological closeness between parents and their adolescent children (Steinberg & Silk, 2002).

1.6 The value of shared custody arrangements

A broad theme in the literature on divorced and separated families is the idea that such families require continued contact to build or maintain high-quality parent-child relationships. Amato (2000, 2001) focuses on the negative consequences of separation for parents and their children but adds that the positive involvement of both parents can mitigate these consequences. Gray and Steinberg (1999) and Kelly and Lamb (2000) invoke the term ‘authoritative parenting’, developed by developmental psychologists, to define the support and supervision of children needed for positive developmental outcomes. Gray and Steinberg (1999) concluded that showing care and interest in a child’s life, and quantity of communication, were most influential in producing constructive authoritative parenting. Kelly and Lamb (2000) similarly propose that separated parents interact with their children daily or every other day, through any functional means, to maintain a positive relationship with supportive communication. Kelly (2007) reviewed various living arrangements post-separation, analysing the adjustment impact on children in post-divorce households, and concluded that ‘traditional visiting patterns and guidelines’ are outdated and restrictive, suggesting instead that more cohesive and shared-parenting alternatives better serve children’s psychological and developmental needs.

Yet the impact of shared custody arrangements on parent-child relationships and family wellbeing remains under-researched, perhaps because these concern only a minority of

families. Nielsen's (2011) review of the literature on children in shared custody homes found that in America, between 85% and 90% of children in separated households live primarily with their mothers, with only 10-15% of children living in shared custody households. In Europe, the percentage of separated families with a shared custody arrangement is approximately 18-20% (Spruijt & Duindam 2010). Nielsen (2011) argues that because most families lack shared custody arrangements, most literature on post-separation families focuses on single-parent households, with the father usually the non-residential parent.

In a notable exception, Bauserman (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of studies comparing child adjustment in shared custody and sole-custody families. Some comparisons to intact families were also included. The study noted both general adjustment and how children adjust with relation to, inter alia, self-esteem, family relationships and divorce. Bauserman (2002) concluded that children from shared custody families were better adjusted than those from sole-custody homes but also that children from shared custody families had no adjustment differences from children in intact families. These results suggest that with on-going involvement and parenting by both parents, shared custody arrangements can be beneficial. However, although Bauserman (2002) is regularly referenced in divorce and shared custody literature, his work is almost twenty years old.

More recently, Smyth (2009) reviewed six Australian studies on shared custody households. Four were qualitative, focusing on individual interviews and focus groups; two studies were quantitative, assessing children's well-being post-divorce. While the fact that all six studies had been conducted in Australia may limit the generalizability of their findings, they suggested that shared custody arrangements were beneficial for parents' and their children's wellbeing.

In his 2011 review, Nielsen found twenty studies published in peer-reviewed academic journals on shared-residential parenting, wherein four of the studies concluded that children from separated households benefit significantly from the active involvement of both parents in their lives. Children living predominantly with their mothers often experienced deteriorated relationships with their fathers. This suggests that limiting father-child time can damage children's relationships with their fathers, as building strong parent-child relationships, and developing the space for authoritative parenting, requires real face-to-face fathering time. The findings suggested that spontaneous engagement in 'ordinary activities' such as chores, homework, cooking, shopping, and errands is fundamental to creating and maintaining strong parent-child relationships post-separation. Nielsen found that shared custody parenting promoted the best outcome for children post-separation. Nevertheless, his review

noted that the quality, rather than the quantity, of time spent with parents was most important in promoting the best outcome for children.

The importance of time quality rather than quantity had already been suggested by Suleman and Meyers (1999). Their survey of 186 custodial mothers and 31 custodial fathers measured parent-child involvement according to data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). They found that provided each parent had a number of custody days each month, parent-child involvement in their children's life would be similar, or equal to, that of parents with full custody. This was the same for both mothers and fathers, although the sample of fathers in the study was far smaller than that of mothers. The authors hypothesised that shared custody fathers tried to maximise their time with their children by planning more activities with them and making their limited interaction more meaningful. But the study focused exclusively on American households, and their findings may not be generalizable to other countries and cultures.

Nielsen's (2011) review also offers specific insight into adolescents' experiences of shared custody, with studies from the US (Buchanan & Maccoby, 1996) and Europe (Breivik & Olweus, 2006) finding that adolescents who had experienced shared custody fared better emotionally and psychologically than those who lived principally with one parent.

One of Nielsen's (2011) research questions aimed to understand how adolescents and young adults felt about growing up in a shared custody family. A UK study reviewed by Nielsen (2011) found after interviewing 73 children living in a shared custody arrangement, that although such arrangements were logistically inconvenient, most preferred this to living with one parent (Smart, 2001). Furthermore, in a study of 60 adolescents (Cashmore, Parkinson, & Taylor, 2008), those living with their mothers identified overnight time with their fathers as creating closer relationships with the latter (Nielsen 2011, p. 603). This finding was echoed in Fabricius, Diaz, & Braver's (2011) study of 1,030 university students, whose parents had divorced before they were 16. It concluded that for the 400 who had lived in a shared custody arrangement, the present quality of their relationships with their fathers was highly correlated to the number of days they lived with them. Those with better relationships had lived with their fathers 30% to 50% of the time. These findings have been frequently replicated in Europe and the U.S. (Fabricius, 2003; Melli & Brown, 2008; Spruijt & Duindam, 2010).

The benefits of shared custody therefore merit further research and should feature prominently in the planning of lawyers, policymakers, and divorcing parents. However,

Nielsen does not focus on parent-child communication but on ‘spending time together’ – a vaguer concept.

By contrast, Bjaarnaso and Arnarsson’s (2011) study explored cultural differences in parent-child communication in diverse family structures using a sample of almost 200,000 children from 36 Western countries, including the UK, 2,200 of whom reported living in a shared custody family. One of the study’s conclusions was that children aged 11-15 living in shared custody households struggle less overall with parental communication than children in sole-custody households and communicate with their parents as well as children from intact families. Children living in joint-custody homes were found to be equally able to talk with their mothers about important matters as children in intact families. Furthermore, children from shared custody homes were more comfortable talking to their fathers about important topics than children in intact families.

It is important to bear in mind that these findings establish no causality and that variables other than family structure and custody arrangement may have influenced them. Still, Bjaarnaso and Arnarsson’s (2011) hypothesise that these results may reflect the important role of fathers in shared custody arrangements, making these fathers a “fixed feature in their children’s lives” (2011 p. 885). Bjaarnaso and Arnarsson’s (2011) suggest that this paternal involvement allows communication lines to remain open and fluid between fathers and their children.

Arnarsson and Bjarnason (2008) similarly found that many children in shared custody families spend more high-quality time with their fathers, making up for the ‘lost time’ when they are residing with their mothers. The authors conclude that although their findings may reflect pre-separation communication patterns, children in a shared custody arrangement appear to have better communication with their parents than those living in other ‘non-intact’ homes, and at least as good communication as ‘intact’ families. This study has laid the foundations for the present research. Although it explores a slightly younger group (11-15-year-olds) than that of the present study (12-18-year-olds), the overlap is sufficient to permit comparison. Further, the unprecedentedly large sample of this recent study (2,200 students living in shared custody homes) makes this study particularly valuable.

However, the questionnaires on which the results are based were completed in 2005/6 and may not reflect recent changes in family communication. Further, while a quantitative study yields a wealth of objective data, it offers no insight into subjective attitudes, cognitions, and feelings. Communication in this study apparently refers exclusively to face-to-face communication; phones and communication technology are not considered, possibly

because in 2005/6, far fewer children had access to this technology – according to PEW statistics (Lenhart, 2009) approximately 36% of 12-15-year-olds in the UK had their own mobile phone devices in 2004; today, this number is approximately 90% by age 11 (O'Dea, 2020). Moreover, although frequency of communication and the prevalence of 'important' conversations were analysed, the quantitative methodology elicited no understanding of the meaningfulness of the parent-child communication. Finally, this study investigated only the perspectives of children, leaving scope for further research into parental attitudes.

Importantly here, Bjaarnaso and Arnarsson's (2011) study, although useful, does not provide a clear definition of 'communication'; instead the data-collection scale used measured 'impaired communication' according to how easy it was for respondents to talk to a) their mother or b) their father about things that really bothered him or her (1 :Very easy - 4:Very difficult) (Bjaarnaso and Arnarsson, 2011; p.875). This extremely limited perception of communication does not offer a holistic understanding of parent-child communication, thus is insufficient. Additionally, the study is further limited through not examining the role of virtual communication. This may reflect the speed of technological change in the past two decades and highlights the importance of considering the many new forms of distant-communication technology in the study of communication in shared custody homes. Studies dating back twenty years lack applicability in today's technologically transformed world, where ICTs allows children to communicate and 'spend time with' their parents from afar; in discussing shared custody, it would seem necessary to understand how parents communicate with their young and adolescent children during 'non-custodial' days.

1.7 Family communication in the era of ICTs

Communications technology has become a ubiquitous feature of Western family life, partly thanks to the rapid adoption of smartphones by parents and children alike. A 2019 Ofcom report titled: 'Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitude Report' found that 93% of children in the UK aged eight to fifteen owned a smartphone (Making Communications Work for Everyone, 2019). Indeed, children are now the fastest growing population of smartphone users in the UK (Terras and Ramsay, 2016), making family communication possible anytime and anywhere (Lanigan, 2009; Stafford and Hillyer, 2012).

The ways families interact, connect, coordinate, and communicate have thus evolved with unprecedented speed in the past two decades and there are now unlimited opportunities for communicating and interacting with others. New forms of communications technology allow family members to choose between numerous devices and applications when deciding how

they want to communicate with each other (Neustaedter, Harrison and Sellen, 2013). These new devices offer families increased opportunities to bond, share information and spend time together, thereby strengthening close family ties (Grant, 2009). The fact that ICTs allow families to connect over long and short distances at little cost facilitates the regular communication necessary for maintaining close relationships (Kennedy & Wellman, 2007). ICTs are now integrated into family dynamics and processes, with parents often required to manage their children's phone and internet usage (Delmonico & Griffin, 2008).

Understanding the role of communications technology in the context of family relationships is therefore the first step to appreciating how separated families communicate in today's technologically transformed society. However, this is no easy task. Carvalho, Francisco and Relvas (2014) reviewed literature on 'the relationship of ICTs and family functioning' from 1998 to 2013, analysing 45 papers exploring attitudes to different types of ICTs, family cohesion, rules, and boundaries. The review showed that ICTs have brought about qualitative changes in the way family members communicate and connect with one another. Nevertheless, the authors point to inconsistencies in the research; they found that different ICTs were studied, with little cohesion between the different studies in terms of the ICTs studied and the research tools used. They also found "a lack of consensus on the prevalence of positive, negative or mixed aspects in the influence that ICTs have on families" (Carvalho, Franciso and Relvas, 2014, p. 106).

1.7.1 ICTs impact on interpersonal communication, relationships and wellbeing

Many of those who see communications technology as helpful to family communication, dynamics and overall well-being perceive it not as replacing face-to-face contact but rather, enhancing and strengthening existing family bonds (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014; Lanigan, Bold, and Chenoweth, 2009). Relationship maintenance requires regular communication, which is offered by communications technology allowing families to connect across space and time (Kennedy & Wellman, 2007).

Kim et al. (2007) conducted an online survey of over 1,000 South Korean participants to better understand individuals' configurations of their relationships based on their communication patterns. They argue that communications technology, face-to-face communication, and telephone serve different purposes, but are often used interchangeably. They see instant messaging platforms as useful for more transient communication, not requiring immediate responses, or for more casual discussion. Adults and adolescents often used emails to communicate more detailed information, while adolescents were found to use

instant messaging for day-to-day conversations with those to whom they felt closest. Adolescent (13-18-year-olds) conversations over instant messaging platforms were found to be more social than face-to-face or telephone communications. The authors found that communications technology can be useful both to maintain pre-existing relationships and to expand relationship networks. Finally, their findings suggest that although face-to-face communication supports the greatest number of relationships, communications technology, such as mobile phones, supports communication in the closest relationships.

Taking a different perspective, Rudi et al. (2014) analysed quantitatively how American parents use ICT to communicate with family members, using a sample of over 1,300 parents to examine how parents use various technological applications such as text messages, email, social networking sites and videoconferencing to communicate. Noting the lack of previous research into the role of ICTs from a systems perspective, they explored the forms of technology parents were using to communicate with their children and other relatives, seeking comparative data on how parents' use of technology varies according to their children's ages.

The authors found that many parents who use their devices regularly do so to communicate with family members, confirming previous findings (Kennedy et al., 2008). Additionally, text messages and emails were a popular way for parents to connect with their children, especially adolescents, as well as with children's other parent in separated families. These platforms have been favoured for their asynchronous transmission of information, videos, and photos. Rudi et al. (2014) suggest that parents also wish to share synchronous communication, both vocal and visual, with their children through activities like videoconferencing (Skype or FaceTime), involving several family members at the same time. The authors suggest that although research highlighted the usefulness and popularity of texting, email and instant messaging with families, videoconferencing applications, now available on smart phones, can replicate face-to-face communication and perhaps offer deeper interaction, with more emotional support than is available through messaging applications. It was found that parents decide which form of communication, or which application, they will use depending on the specific situation and communication purpose.

It is worth noting here that Rudi et al. (2014) also found an association between parents' greater use of technology to communicate with their children and an increase in the children's ages, especially in adolescents. This aligns with other research suggesting that parents need to shift their communication patterns and adapt to their adolescent children (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Adolescents have different communication needs in terms of

content and frequency, and desire more autonomy (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). While parent-child roles are often renegotiated during adolescence, it is also a time when children start owning their own (smart) phones (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). Rudi et al. (2014) suggest further research on understanding ICT use for family communication, to enable guidelines and resources to be created to help families undergoing various transitions.

1.7.2 The limits of closeness of ICTs

While some studies suggest that the rise of ICTs might contribute to a greater sense of 'closeness' for family members, others paint a more nuanced picture. Kennedy et al. (2008) found that 25% of parents reported feeling closer to their family since the emergence of mobile phones, the internet and technology, than when they were growing up. 53% of respondents suggested that the quality of their communication with family and friends has been improved by mobile phones and the internet. Although videoconferencing was used by few families, most had the necessary infrastructure and technology, and were excited by the prospect of using it in the future. Using a qualitative design and focusing on parents and adolescents, Devitt and Roker (2009) similarly concluded that family communication had been much enhanced by mobile phone use, with families socialising more on virtual platforms.

However, Williams and Merten's (2011) study of how parents' and adolescents' use of communication technology may impact on parent-child dynamics and general family connectedness produced mixed results. On the one hand, they recognise its ability to strengthen family bonds, allowing parents and adolescents to share time together when apart. Nevertheless, they also perceive communication technology as adding new complexity to family relationships. The authors hypothesize that communications technology and the social platforms associated with it offer family members uninterrupted attachment with infinite connectivity, unlimited by space and time. Families now believe that individuals are "always on" and reachable, even when at work or abroad, enabling enhanced closeness. Although it is often assumed that the more connectivity the better, Williams and Merten (2011) caution against this view, arguing that increased time spent communicating does not equate to greater intimacy. On the contrary, they suggest that the pressure of being "always on" can reduce intimacy and closeness. This hypothesis was confirmed by their quantitative analysis of two samples of over 1,000 parents and adolescents, which revealed diverse implications for family relationships. The results did indicate that family bonds can be strengthened by regular use of communications technology, which renders distance, context, and time irrelevant. Conversely, they noted that quantity of communication was not

correlated with relational closeness. The authors therefore sound a note of caution about 'too much' bonding via communication technology, which might worsen family connectedness and intimacy. Turkle (2011) and Bargh (2001) similarly found that although CT can increase the time families spend communicating, with the opportunity to strengthen relationships, the quality of family communication, and of relationships, can be negatively impacted by over-reliance on CT.

A related Hong Kong study by Wang et al. (2015) investigated the impact of using different forms of ICTs on family communication and how this is associated with family well-being. The survey of over 1,500 adults found that face-to-face was the most used medium of communication, followed by phones, various forms of instant messaging, social media, platforms and then email. Similar to Stern and Messer (2009) and Kim et al., (2007), they found that families relying mostly on face-to-face interaction and phone-calls experienced higher levels of wellbeing. Consequently, Wang et al. (2015) suggest that face-to-face communication may be superior since both verbal and non-verbal cues are conveyed within a context enabling immediate responses but note that face-to-face communication is not always available. Based on their findings and earlier research, they recommend that to maintain strong family communication and encourage high levels of family well-being, family members should be informed of both the value of face-to-face communication and the limitations of ICTs. The authors advocate that ICTs be used as a supplement, rather than a replacement, for 'traditional' forms of communication.

While offering useful insights, this study covers only adults aged over 18, so it does not focus on parent-child communication. Further, for such a recent study, it seems remiss that no forms of videoconferencing such as FaceTime or Skype were included in the definition of ICTs. This is a drawback of the study as reference to videoconferencing, a hybrid of face-to-face and phone calls, might have yielded more nuanced results.

A limitation of the above studies is the absence of research into the impact of ICTs on family-only relationships. As a widely used medium for communication by family members this new technology needs to be researched within the specific context of family relations. The recent expansion of ICTs into daily lives means that the scenarios for interaction have had to be readjusted, with current social and family connections reflecting our modern, networked society (Carvalho, Francisco, and Relvas, 2014).

1.7.3 ICTs in separated families

Few studies analyze communications technology in the context of families which have undergone a divorce.

In a qualitative study, Bailey (2003) interviewed 36 non-residential parents to understand divorced non-custodial parents' experience of parenting from afar; all participants lived at least 50 miles away from their children. Several participants used telephones to enable frequent communication with their children, partly making up for their limited face-to-face time. Nevertheless, the study was conducted almost twenty years ago, hence participants' access to technology was limited to phone use. At the time of the study, long-distance telephone calls were costly; today long-distance communication is easily accessible and often free. The study found that parenting from a distance was a significant challenge for non-residential parents after divorce. The author concluded that a new strategy was needed to support 'binuclear' families, offering parents denied frequent custody a way of being in touch with their children meaningfully, consistently, and frequently.

Padilla-Walker, Coyne and Fraser (2012) used quantitative measures to examine the interaction between families' media use and overall connectiveness in a sample of over 450 adolescents and their parents. They found that mobile phones were families' most used communication mediums. Increased media use was related to higher levels of family connection. The study also found higher levels of mobile-phone use between parents and their adolescent children in single-parent households rather than within intact nuclear families. Overall, increased use of communications technology facilitated heightened family closeness.

Yarosh and Abowd (2013) conducted 15 in-depth interviews with residential parents, non-residential parents and children from families who had undergone divorce, to understand the daily challenges they experienced. One of the main challenges noted, especially for non-residential parents, concerned maintaining a shared-family context while living apart. Yarosh and Abowd (2013) mention the option of using more communication technology, such as videoconferencing, to complement in-person visits and to augment the amount of face-to-face time spent between non-custodial parents and their children. Nevertheless, perhaps due to the young age of their participants, the authors found that current communication technologies are insufficient for bringing about high-quality communication. They found that parents and children perceived audio-only communication, such as phone calls, as short, unsatisfying, and not user-friendly to children. Although videoconferencing was noted as a deeper and more fulfilling medium of parent-child communication, most families rarely used it. Yarosh and Abowd (2011) found similar results when researching how parents who

frequently travel for work, communicate with their children; although several families tried videoconferencing, few used it habitually. However, although offering useful insights, Yarosh and Abowd's (2013) focus on pre-pubescent children, who are quite different from adolescents. The latter are likely to have independent access to ICTs, and associated applications such as videoconferencing, via their own smartphones. Additionally, the study focuses on households where one parent has dominant, rather than joint, custody.

'Virtual-visitation' is a useful term explaining how non-residential parents can use technology between in-person communication opportunities to feel part of their children's lives (Flango, 2003). 'Virtual visitation' includes phone-calls, text messages, instant messages, and videoconferencing (Flango, 2003). Shefts (2002) comments that several family law publications include virtual-visitation in their custody suggestions, advising how communications technology can ensure that parent-child relationships flourish despite little or no custodial time. Nevertheless, Yarosh and Abowd (2013) observe that research in this field remains lacking.

Stafford and Hillyer (2012) suggest areas of future research into the use of communication technology by divorced families. The authors review emerging research on the role of ICTs, current trends, and how they interact with personal relationships. They conclude that ICTs allow 'ordinary' relational conversations to occur on alternative platforms to face-to-face. They found that conversations on ICTs, covering, inter alia, common interests, small talk, expressing affection, coordinating activities, sharing humour, arguing, and playing games, are identical to conversations in the past. The authors suggest that future research should address how technology sustains relationships. The authors conclude that ICTs could also help manage and even repair difficult or tense relationships. They cite families who have undergone separation, suggesting that these families could benefit from various ICTs, especially when emotions are running too high for face-to-face contact or phone calls, and concluded by suggesting that future research should investigate how ICTs are, and can be, used after divorce.

1.7.4 Limitations of the literature on ICTs

Although the last two decades have seen a surge in research on the use of ICTs in inter-personal communication, including families and adolescents, much of this literature has limitations.

Most research into the impact of ICTs on families uses quantitative methodologies. These studies focus on different aspects of communications-technology use, mapping patterns of use to determine which forms of communication are most appropriate for different occasions. No studies have investigated the meaning and emotional or psychological impact of using certain ICTs over others.

Furthermore, most studies are not UK-based, but emanate from the USA, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Australia, among others. Despite similar trends in phone and internet use, the generalisability of their results, given the different societies and cultures investigated, cannot be assumed.

Few studies differentiated between types of communications technology, instead conflating them into one group. This made it difficult to ascertain which applications or forms of communication were responsible for which effects. Research that did differentiate, often did not cover videoconferencing. Currently, videoconferencing platforms, such as FaceTime, Skype, and Whatsapp Video, are highly popular; they could help fill the gap in contact created by various custody arrangements, especially within the context of separated families.

1.8 Gaps in the literature and Study Rationale

This summary of the state of research on family communication post-separation, with particular focus on shared custody households, shows a number of significant gaps that the present study hopes to fill.

Several aforementioned papers focus on family communication but do not include shared custody households in their analysis, focusing on either ‘intact’ and ‘nuclear’ households or on single-parent ones, in which the non-residential parent lacks significant custody rights. Further, studies on communication within shared custody homes fail to include ICTs in their definition of ‘communication’ and do not focus on or question their role. Yet modern technology for family communication is critical today. This has been found to be especially the case with adolescents as the majority of them own phones, often smartphones, by early adolescence (O’Dea, 2020) allowing for more variability in how they communicate with their parents, compared to younger children whose communication with their parents is more limited by their parents’ custodial arrangement. The liberties included in owning one’s own phone allow for adolescents to have more choice in when, and how, they communicate with

their parents, enabling them to stay in contact with their parents on their non-custodial days as well.

Communications technology may arguably be even more important in shared custody households, since it has far greater potential for narrowing or closing the communications gap with their distant adolescent children than other forms of communication; it avoids the formality of written communication and offers the visual contact unavailable in telephone communication. Shared custody parents are therefore more likely to rely on ICTs to sustain high quantity and quality of communication from a distance. Regular communication is as necessary to parents' emotional well-being as to that of their adolescent children. At a time of a pandemic which has created unprecedented social and economic hardship, threatened mental health, and separated families through lockdown restrictions, the present research is more urgent than ever; ICTs have become far more than a convenience – they are a lifeline.

This research thus builds on the existing literature while filling an important gap. It does this by incorporating ICTs into parents' definitions and understanding of communication, linking these to relevant literature themes in order to build a more holistic understanding of how parents communicate with their adolescent children in shared custody households. By using a qualitative approach in a field where quantitative surveys remain by far the majority, it also hopes to provide new insight into how parents feel about the ways they communicate, and how this communication may affect their emotional well-being and that of their children. Finally, it is also hoped that this study will be a springboard for future research, enabling counselling psychology researchers and clinicians to find innovative new ways to support families who are undergoing, or have undergone a separation.

In light of the current research base and the gaps found within it, the research question is:

How do parents communicate with their adolescent children in shared custody households?

1.9 Relevance to Counselling Psychology

During and after separation, families often find themselves undergoing one of the most challenging experiences in their lives. The emotional, behavioural, and psychological adjustments often required after a separation can impact parents, their children, and other members of their wider system. Input from therapeutic services can be extremely helpful to families at different times during the separation process (Ballard, Fazio-Griffith and Marino, 2016; Ramisch, McVicker and Sahin, 2009; Nichols, 1985).

Although sometimes a tumultuous transition for all family members, the adjustment for custody-sharing parents can be especially complicated from both a practical and emotional perspective (Kelly, 2007; Bauserman; 2002) Parents may already be deeply involved in their children's lives prior to separation, making the transition from seeing their children daily to only 35-65% of the time extremely difficult, potentially leaving behind a void for these parents during non-custody days.

Therapeutic intervention for these parents can allow them to work on the various emotional and psychological adjustments they are experiencing; with some families benefitting from discussing these adjustments together within a neutral therapeutic framework (Gladding, 2015; Jones, 1993). The therapeutic space afforded by the counselling psychology setting offers parents the guarantee of impartial support and relief from the strain of negotiating sometimes difficult family relationships and communications, in the knowledge that they will always be understood and accepted.

Therefore, this research hopes to enable counselling psychologist practitioners to work more sensitively with family members who live in shared custody homes by understanding the nuances of their experience of communicating with one another. It is hoped that an improved understanding of the impact of parental separation on communication between family members, within the context of shared custody arrangements, will improve awareness among clinicians and wider society of the communication challenges faced by families that have undergone a parental separation. This research could also help counselling psychologists better understand how parent-adolescent communication in shared custody homes differs from that of intact households.

Reflecting on the value of qualitative research, Yardley (2000) comments on the need for research to illuminate something interesting, beneficial, and significant about the subject under investigation. Yardley (2000) adds that research and analysis needs to have a clear and important bearing on the beliefs and/or actions of others. This research meets these conditions as it offers significant value to a wide range of groups and individuals. The research aims to help professional clinicians working in the field of mental health – especially those working with parents who are considering, are in the process of, or have undergone a separation. Finally, this research may be useful to individuals within wider society, who are themselves experiencing the struggles associated with communication in shared custody households or wish to understand what their communication after a separation, with shared custody arrangements, could look like. In order to reach this population, the study's findings

intend to be shared via magazines for separated or divorced parents such as 'The Divorce Magazine' in the UK. Additionally, the results will be submitted as a blog post to websites or blogs which are relevant for parents who are already separated, or are considering separation, in order to adequately disseminate results to the broader population.

1.10 Reflexivity

Qualitative research is by definition personal and subjective (Smith, 2008) thus, in line with Braun and Clarke (2013), I have chosen to use the first-person pronoun for my reflexive section. Since the research process began, I have been unable to separate my own experience of the world from my involvement in the research. Who I am and how my personal experiences and cultural background have shaped this project is a vital consideration for the understanding of my research journey and choice of topic. I have remained starkly aware of my subjectivity and throughout the research process have ensured that I am bracketing off my thoughts and feelings through various reflexive practices.

I chose this research topic for several reasons. For my MSc thesis in Psychology, I researched a similar topic, albeit from a different angle. Upon completing my Masters, I realised that I wanted to research this topic further in order to explore the many new questions I had regarding family communication within separated households all of which had arisen in the course of my Masters' research.

Additionally, the phenomenon being researched is one which I have seen and experienced throughout my life with several members of my extended family having experienced divorce. This has meant that some of my relatives are continuing to grow up in shared custody homes. Thus, I have seen firsthand how family dynamics can shift and transition post-separation and how this can influence and affect the ways in which parents communicate with their children. I was able to observe how parents needed to adjust and change their communication patterns from having daily opportunities for face-to-face contact to having to instead communicate at intervals, and from a distance. Communication from afar requires different devices, technology, focus and time, necessitating a profound adjustment for both parents and their children. I noticed that when residing with one parent, younger children would often not communicate regularly with the other parent yet, this was often not the case with adolescents whom parents had the opportunity to communicate with more directly through using communications technology such as their smart phones. The freedom that parents had to communicate with adolescent children, also during non-custodial days, left

me extremely curious to further investigate and better understand how parents' experience, and feel about, their communication specifically with their adolescent children. Thus, this research topic was chosen as it is a phenomenon about which I was deeply curious.

From a more personal angle, the topic is also uniquely relevant to me. During my childhood and adolescence, my father commuted weekly abroad for work and was only home on the weekends. The limited time that we had in-person together can be seen as remarkably similar to children of separated parents with shared-custody arrangements. I was very aware, both then as a child and later in life, that the incredible amount of time apart heavily impacted on our communication. At the time it was not mainstream for children or adolescents to own mobile phones, and smart phones had not yet been fully developed. Therefore, the only available forms of communication were via the landline which was shared by all family members and was extremely expensive when calling abroad.

As I grew older and reflected more on the physical distance that my father and I shared, I became more aware of how big an impact the lack of consistent and regular communication had on our overall communication and on our relationship as a whole. Later, when I spoke to family members whose parents were separated and with time met more people whose parents had a shared-custody arrangement, I was struck by the parallels between our two experiences. Although significantly different in many ways, the lack of communication between me and my father when he commuted weekly echoed the experiences of others whom only saw one parent on the weekends too.

While I am aware that these personal experiences may have had an effect on the research process, I used my reflective tools, especially a reflective journal in order to bracket off my own experiences as best as possible. I also was aware that my own experiences could not adequately shape expectations or assumptions about this study's results due to the incredible technological advances that had occurred between my own childhood and when I conducted my research and interviews. I was curious to hear about separated parents' experiences of communicating when together and apart and to hear about what tools they used and found helpful, with the knowledge that such tools did not exist during my own childhood. I did not have any particular expectations or assumptions as to whether or not the recent technological advances were helpful or unhelpful to parent-child communication and was curious to find out more from the relevant parents themselves.

The subsequent three chapters (2-4) will present the study's qualitative methodology and philosophical positioning; analysis findings; followed by the discussion and conclusion which

will incorporate the strengths and limitations of the research, suggestions for further research and the study's implications for the field of counselling psychology and clinical practice.

Chapter 2: Methodological Overview

2.1 Introduction

This chapter offers a thorough account of the research approach and process. The research aims are outlined, and a brief justification is offered for the choice of a qualitative approach. The researcher's ontological and epistemological position are then defined, before turning to Thematic Analysis, the chosen methodology, its relevance to the research question, and why it was chosen over other approaches. The chapter continues by offering an overview of the recruitment process, and of the relevant ethical considerations. Finally, the interview process is outlined as well as the step-by-step analytic strategy, and a reflexive account is presented.

2.2 Research Aims

The study aims to describe and understand the experience of parents who have undergone a separation with regards to how they communicate with their adolescent children, both when they are together and when they are apart. The contemporary context is considered throughout, including consideration of issues such as how custody arrangements have changed, how parenting has developed, and how technology has transformed communication. The study's findings will, it is hoped, inform Counselling Psychologists on how shared custody parents communicate with their adolescent children, enabling them to work better with shared custody parents, families or with adolescents growing up in a shared custody home. The study aims also to incentivise further research within this field and to improve understanding of how the context of communication patterns can influence parents' and children's well-being.

2.3 Justification of Qualitative Methodology

A lot of psychological research has utilised positivist methods, usually based on some form of quantitative research design. Quantitative research is usually employed in search of an objective truth or reality about the world and the people in it (Kirk and Miller, 1986). However, since the 1990s, qualitative methods and approaches have achieved far more recognition within the UK and have become part of mainstream UK psychology (Harper & Thompson, 2012, Willig, 2008). Unlike quantitative research, which poses specific, non-variable and narrow questions to participants, a qualitative methodology permits a far broader and deeper insight into participants' unique experience.

A qualitative approach was chosen for this research study, as it seeks to clarify individuals' understanding of their subjective experiences (Harper & Thompson, 2012). Selecting a qualitative approach was based on the belief that each individual's experience is likely to vary significantly; participants will therefore require a certain amount of space to understand and make sense of how they experience the world around them and the events in their lives (Willig, 2013).

Elliott, Fischer and Rennie (1999, p. 216) best explain the benefits of qualitative research in terms which clarify why it was chosen for this study: "The aim of qualitative research is to understand and represent the experiences and actions of people as they encounter, engage and live through situations".

Focusing on participants' unique experiences was selected as the best approach as little seems to be known about how parents communicate with their adolescent children in shared custody households. A methodology allowing for a comprehensive exploration of participants' experience was therefore deemed most appropriate as offering greater understanding of the subject and also likely to stimulate further research.

2.4 Theoretical and Philosophical Underpinning

This section outlines my ontological and epistemological assumptions and positioning which are important to clarify as these define one's assumptions about the world, research and knowledge (Guba, 1990). Epistemology is "the study of the nature of knowledge and the methods of obtaining it" (Burr, 2003, p.202); ontology is "the study of being and existence" (Burr, 2003, p.203). Although intrinsically linked, there is an important distinction between ontology and epistemology: "Epistemology concerns what it is possible to know whereas ontology concerns what there is to know in the world 'out there' " (Harper, 2012, p.87). Because of this important distinction, my ontological and epistemological positions are discussed separately.

2.4.1 Ontological Position

Ontology is best understood as a continuum ranging from realism to relativism. Realism assumes that there is a reality which exists independently of the human mind. Realism is often associated with quantitative research as it holds that reality can be objectively measured (Ponterotto, 2005). Relativism, by contrast, regards reality as a socially constructed product of the human mind and therefore only fully comprehensible through

interpretation (Willig, 2001).

Lying between realism and relativism, critical realism accepts that an external reality exists independently of the human mind, but also holds that every individual makes sense of that external reality differently, depending on each individual's beliefs and values (Finlay, 2006). Human perception is inevitably limited and perspectival; critical realism therefore holds that while there is a reality or 'truth' out there, no one individual can access it in its entirety (Howitt, 2010).

The ontological position of critical realism adopted in this research project assumes that the experience of family communications exists "out there", independently of the researcher. However, it also accepts that parents' lived experience of communicating with their adolescent children will differ according to socially and culturally constructed personal interpretation of their experience.

2.4.2 Epistemological Position

Epistemology concerns the nature of knowledge and the various ways of accessing it (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Epistemological positions are classified under various headings (Ponterotto, 2005; Willig, 2013; Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Braun & Clarke's (2013) epistemological continuum from essentialism to constructionism is used in this study. Their continuum and the method selected for this study are outlined below.

Essentialism requires the 'reality', experiences and meanings of participants, which directly reflect the external world, to be recorded (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It aims to produce objective knowledge; the researcher therefore cannot be personally involved as this could create potential bias which would taint the research (Willig 2013).

Conversely, constructionism holds that there is no external reality but only a paradigm of reality constructed through our interactions with the world, mediated by language and discourse (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Social constructionism goes further, focusing largely on historical time and culture and on language as their product (Howitt, 2010). Constructionists believe that the way humans make sense of the world and understand 'reality' is time- and culture-specific (Crotty, 1998; Howitt, 2010).

Contextualism is situated between essentialism and constructionism (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Contextualism argues that what goes on in the human mind can be bridged by an existing

external context (Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988). Contextualism is made up of both essentialist and constructionist elements; its findings consist of participants' personal accounts of how they experience and understand the external world, but also acknowledge the constructionist position that changes in cultural context and time will impact both the data collected and the mode of analysis. Unlike constructionism and essentialism, contextualism, which is incorporated in theories such as critical realism, suggests that the surface of reality may need to be "unpicked" or "unraveled" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.9).

Willig (2001) stresses the importance of the researcher clarifying his/her assumptions about knowledge. After careful consideration, I opted to produce contextualist knowledge. This approach seems appropriate for the Counselling Psychology philosophy by which the researcher aims to explore how individuals understand their own reality based on their interpretations of their own experiences. This approach was also chosen because a contextualist framework allows, and even encourages, the researcher to bring her own personal understanding and positioning into the data collection and analysis (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000).

Since context is vital to this study, contextualism's focus on the context-dependency of knowledge is highly relevant in a number of ways. First, child-rearing methods and interaction with children have varied greatly over time, so parents' communication with their adolescent children, and their experience thereof, will be set in a 21st century context. The importance of technology in today's definition and understanding of communication is also context-dependent and will be considered throughout the study. Lastly, the modern conception of family and separation or divorce is another important contemporary contextual factor that will be taken into full account.

Although this study distinguishes between critical realism and contextualism, using critical realism as an ontological position and contextualism as an epistemology, the two are clearly linked. Braun & Clarke (2013) go so far as to suggest that critical realism is a sub-category of contextualism. Thus, the ontological and epistemological positioning of this study is effectively balanced.

2.5 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

In recent years, Thematic Analysis has become recognized as a methodology in its own

right, largely due to Braun and Clarke's (2006) paper on how it can be used in psychology.[1] Thematic Analysis can be described as a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting themes across data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013, p.79). Thematic Analysis aims both to make sense of the data and to offer a precise summary of what it means (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Unlike other methodologies, Thematic Analysis is extremely flexible as it is not connected, or bound, to any specific framework or theory. This means that several different epistemological positions can be applied to Thematic Analysis research. Due to the flexibility of Thematic Analysis as defined by Braun and Clarke (2013), contextualism was chosen and adopted as this project's epistemology.

Although a more flexible methodology, potentially requiring less technical skill than other approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2013), Thematic Analysis nevertheless requires intense focus and should not be dismissed as simple. Considerable focus is required to ensure that the research and analysis remain explicit, clear and precise. It is especially important that the researcher ensures that the themes are specific and representative of issues clearly related to the research question (Willig, 2013). Additionally, Thematic Analysis lacks theoretical underpinnings, making necessary a great deal of preliminary theoretical and conceptual work by the researcher (Willig, 2013). My understanding of my own epistemological position had to be well-defined as well as the exact context from which the data materialised.

Thematic Analysis is also a methodology which encompasses the researcher as a participant in the research and analysis process. Hence the researcher's own perspective can influence the formulation of emerging themes. This is another reason why Thematic Analysis was chosen as appropriate for this research as my involvement in the research process was felt to be integral to the evaluation of the data and will be considered and discussed in the reflexivity section.

2.5.1 Thematic Analysis: Justified

The flexibility of Thematic Analysis was a key reason why it was chosen for this research project as it enables researchers to decide how they want to identify themes within the data. For this study, I chose an inductive approach, which seemed most appropriate to address the research question as it allowed the focus of the analysis to be on detecting close links between the themes and the data (Frith & Gleeson, 2004). The data was analysed at a

[1] Braun and Clarke (2019) now refer to their approach to Thematic Analysis as Reflexive Thematic Analysis but for this study the two terms will be used interchangeably.

semantic and descriptive level (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were identified and coded based on participants' explicit and implicit verbal communications; deeper meanings and interpretations were not sought (Guest et al., 2012, Patton, 2002). A more in-depth analysis searching for latent codes could have been valuable but a focus on semantic codes meant that the research question and existing literature could be kept in the foreground of the research. As I was exploring how parents communicate, it seemed more appropriate to focus on participants' words rather than on latent approaches of interpreting and theorising from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Essentially, Thematic Analysis allowed this research to pursue a 'big Q' study, with an inductive, open-ended approach, allowing participants' experiences to be discovered and explored (Willig, 2013).

Braun and Clarke (2019) suggest that their Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach can be adequately applied to research questions seeking to understand individual experiences, behaviours, practices, thoughts and feelings. Reflexive Thematic Analysis is a suitable fit for this research as the research question falls in line with Braun and Clarke's (2019) guidelines through focusing on what the participants say about their experiences whilst also seeking to understand the intricacies of the data content and specific language used. Additionally, Thematic Analysis is theoretically adaptable, inviting flexibility with regards to one' choice of epistemology (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thus, this study's contextualist epistemology and critical realist ontology is an appropriate choice as Thematic Analysis can act as "a method that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of 'reality'" (Braun and Clarke, 2006 p.81).

2.5.2 Alternative Qualitative Approaches

Thematic Analysis is not the only approach that identifies themes across a data set, so other approaches had also to be considered. Aside from Thematic Analysis, the two approaches that were considered were Discourse Analysis and Grounded Theory.

Discourse Analysis is principally interested in language and how grammar, semantics and linguistic devices are used to construct an individual's accounts of their experiences. Discourse Analysis is often used in order to better understand various aspects of communication thus due to the study's focus on communication, it was considered as an alternative research method. Nevertheless, Discourse Analysis focuses more on language in and of itself and the role of words in constructing one's social world, rather than on getting closer to, and better understanding, the experience itself. The aim of this research is to achieve a thorough and comprehensive understanding of each participant's experience.

Thus, Thematic Analysis attends to the words used by participants; rather than using these words to create meaning as Discourse Analysis would do, the words are seen as a means to express a detailed account of participants' experience, enabling the researcher to fully understand and appreciate these experiences. As language is not a principal focus of this study and is perceived rather as a means to an end, Discourse Analysis was not pursued.

Another alternative methodology that was considered is Glaser and Strauss's (1967) Grounded Theory. By systematically collecting and analysing data inductively, Grounded Theory aims to generate new models or theories in order to explain the studied phenomenon (Birks & Mills, 2011). It is also a fairly broad methodology with many different strands, each having a different theoretical underpinning and procedure, ranging from relatively positivistic to constructivist (Charmaz, 2008). Grounded Theory was considered for this research as the theory's links with the field of sociology (Willig, 2008) are relevant to this study through underlining the intertwining of social processes, subjective experiences and change (Charmaz, 2008). Additionally, it is both applicable and relevant to the field of Counselling Psychology (Ponterotto, 2005), as exemplified through its use of reflection as an analytic tool. Similar to Thematic Analysis, Grounded Theory also attempts to find meaning in the data through utilising a rigorous line-by-line coding and analysis method (Willig, 2013). However, instead of seeking to develop a theory, this research study intended to describe the data and identify themes which thoroughly and comprehensively categorised the various components of participants' experiences in order to generate informed interpretations of the data. Grounded Theory was therefore deemed inappropriate for this research project.

2.6 Overview of the Research Procedures

2.6.1 Recruitment and Participant Requirements

Prior to the commencement of recruitment and data gathering, full ethical approval was obtained from City, University of London's ethics committee (Appendix A). The BPS's 'Code of Human Research Ethics' guidelines (BPS, 2014) and HCPC's 'Guidance on Conduct and Ethics' (HCPC, 2016) were fully complied with in order to ensure ethical conduct throughout the research process.

Following ethical approval, recruitment began. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling involves selecting a specific sample in which the specific qualities being studied are clearly demonstrated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Using purposive sampling ensured that I could access rich data on the studied phenomenon

(Silverman, 2005). The recruitment advert (appendix B) was posted in GP surgeries, on public notice boards of various schools, community centres and on social media websites. The advert was also sent out to my family and friends in case they might know of suitable candidates interested in, and willing to, participate. Snowballing was also encouraged as a recruitment method as this is very useful in finding relevant and information-rich participants (Patton, 1990, 2002). Individuals interested in taking part in the study were asked to make first contact with me to ensure that they did not feel coerced into participating. Once participants made initial contact, a short ten-minute phone call was arranged in order to further explain the purpose of the research to the participant and to ensure that the participant adequately fulfilled all elements of the research criteria. Overall, 20 prospective participants responded to the recruitment advert. Most of these made contact via the social media groups, blogs or websites that the advert had been posted on. Four of the respondents did not adequately fulfil the necessary recruitment criteria. Two of the prospective participants, after learning more about what the study entailed, chose not to participate due to the time commitments needed. Two more participants agreed to participate, and both fit the research criteria but re-arranged and cancelled the interviews on several occasions and then stopped responding to follow up emails. A total of twelve participants were fully recruited and participated in the interview process.

The sample size was selected on the criteria of Braun and Clarke's (2013) suggested sample size for a Thematic Analysis doctoral study. Braun and Clarke (2013) recommend collecting demographic data; this was done through a short, simple questionnaire, the results of which ensured that the sample was inclusive and has considered BME and all genders (Appendix C). These results have been compiled into a table to offer a clearer overview of the participant sample and their family structure (See Table 1).

The recruitment advert included the inclusion criteria which outlined that the study was open only to individuals over the age of eighteen. Participants could be male, female or non-binary. In order to participate, participants had to be separated or divorced from the mother or father of their adolescent children and needed to be in a shared custody arrangement, with neither parent having access to their children for less than 35% of the time. This figure was chosen based on the literature's definition of the minimum required custodial time to be included in the definition of shared custody (Kelly, 2007). Finally, participants needed to have both a smart phone and at least one adolescent child aged 12-18.

Following their initial expression of interest in participating and prior to the interviews, participants were all sent an information sheet to read which detailed the nature of the study

and their proposed role as participants (Appendix D). Participants were asked to read the information sheet carefully and were given the opportunity to discuss any questions or concerns they may have had. The information sheet was useful in providing participants with further detail about the study, giving them more insight into what topics the interview would focus on. Nevertheless, information such as the interview schedule, was withheld from the participants in order to preserve some levels of naturalness within the interviews. Once participants had read the information sheet and expressed a willingness to participate, they were then sent a consent form to read and sign (Appendix E).

2.6.2 Ethical Considerations

Various ethical processes were followed throughout the recruitment and interview process. Full written consent was required from all participants before interviews could go ahead. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw before or during the interview. They were also told of their right to withdraw their interview data up until six weeks after their interview had taken place. They were informed that all withdrawn data would immediately be destroyed and that a withdrawal at any time would have no repercussions, nor would it require any explanation.

All participants were guaranteed full confidentiality. The original consent forms and demographic questionnaires were kept separately from the transcripts, each of which was kept in a locked and secure cabinet in my home. The audio recordings of the interviews were stored on an encrypted, password-protected folder on a password-protected laptop. All audio recordings were immediately deleted from the recording device. In writing up the study, no identifying data was used, and participants' names were protected through the use of random pseudonyms.

Participants' well-being was a priority at all times. Throughout the interviews, I used my skills as a trainee Counselling Psychologist, through remaining attentive to any signs or expressions of discomfort. Within two of the interviews there was a need to pause or stop and take a break from the interview as that was deemed necessary for the wellbeing of the participants. After the interviews, each participant was given a debrief sheet (Appendix F); they were fully debriefed verbally and also had the chance to ask questions or express any concerns which came up for them during the interview. Several of the participants used this opportunity, once the recording device had been switched off, to express their interest in the topic and to tell of why they wanted to participate in the study and to be a voice for other separated parents. Although the topic of the interview was not necessarily a highly sensitive

one, I remained vigilant throughout the interview process to signs of emotional reactions on the part of participants. In the debrief sheet given to each participant after their interview (Appendix F), the names and contact details of relevant support networks were offered in case participants felt the need to seek support following the interview.

2.6.3 Interview Setting

Interviews took place in a private pre-booked room at the City, University of London campus. In the event that participants were unable to attend an interview at the City University campus, for example for interviews which took place outside of London, the interview took place instead at public places which were secluded, quiet and neutral spaces such as libraries and counselling rooms. Two of the interviews took place in the participant's homes. For all interviews that did not take place within the City University Campus, the City University Psychology Lone Worker Practice Procedure was methodically followed. In order to follow safeguarding guidelines, sealed envelopes with the name and address of the interviewee was given to a colleague. The holder of the envelope was contacted both before entering the interviewee's home and after departing, in order to confirm that the interview was over and that I was safe. The envelope enclosing the participant's address remained un-opened as they were only to be used in case of emergency. Following the interviews, the sealed envelopes were returned and were then destroyed.

2.6.4 Interview Schedule

An interview schedule (Appendix G), covering several relevant topics, based on the literature review, was compiled and the interviews followed a semi-structured approach in which open questions were used to promote responses from the participants. I chose to focus on open questions in order to offer participants the space to talk freely and genuinely about their experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2013), Nevertheless, I also ensured that the questions were still appropriate with regards to the research question. For some participants requiring more assistance, sub-questions and prompts were also prepared.

2.6.5. Sample

A total of twelve participants, seven women and five men, were recruited and interviewed. Demographic information of each participant was collected and assembled into a representative demographics table (see Table 1). Braun and Clarke (2013) advocate for demographic data collection in order to better understand the sample and as part of ethical

practice. Although a homogenous sample, in terms of all participants adhering to the same participant criteria, collecting and compiling demographic data demonstrated the various differences and similarities that exist across the sample.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	No. of children	Time passed since separation	Percentage custody time
Anita	44	Female	WB	2	6 years	60%
Barry	55	Male	WO	4	12 years	40%
Clive	42	Male	WO	2	3 years	35%
Dalia	50	Female	WB	3	2 years	65%
Erika	44	Female	WO	1	7 years	50%
Frank	51	Male	WB	4	8 years	50%
Georgia	48	Female	WO	2	8 months	50%
Harry	35	Male	WO	1	4 years	35%
Irene	45	Female	WO	4	3 years	60%
Janet	45	Female	WO	4	6 years	60%
Leo	49	Male	WB	5	12 years	40%
Mary	52	Female	WO	4	12 years	60%

2.6.6 Participants' Interest in the Research

After each participant interview time was taken to discuss with each participant their reflections on the interview process. Within these conversations, many of the participants spoke of what had attracted them to take part in this particular research, especially as no financial incentive had been offered. Several of the participants spoke of wanting to share their experiences with other parents whom may find themselves in a similar situation to what the participants had experienced. There was a strong message of wanting to reassure these 'other' parents that separation or a shared-custody living arrangement does not have to mean that parent-child communication suffers. Several of the participants spoke of the fear and anxiety that they experienced as parents considering separation. They hoped that in hearing their experiences, other parents would realise that in reality the outcome of parental separation in terms of communication and parent-child relationships can remain positive and actually can allow for overall relationship improvements. In addition, five of the participants

were male and reported their want for male voices to be heard within the conversation of separation, shared-custody and parent-child communication. There was an underlying sentiment among the men that within these conversations, men's experiences and opinions can be suppressed and therefore they wanted to participate in the research to use this opportunity as one which would provide them with a voice and would allow them to be heard whilst simultaneously helping other fathers in similar predicaments.

2.6.7 Pilot Interview

Prior to starting the recruitment process, a pilot interview was scheduled with an acquaintance who fit the participant criteria but was not included in the sample as I was concerned that using a known participant could influence the interview and analysis process. The aim of the pilot interview was to ensure that the audio equipment worked well as well as to test out the interview schedule with regards to the questions' openness, appropriateness and clarity. Additionally, having not conducted qualitative research for several years, it was thought that a pilot interview would be helpful in easing the transition from the role of therapist to the role of researcher.

The pilot interview proved to be exceptionally helpful. It offered me the opportunity to acknowledge several issues with the original interview schedule. As a result, the original order of the questions was amended as well as the wording of some of the interview questions being changed. Additionally, although there had been concerns around struggling to move away from the therapist to the researcher role, the pilot interview was successful in proving that I was able to ask questions and respond to the participant in a warm, empathic and encouraging manner without replicating the dynamics of a therapy session. This realisation reduced my anxiety around the interview process thus allowing the ensuing 'real' interviews to take place in a calmer manner. The valuable lessons derived from pilot interview were pivotal in ensuring that the twelve interviews that followed were conducted as successfully and smoothly as possible.

2.7 Overview of Analytic Strategy

The following analytic strategy was followed, in line with Braun and Clarke's guidelines for Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Braun and Clarke, 2006):

2.7.1. Phase One: Data Familiarization and Immersion

Following the completion of each interview, they were transcribed verbatim. I completed this procedure both for ethical reasons and because transcription acts as a useful way to familiarize oneself with the data set (Reissman, 1993); transcription can even be seen as an interpretive act in itself (Lapadat and Lindsay 1999). Once the transcription process was completed, I listened to the audio-recording of each interview again, simultaneously reading the transcription notes to ensure that the transcript was accurate and also to allow for the inclusion of non-verbal elements such as participants' sighs, emphases, pauses and silences (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This process granted me full immersion in the data, allowing the flavour of the language to be captured (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The transcripts were re-read several times, to ensure full data immersion, an essential element of effective Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

2.7.2 Phase Two: Identifying Initial Codes

Coding refers to the stage of the analysis in which the data is organized into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005). I remained conscious of the need to code in a way which ensured that the context of the data did not get lost (Bryman, 2001) and chose to therefore code the full data set manually (Appendix H). Completing this process manually also allowed for further data-immersion and for themes to slowly start to emerge. It was important to look for as many initial codes as possible (Braun and Clarke, 2006), so each code was listed alongside references to the participants who mentioned something in relation to a code, together with a note of where this reference can be found in their interview transcript (see sample in Appendix I). Some codes consisted of a word or small phrase whilst others were longer, in order to not lose any necessary context (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Initially, some data extracts fit more than one code and therefore were coded several times. Once the initial codes were all listed, the transcripts were re-read several times with the codes in mind, with the aim of establishing further links between codes and data.

2.7.3 Phase Three: Extracting Themes

This phase was one which I found arduous, lengthy and at times challenging. The process of looking for themes was best facilitated through the creation of Thematic Analysis mind maps (Braun and Wilkinson, 2003), which were created, changed and adapted throughout the completion of this phase. Maps made the process more visual which was beneficial in eliciting new and different codes, which could be analysed and sorted into overarching themes and sub-themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013). I found that the best way to do this effectively was through printing out codes from the previous phase, cutting them into

individual code names and then clustering them together on the floor (See Appendix J). Once this was done, the codes were grouped into clusters and when relevant were given appropriate cluster names. The initial groups of codes were analysed and some of the 'themes' or code clusters had significant overlap thus were merged with one another in order to strengthen the groups. The codes were rearranged further in order to produce an initial map split into themes and subthemes (Appendix K). This map was seen as a loose and tentative first draft of a thematic map which would evolve throughout the continuation of the analysis process.

During this stage of the analysis, it was important to remember that the process of analysing and coding data is subjective. A bottom-up approach was therefore used in which the codes identified were not forced to fit into pre-conceived themes. Additionally, it was important to include more than simple quotations as the text around the quotations is what provided the context, thus was necessary in order to maintain each quote's meaning (Bryman, 2001). During this stage, the different levels of analysis became apparent as the data could fit into codes, main themes and sub-themes.

2.7.4 Phase Four: Refining Themes

At this stage, all the themes that had emerged were reviewed and refined. The first step in doing this required a review of the data extracts to cross-examine the provisional themes with the quotations which had been identified as most relevant. This step also ensured that there was consistency within each provisional theme. Through this process, it was found that some themes lacked sufficient supporting data; others had to be broken down into separate themes or alternatively, some were combined to form a single stronger theme. Each theme needed to be considered alongside the collected data extracts to make sure they all formed a consistent pattern (Braun and Clarke, 2006). At this point it was important to consider Patton's (1990) "dual criteria for judging categories". Patton (1990) suggests that researchers need to consider whether the data within themes correspond to one another meaningfully, and whether there is clear and identifiable heterogeneity between the themes. I took time to evaluate whether or not each theme abided to Patton's dual criteria, and when this was not found to be the case, themes were once again re-evaluated and adapted accordingly. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest creating a second thematic mind map at this stage, thus I created a digital thematic map in order to represent the refined themes and subthemes found at this stage (Appendix L). Following the initial refining process, the validity of each theme and the thematic map had to be considered in relation to the data set as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once I felt that thematic saturation had been reached, the

analytic process was considered complete.

2.7.5 Phases Five and Six: Defining and Naming Themes, Followed by Write- Up

This was the final stage of refining and defining the themes. As well as being able to define each theme, it was also necessary to be able to define what the themes were not. The names allocated to each theme were thought about carefully to make sure they fully captured what the theme was about.

Once I had a full set of final themes, phase six began. Each theme required a corresponding detailed written analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This included continuous further analysis while I wrote up the report. Throughout this stage, the themes themselves, and their names were constantly evaluated, with small changes being made throughout the write-up process in order to make sure that the themes effectively represented the data included within them.

2.8 Quality Criteria

To make sure the analysis was conducted to a high quality and professional standard, Braun and Clarke's (2006) 15-point checklist was consulted from the beginning of the research until the write-up, ensuring that their quality criteria guidelines were fully met at all times. Smith et al. (2009) also encourage researchers to use Yardley's (2000) quality criteria thus, Yardley's measures were also used to guarantee high research quality and to ensure that the research was context-sensitive and that my impact on the study, as researcher, was adequately reflected on throughout. Additionally, I consciously worked to ensure clarity, coherence and transparency throughout, and to demonstrate how the research makes a relevant contribution to the field of Counselling Psychology (Yardley, 2000). These points are taken up again in the final chapter (see section 4.4).

2.9 Reflexivity

Qualitative research is by definition personal and subjective (Smith, 2008); it enables people's experiences to be explored in great depth (Patton, 1990). Therefore, who I am and how my personal experiences and cultural background have shaped this project is a vital consideration for the understanding of my research journey and choice of topic. Additionally, reflecting meaningfully on the research process is essential to achieving a good methodology (Willig, 2008).

As a qualitative researcher, I hoped to give voice to the true experience of a specific group of individuals. Since the research process began, I found myself unable to separate my own experience of the world from my involvement in the research. When engaging in personal interviews with participants and then immersing myself in the data analysis, I was aware of the extent to which my involvement steadily increased. During the interviews I found myself struggling in how I positioned myself in relation to my participants. On the one hand I was a Trainee Counselling Psychologist and therefore found myself hearing their experiences through a therapeutic lens, on the other hand I maintained my researcher 'hat' in order to ensure that I was conducting the interviews properly and ethically. I wondered if at times my tendency towards using client-centered techniques constrained me from phrasing my questions in a more directive way to the participants, which perhaps would have been more helpful. Although at times I noticed myself confusing my position as researcher with that of clinician, I felt that overall my Counselling Psychology skills allowed me to form relationships with the participants, perhaps making them more comfortable to open up to me about their personal, and at times difficult, experiences. I was comforted by the knowledge that balancing one's roles of clinician and researcher is a common struggle within qualitative psychology research (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006), one which may stem from the two roles requiring similar attributes of being empathic, creating a strong rapport and active listening, and both taking place within a confidential space (Riqz, 2008). When these confusions arose, I made sure to remain aware of them, to reflect on them and ensure as much as possible that I was not compromising on the quality of the interview experience or the data.

At times I found that there was a natural distance between myself and my participants as I was not in the same 'group' as them and sometimes sensed that I was positioned as an outsider. Several times I noticed participants implying that I wouldn't necessarily understand their experience adequately having not gone through it myself. I was aware of the fact that all of the interviews were conducting during the second and third trimester of my first pregnancy. Thus, it was evident to the participants that I was pregnant, and I found myself wondering how my pregnancy may have impacted on the interviews. On the one hand I wondered if the participants wanted to at time enlighten me about the experience of parenting, so as to prepare me for what lay ahead and on the other hand it felt as though my pregnancy acted as a point of 'difference' between us, with them assuming that I had not yet experienced communicating with any children of my own, let alone adolescents. Thus, at times it felt as though our 'differences' may have created a wedge between us.

Consequently, I worried that I would struggle to represent them adequately in my research but when conducting my analysis, I realised that I was still able to comprehend their unique

experiences on a meaningful level. Moreover, I was touched and honoured that they had trusted me through their open and honest narratives, allowing themselves to be vulnerable when sharing their experiences with me. Additionally, when completing my analysis I realised that my 'outsider position' may have influenced my data collection and analysis in the sense that it allowed me to be genuinely curious and perceptive about their experiences whilst harboring a necessary level of distance and neutrality. Had I endured a more similar personal experience to them, it may have been difficult to remain neutral, thus I believe that at times my 'outsider position' helped me effectively complete my research. Although much younger than my participants, when conducting the interviews, listening to the recordings and conducting my analysis, I felt that even without being in their 'group' I still had a significant understanding of their experiences which allowed me to engage with the analysis in a meaningful way.

However when carrying out the analysis I encountered several challenges. I was on my maternity leave and therefore worked through my analysis very slowly over several months. This meant that some of the interviews were put aside for a while before I coded them, and I found myself wondering how the time that had passed may have impacted on my analysis. As I worked through the interviews I conducted, I found myself having to re-read some of them many more times before starting the analysis process in order to re-familiarise myself with the data. I also found myself needing to go back to the notes I had written immediately after the interviews which reminded me of each participant's body language, tone of voice, expressions and the overall interview experience in order to adequately re-build a clear picture of each interview which I then held in my mind whilst reading through the data.

Additionally, in the time that had passed from conducting the interviews to analysing them, I had given birth and was bringing up a baby; thus I found that each day, as I grappled with the challenges associated with becoming a new parent, my perceptions of parenting were constantly changing. I was aware that my understanding of what it means to be a parent, and to communicate with a child, kept shifting and thus may have impacted on, and shaped, the ways in which I interpreted the data. I believe that my understanding of the participants' experience and the data was enhanced through my own parenting journey, but I could not help but wonder how different my understanding of the data would have been should I have had adolescent children too. As I conducted my analysis over several months, the ways in which I may have interpreted the data of the first interview, soon after I gave birth, to the ways in which I interpreted the final interview data, several months post-partum, may have been very different, having been influenced by my parenting experience. Thus, once the two

initial phases of analysis were complete, I chose to review and re-read all of the data, as well as my initial codes, before continuing with the analysis process.

Lastly, throughout the analysis I found myself shifting from perceiving the participants as one group of parents who had shared custody to lots of individual voices with unique stories. At times the similarities between them were so stark but I still found myself appreciating that the ways in which each participant experienced this specific phenomenon is unique. Although there was clear homogeneity among them, their individual voices were clear and I realised that in order not to allow their distinctiveness to be lost, it was fundamental for me to represent them as both individuals, and a group, when writing my analysis and discussion, something I endeavored to do.

Chapter 3: Results and Analysis

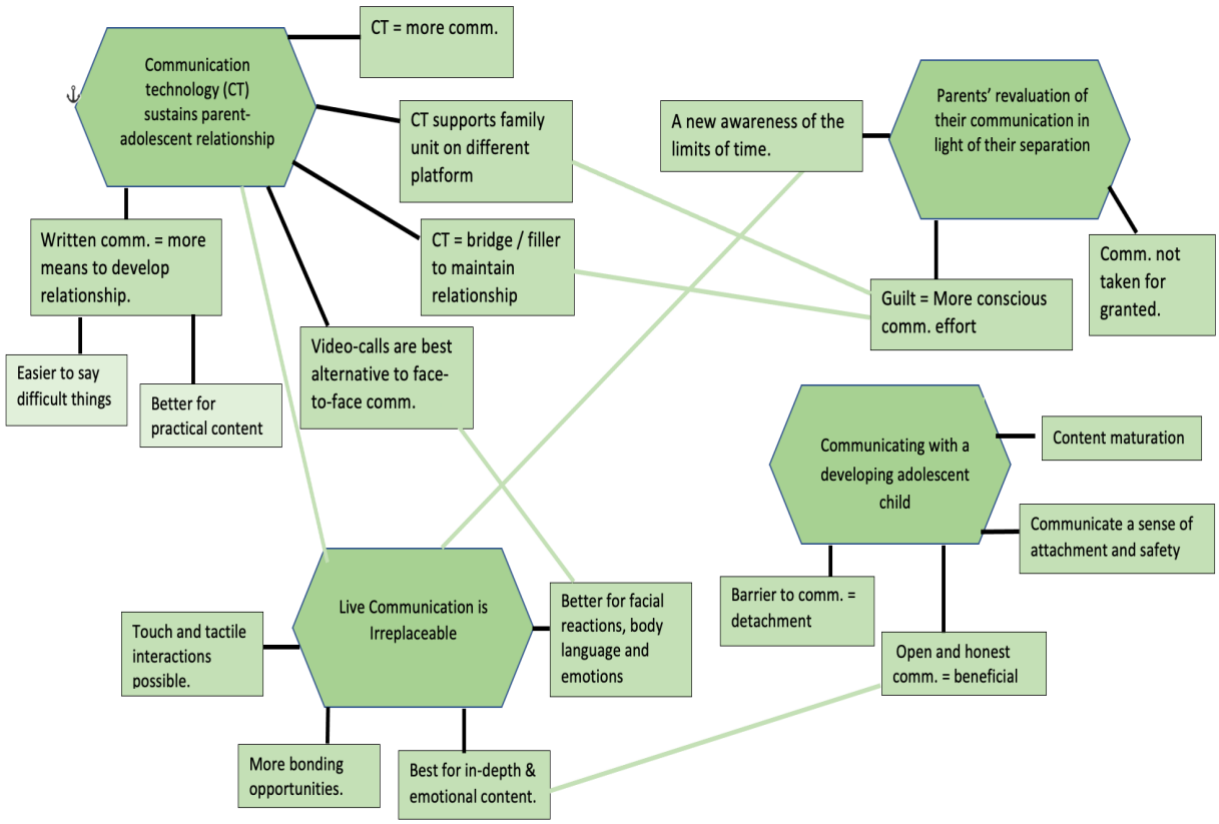
3.1 Overview of Findings

The aim of this research is to investigate how parents communicate with their adolescent children in shared custody households. The following chapter outlines this study's findings in relation to the above research topic. Following the Thematic Analysis approach outlined in the Methodology chapter, all data was transcribed and coded in the initial stages of analysis. The codes were then clustered and re-clustered to generate four master themes and several sub-themes (See Thematic Map 3.2.1 and Table of Themes 3.2.2). The themes were inductively identified (Frith & Gleeson, 2004) and are therefore strongly linked to the data sets (Patton, 1990). Quotations are used throughout the in-depth analysis in order to ground the presented themes in the data. At times, when data has been deemed immaterial or irrelevant, part of the quotation has been omitted, these instances have been represented by an ellipsis ' . . . '. Participants' names have been anonymised and they have been assigned pseudonyms.

This chapter is structured thematically, following the master themes identified in the course of the interviews and subsequent thematic coding. The first section considers how communications technology sustains the parent-adolescent relationship; the second discusses parents' perception that there is no satisfactory substitute for live, face-to-face interaction; the third examines parents' thoughts and feelings on communicating with adolescent children as they undergo a developmental transition stage; and the fourth theme analyses how parents reflections on their past communication has caused them to re-evaluate their present communication patterns.

3.2 Overview of Themes

3.2.1 Thematic Map



3.2.2 Table of Themes

Master Themes	Sub-Themes
Communications technology sustains the parent-adolescent relationship	1 (a) Communications technology can support the family unit on a different platform. 1 (b) Technology allows for extended volume of communication. 1(c) Video calling is the most effective alternative when face-to-face communication is unavailable. 1(d) Communication technology acts as a bridge or filler to maintain the parent-adolescent relationship. 1(e) Written communication provides another means of developing relationships. (i) Some difficult things are easier to say in writing. (ii) Written communication is good for practical content.
Live communication is irreplaceable	2 (a) Live communication allows for touch and tactile interactions. 2 (b) Live communication enables body language to be fully experienced. 2 (c) Live activities provide opportunity for communication and bonding. 2 (d) Face-to-face is ideal for in-depth and emotional content.
Communicating with a developing adolescent child	3 (a) Adolescents benefit from open and honest communication from their parents. 3 (b) Regular communication offers a sense of attachment, security, and safety**.** 3 (c) Adolescence leads to maturation of communication content. 3 (d) Adolescent detachment impacts on communication
Parents' revaluation of their communication in light of their separation	4 (a) Communication is not taken for granted. 4 (b) A new awareness of the limits of time. 4 (c) Guilt for past failures leads to more communication efforts.

3.3 Theme One: Communications technology sustains the parent-adolescent relationship

This was one of the most salient themes throughout the interview process. There was a range of understandings about how communications technology can support the parent-adolescent relationship. The theme was accordingly split into five sub-themes (see Table 1 3.2.2), one of which was further sub-divided in order to distinguish between, and focus precisely on, each point.

3.3.1 Communications technology can support the family unit on a different platform

Several parents mentioned that communications technology offers a platform on which the family nucleus can unite, suggesting that this technology serves as a pillar sustaining the parent-adolescent relationship. All respondents spoke of using WhatsApp as a key communication platform. WhatsApp often enabled family groups, entire families, including both separated parents and all children, to communicate as a unit. Even in families in which communication between the separated parents had broken down, family groups including one parent and all the children interacted regularly. These family groups allowed parents to communicate with their children simultaneously rather than having to maintain several separate conversations. These conversations were often found to be akin to the kinds of dialogue that characteristically take place within a family home; technology made such dialogue also available to the non-custodial parent. Family conversations also provide a sense of normality, especially when both parents are involved.

Anita found that a family WhatsApp group with her ex-husband and both adolescent children

"enabled more communication as a family generally. This entire family unit can exist on another platform." (p. 6, ll. 22-23)

The use of the term 'entire family' suggests that although the parents separated, the family as an organic whole unit resettled in the virtual world after the upheavals of separation.

The communication between Anita and her ex-husband regarding the children's schedule, together with messages from the children relevant to both parents, would be placed on the family group for everyone to see:

". . . when they get exam results and they send us messages from school, we can all see it." (p. 9, l. 10)

Central to the effectiveness of this mode of communication is the opportunity it offers to create a forum in which the entire family can participate – no one family member need feel excluded and all members can benefit from the openness they enjoyed as a family unit prior to the separation. Anita stressed that she found the WhatsApp platform extremely helpful for family communication, especially with regard to the opportunity to have family groups. Towards the end of her interview, she went so far as to recommend setting up family groups, with both parents present, for all families going through a separation:

"I think yeah, in terms of good communication, WhatsApp is probably best and I think having a family group is definitely a really good idea" (p. 21, ll. 1-2)

Harry and his ex-wife also regularly use a family WhatsApp group in order to:

"agree something big or discuss some details" (p. 4, ll. 17-18)

Leo's family had several different groups but:

"We have one WhatsApp grouping which includes their mother which is practical" (p. 6, ll. 4-5)

Following Anita's comment on the suitability of WhatsApp for this type of family communication, Leo's suggestion that it is capable of accommodating a diversity of family groupings suggests a further advantage of this medium of communication. Emphasising its more practical use, Leo also continued to highlight the value of this group and how the entire family communicate on it, indicating that it is his most used family group:

"I mean, actually, it's probably, the bulk of our chats are on that group in actual fact." (p. 6, ll. 10-11)

Georgia admitted that due to her lack of harmonious contact with her ex-husband, a family chat involving both parents wasn't a feasible option; nevertheless, she felt that such a chat would be most effective in preventing children 'playing' their parents and would also facilitate better co-parenting:

"If everyone was willing to be civil, a group chat could be really helpful in that sense because I think a group chat would eliminate that whole "Well, Dad said I could do it" and instead Dad would come back in and say "no I bloody well didn't" you know . . . They wouldn't try it if they knew their dad was going to see it." (p. 20, ll. 5-9)

Georgia's caveat, requiring everyone to be "civil", may serve as a reminder of the tangible difficulties of leaving one's emotional tensions at the door. Although using communication technology can be helpful, it cannot produce miracles such as eradicating the strong emotions that can exist within separated families.

On the other hand, Georgia's reference to the openness and visibility afforded by WhatsApp builds on the comments of Anita and Leo to the same effect, in this case, in order to emphasise not only the benefits of a distanced family reunion, but the further benefits in terms of avoiding later conflict and tension. Georgia added that a family group chat with both parents would be highly practical as it could also act as a place where all logistics, dates and plans are arranged and confirmed; almost suggesting that family plans should be approached in a business-like way. It would constitute a:

"sort of a group calendar so that you know who's taking who where and at what point." (p. 20, ll. 15-17)

Janet, Irene and Mary all have family WhatsApp groups with their children but excluding their ex-partners. Although Janet communicates with her ex-partner, they each have their own family group with their children, communicating with each other on a separate WhatsApp group. Asked who is on her WhatsApp group, Janet replied:

"The four kids and me . . . (p. 2, l. 5)

". . . he [her ex-husband] has one with them, I have one with them and we communicate between each other." (p. 2, ll. 8-9)

Janet noted the importance of the WhatsApp family group:

"I mean, a lot happens on the group chat." (p. 9, l. 16)

The idea of the family communicating as a nucleus via technology was emphasised by Irene. Although the family chat doesn't include her ex-husband, she nevertheless commented on

how much she communicates with her adolescent children through their WhatsApp group and how easy this makes communicating as a family, reinforcing the idea of inclusiveness mentioned by other interviewees:

"We have a family group, obviously on WhatsApp, that way it's easier to get everybody communicating together." (p. 2, ll. 10-11)

Mary too found that WhatsApp family groups offered the bonding opportunity to 'talk' to all her children simultaneously, even when they are physically apart. Asked how she feels using her family WhatsApp group, Mary replied:

"Life is fast and quick and you know, I don't think we get together enough. If you want to bond a little bit and bond everyone together, then it [WhatsApp] does create a little bit of glue and is useful and we do use them as a family which I enjoy." (p. 21, ll. 13-17)

The word 'glue' reinforces Mary's concept of virtual communication as creating a bond, holding the family together, and reinforcing the concept of inclusiveness noted by Mary earlier and by the other interviewees.

The way communication technology, especially WhatsApp family groups, can support parents' communication with all their children, is evidenced by the many and varied positive comments of most participants. This technology fills a gap which is often left post-separation, when spending time together as a unified 'family' becomes rare and one parent is by default always away from the children. Participants' use of terms such as 'entire family', 'family unit', 'togetherness' and 'glue', all point to the many ways Whatsapp is able to tie and bond the family together, even from a distance.

Family groups enable the family to converse as a unit, with either or both parents present, albeit on a technological rather than a face-to-face platform.

3.3.2 Technology allows for extended volume of communication

Technology has made communication easier and more frequent, and promotes a certain relaxed casualness, perhaps because physical distance reduces stress and tension. Parents, regardless of their specific custody arrangement, can enjoy daily communication with their adolescent children, provided the adolescents have phones of their own. Their conversations can remain 'continuous' as mobile technology means that conversations are no longer limited by space and place. This grants both parents, even on 'non custody' nights, a sense of togetherness with their children. The frequency of such technology-enabled communication allows parents to remain close to their children even when they are not in physical proximity, as is often the case for parents sharing custody.

Almost all participants mentioned their newfound reliance on technology, a result of their separation, to maintain frequent, easy and accessible communication with their adolescent children.

Clive found that communication applications such as WhatsApp and Facetime *"enhances and helps frequent communication"* (p. 18, l. 9).

Technology enabled Leo to maintain constant, clear communication:

"we've kept in, in very clear contact, um, mainly through you know, technology and phones, and I think this is probably more driven by them, you know more modern forms of social media so texting and, and, and, [stutters] WhatsApping and emailing rather than telephone" (p. 2, ll. 10-13)

Leo's voice grew louder, and he appeared to be firmly emphasising the words 'very clear contact' seemingly wanting to make absolutely sure that both he and I had understood and fully believed what he was telling me.

Later in the interview Leo credited technological platforms with supporting the lives of divorced parents, making communication easier while maintaining closeness between the individuals within the family:

"You know these new platforms make, make life an awful lot easier, especially for divorced parents . . . Yeah, it's really brought the children closer, to each other and to both of us as individual parents." (p. 24, ll. 10-12)

Frank went further, expressing how his communication with his adolescent children might actually have improved post-divorce thanks to technology:

"The frequencies . . . the frequencies are the same if not better" (p. 11, l. 1)

Erika mentioned really struggling at first on days when she didn't have custody of her son. Her maternal instincts of care, concern and anxiety for her son's wellbeing and safety came through strongly in her dialogue. The way she expressed her communication with him suggested that technology was acting as a sort of umbilical cord, maintaining the close mother-child bond:

"I constantly phone him and see how . . . how he is, even not on my days I'm phoning him every day to see how he's doing or what he is doing and if he is doing alright." (p. 2, ll.14-15)

The tripartite construction of her phrasing, with its powerful anaphora, suggests a need for completeness, as if Erika remains determined to keep her adolescent son enclosed in her care. His possession of a phone meant that she could reach him even when they were at a physical distance. She would do this to check on him, as mentioned above but she also said that:

"I'd phone him sometimes and I would say love you." (p. 12, l. 5)

Erika noted that she would normally say 'I love you' before her son went to bed; thus, thanks to technology, she could continue that customary important communication. Traditionally, divorced parents without custody would be unable to have 'regular' and 'frequent' communication with their children; Erika's testimony shows that communication technology now offers such parents the comfort of frequent, close communication.

Clive, Dalia, Frank and Harry all revealed that communication technology enables daily contact with their adolescent children. This contact arguably reduces the sense of a physical gap between them or makes it less problematic for them.

Clive found that:

“now you can almost on a daily basis or on a very regular basis, you can still keep in touch and remember each other and you know, keep in touch and find out what's going on in other people's lives.” (p. 18, l. 13)

Clive’s choice of words ‘remember each other’ seem to suggest that infrequent contact in separated households could potentially lead to family members forgetting one another. This further emphasises the urgent need for parents to maintain constant remote communication when apart.

Similarly, Dalia spoke about the fact that:

“we are always in touch and I am so secure in their relationship with me.” (p. 1, ll. 18-20)

Dalia seems to be suggesting that the continuous dialogue with her children is strongly associated with her feelings of security in her positive relationships with them. Interestingly, Dalia’s comment implies that this continuous dialogue is a source of reassurance for herself as well as for her children, a valuable reminder that it is not only the adolescent child who is left anxious and insecure after parents have separated.

For Harry too, the comment, *“24/7 I can be in touch with her”* (p. 15, l. 4) shows that there are no barriers to limitless communication with a daughter via technology, regardless of custodial arrangements. As for Dalia and Harry, there is an undercurrent of feeling that the benefits of 24/7 communication enable parents to feel as though the bond between them and their children is permanent, offering them a reassurance of both their communication and relationship with their children. This is the case even when a physical distance may exist and their relationship may have been fractured as a result of their divorce.

Frank, who has an adolescent son at boarding school, spoke about how technology has changed the volume of his communication with his son, allowing them to communicate far more:

“It's changed insomuch as because of social media, my son, the adolescent one, tends to text a lot now and he'll phone . . . Yeah, I mean I speak to him every day” (p. 2, ll. 13-15).

Speaking about his adolescent daughter, who is not at boarding school, he added:

“. . . and my daughter I speak to every night as well.” (p. 1, l. 19-20)

Participants' experiences as detailed above indicate that the quantity of communication enabled by communications technology is immeasurable. This seems to be extremely significant as the parents themselves associated increased virtual communication with greater feelings of closeness. Parents seem able to enjoy continuous dialogue with their children irrespective of their custodial agreements and the lack of daily face-to-face contact. An important distinction also emerges between the unlimited quantity of communication and the actually enhanced quality of this communication; what parents appeared to appreciate most was this enhanced quality, suggesting that distance had actually served to strengthen the relationships with their adolescent children.

3.3.3 Video calling is the most effective alternative when face-to-face communication is unavailable

Facetime and other video-calling phone features were singled out as being among the most effective mediums of communications technology available for separated parents to communicate with their adolescent children. Video-calling, unlike regular telephone conversations or written communication, allows for visual micro-communication. Such micro-communication is not as effective or as clear as when communication takes place face-to-face; nevertheless, long-distance communication via video-calling enables parents to make better sense of their children's facial reactions, eye movements, body posture, silences and tone of voice. This was seen by some parents as the closest they could come to face-to-face contact when they don't have custody.

Barry suggested that when he can't be with his children, he prefers to:

"at least see them on Facetime . . . there is something much closer about it." (p. 12, ll. 20-22)

The closeness afforded by video-calling was praised even more highly by Mary, who suggested that it is almost as good as being together face-to-face:

"It's the same as face-to-face. I mean 'cause you're . . . you are there, you have eye contact you have most of the same things . . . I mean I don't know if it can replace but it's definitely quite similar to." (p. 17, ll. 23-24 –p. 18, ll. 1-2)

Clearly there is something extremely effective about conversing with one's children via the visual element of video, more than simply talking on the phone. There is an added feeling of closeness and togetherness despite the physical distance. Mary's phrasing, suggesting that the physical distance is negated by the eye contact afforded by video-calling, would explain why parents might prefer this means of communication to telephone calls; video-calling reconstructs and replicates the three-dimensional physical world in which physical, face-to-face interaction occurs. By contrast, telephone communication consists solely of the more emotionally impoverished, non-visual medium of transmitting sound waves.

This hypothesis is supported by Dalia's comment that she uses Facetime regularly with her daughters:

". . . I realise that my daughters and I Facetime even more than we call each other normally. We often Facetime so we can see each other's faces." (p. 9, ll. 4-5)

This family sees video-calling as an alternative to, and an upgrade on, regular phone calls. In response to a question asking if Facetime is very different from being on the phone, Dalia replied:

"Yes, yes, because you can actually see the person, their facial reactions, so I really like the video aspect and I find that part of technology really, really effective." (p. 9, ll. 8-10)

Micro-communications are lost over the phone and in written communication; Frank felt strongly that video-calling offers the opportunity to pick up on his children's facial and body language when they are not physically together in a way which would otherwise be impossible.

"When someone's visually there it's as if they're standing in front of you so you can pick up when . . . From their faces if they had a bad day at school, which I often do with my with my youngest boy." (p. 5, ll. 11-16)

Frank clearly felt that phone contact makes it harder to decipher emotions or pick up on certain emotional content that his adolescent child might not be disclosing to him; by contrast, video-calling makes it easier for him to interpret these emotions and experiences by reading his children's facial and body language. As with Mary and Dalia, Frank's comments suggest a sense of parental concern, expressed as a need for visual reassurance that his youngest son is all right.

Georgia focused less on body language and more on the experience of being together virtually. She suggested that video-calling is preferable to phone calls as she and her daughter can 'see' what each other is up to, experiencing something of a sense of togetherness from afar.

"She can show me what the cat's up to or whatever . . . she can ring me and see . . . see what I'm actually up to rather than just talk to me if she wants to . . ." (p. 12, ll. 22-23).

The crucial importance of visual contact in all human relations helps explain why one of the biggest impacts of separation on parents can be the huge shift from seeing, and communicating with, their children daily to only being given specific, limited days. It seems from Barry, Dalia, Frank and Georgia's experiences of video-calling that they are able to offer their adolescent children the figurative familiarity of being together by creating a virtual experience to imitate the literal, three-dimensional experience of being in each other's presence.

In a way, video-calling seems to take a certain kind of pressure off the participants in the conversation. This may be because it allows for non-verbal communication of a more visceral kind than the effort required to put thoughts and feelings into words. On the telephone, by contrast, any pause creates a potentially awkward silence, as it is impossible to 'read' the mind of one's interlocutor. The relief from this kind of tension appears to be just as important to the parents as their children, offering them a sense of reassurance and connection. Video-calling enables a form of instant communication and 'togetherness' that can be obstructed in the struggle to find the precise, appropriate words.

It is therefore unsurprising that participants described video-calling as the most effective alternative to face-to-face communication; it offers parents the surrogate experience of togetherness even when a physical distance separates them from their children. Multi-modal micro-communication can be better sensed through video-calling than by phone, which allows only for sound communication. These non-verbal elements are a huge part of what it means to these parents to have good communication with their adolescent children.

3.3.4 Communication technology acts as a bridge or filler to maintain the parent-adolescent relationship

Many participants differentiated between the high-quality conversations with their adolescent children afforded by communications technology and the simpler, daily contacts which also serve to maintain contact with them. A theme which emerged from the initial codes was that although perhaps not a replacement for all face-to-face communication, technology can very effectively act as a bridge or filler to facilitate the higher quality face-to-face communication which isn't openly available to separated parents.

Janet is happy *if "the in-between communications are on WhatsApp"* (p. 6, ll. 3-4) when face-to-face communication is unavailable. She:

"may send a WhatsApp just saying some words or checking in or saying, you know, I hope you had a nice weekend . . . I love you or whatever . . ." (p. 11, ll. 20-23)

For Janet, communications technology platforms like WhatsApp are very effective for 'in between' communication, serving as a stopgap or filler when she is unable to be physically with her children.

Georgia also commented that communications technology *"lets you keep communicating with the kids whilst they are not with you . . ."* (p. 13, ll. 3-4)

". . . I wouldn't say it fully bridges it but you know, at least you are keeping in touch." (p. 13, ll. 6-7)

Georgia is clear that technology, however necessary or effective, is no substitute for genuine physical contact and can only ever serve as a 'bridge'. The unspoken implication is that a united household/family would not need such a bridge; by analogy, a blind person might depend on a guide dog to get around – but what blind person would not prefer to have full sight and no need of a guide dog? Georgia was evidently implying that she would rather be with her children face-to-face but her custody arrangements, like those of many separated parents, made this impossible. She therefore relies perforce on the 'filler' communication offered by such technological applications. Thus, although perhaps not offering the same quality of communication, the mere availability and consistency of communications technology makes it important and necessary.

Frank made several references to the importance of maintaining regular daily contact with both of his adolescent children via various mediums of technology.

"I've always found it important to maintain contact however or whatever medium that is through . . . And I've always done that." (p. 5, ll. 3-5)

". . . and that platform [WhatsApp] allows you to do that very well." (p. 5, ll. 21-22)

Frank's lexis - 'maintain' – implies that communication via technology does not necessarily offer the best or highest quality of communication; rather, it has a separate, more basic function, namely, to keep the channels of communication open:

"I just think it's just doing what it takes to maintain that is important." (p. 13, l. 5)

"The other platforms and phones are all really useful for maintaining constant communication and keeping it more consistent. Yeah, even if it's not the best quality." (p. 22, ll. 13-15)

Frank reiterates the importance of consistency and maintenance as a priority in his communications with his adolescent children. There may be several reasons for this emphasis on consistency; he may, for example, have learned as a parent of young children that consistency and regular communication are vital in creating a secure environment in which they can flourish and develop. Frank experienced the vital importance of this during the custody battle with his ex-wife, when he had no communication with his children:

"The best form of communication is the communication you have . . . Because when you don't have it, you realize that even a telephone call is extremely important. It's not brilliant but it maintains the contact and it drives you [pause] . . . to want to have more and better communication." (p. 22, ll. 3-7)

To a lesser degree, Leo also points to communications technology as a maintenance bridge when face-to-face communication is unavailable. Speaking of his family WhatsApp group, Leo said:

*"It's kind of my way of just keeping connected with them and keeping in touch with them when I . . . when I don't see them" (*p. 6, ll. 19-19)

Differentiating between these ersatz forms of communication and face-to-face, he commented:

"It's a keeping in touch rather than a real, real conversation." (p. 21, l. 9)

"It can only ever be . . . [pointing to phone] a . . . you know . . . A stopgap to what is the real thing and the real thing to me is always going to be being with them." (p. 23, ll. 8-9)

Like Frank and Georgia, Leo clearly sees communications technology as a necessary evil rather than a satisfactory substitute for the physical and non-verbal contact that is so important a part of communication. Misunderstanding, for example, can easily arise when lack of visual contact prevents an individual from realising that an apparently critical comment made by telephone may be intended as sarcasm or a joke. Leo does see a mobile phone, and the communications platforms associated with it, as extremely helpful for 'keeping in touch' and acting as a 'stopgap', bridging the family's communication until they can be together face-to-face again. This is fundamental for separated parents like himself who spend considerable periods of time away from their adolescent children. But it is no more than 'better than nothing'.

Barry and Clive similarly use communication technology daily with their adolescent children when they don't have custody, but they too see it as no more than *faute de mieux.* It is merely a barely satisfactory bridge and cannot compare with face-to-face contact. Clive said:

"what's important is to realize that certain things can augment and improve and they can be useful tools but not tools that substitute and replace the human connection. That's a really important differentiation." (p.19, ll. 14-16)
"Face-to-face when possible is the best and maybe the others to fill the gaps" (p. 19, ll. 22-23)

Similarly, Barry uses communications technology to communicate daily with his children from afar, but: *"I still feel I miss out on a lot. It is not the same to just communicate daily as living there . . ."* (p. 6, ll. 11-12)

In complete contrast, for other participants such as Mary, technological platforms are far more than a mere 'bridge'; they mean that "*you're able to be in touch with children more"* (p. 14, ll. 14-15).

Nevertheless, participants' repeated references to 'bridging' suggest that for all of them, regardless of the convenience of communications technology, and their gratitude for what it could offer, it was no more than a substitute for full communication with their adolescent children. All appreciated that there is so much more to communication than an exchange of verbal information; within families particularly, a great deal of communication is non-verbal. Thus the 'bridging' or 'filler' communications afforded by technology meant that when parents didn't have custody of their children, they could still keep in direct contact with them. This was not the same as face-to-face dialogue, but it certainly helped to fill the gap when this was unavailable. Perhaps at a subliminal level, it also served as a form of damage limitation; maintaining channels of communication by whatever means could help mask the stark reality of irretrievable family breakdown.

3.3.5 Written communication provides another means of developing relationships

3.3.5.1 Some difficult things are more easily expressed in writing

The fact that written communication via technology platforms was found to be a very different communication experience from face-to-face, also offered parents a unique opportunity. Several found that such written communication offered an easier way to express emotional, difficult or heartfelt content which might have been difficult to verbalise.

Mary found WhatsApp and other verbal communication platforms useful for conveying painful thoughts and feelings labelling them as: *"the modern form of emails and letter writing."* (p. 17, ll. 12-13)

The comment is especially noteworthy given that emails are already considered 'old' technology and cultural commentators have long lamented the lost art of letter writing. But for Mary, as with letter writing, a parent can 'hide' behind their phone and write more sensitive content which they perhaps feel uncomfortable about bringing up face-to-face.

"There are sometimes subjects which are maybe a bit touchy or . . . So I might write something and then afterwards we can elaborate" (p. 17, ll. 10-12).

Mary evidently finds it easier to broach sensitive subjects from the safe distance created by the written word, only later venturing to discuss them face-to-face. In the first instance, she needs the 'shield' of WhatsApp, indicating yet another benefit of communications technology – the potential to raise sensitive issues from a safe distance.

Clive similarly found that his children might feel more comfortable texting or WhatsApping on certain sensitive topics rather than confronting him with them face-to-face.

"They might be happier sending you a text saying, 'Daddy I'm going out tonight or you know . . . rather than waiting until they see me to say, 'Daddy I smashed the car', you know, just maybe to give you time to cool down . . ." (p. 20, ll. 7-14)

Clive recognizes here that conversation is not simply an exchange of factual information, but a staged engagement between individuals who require time to pave the way for breaking bad news. Unlike face-to-face communication, dialogue via technology creates a safe

distance between the breaker of the bad news and the recipient, allowing the latter time to 'cool off' instead of breaking out immediately into an angry confrontation that can easily escalate into a violent argument. This cooling off period can be helpful in protecting the parent-child relationship, enabling reflective time which can stop unnecessary confrontations from erupting.

Anita also found that:

"It's probably easier for them to be able to communicate when they're not with me things that may be difficult to communicate actually when they are with me." (p. 9, ll.11-12)

Like Mary and Clive, Anita realizes that some things are better expressed in writing rather than in speech, since a written communication can offer a full, uninterrupted account of the circumstances; by contrast, it is only too easy for the account to be interrupted by an angry question or exclamation, throwing the individual making the disclosure off their stride. In this limited and specific, but nevertheless important way, communication technology may offer a benefit not enjoyed by families in constant physical proximity with each other – the modulation of distance can in certain circumstances act to prevent emotions from becoming inflamed. The coolness allowed by such distance enables participants in the conversation time to reflect before bursting into speech they might later come to regret.

"I don't think she can start a conversation with me verbally when she is not happy" (Anita p. 10, ll. 6-7).

"So I think emotional conversations are much easier on WhatsApp." (Anita p. 16, ll. 6-7)

The natural 'away' time Anita has from her children due to her shared custody means that she has learnt to rely on distant communication; through this she has found that technology can actually facilitate greater breadth of conversation, including things that perhaps her children wouldn't be comfortable bringing up with her face-to-face. This may also lead us to question the perceived strength of Anita's relationship with her daughter; perhaps their relationship isn't in a place where it can 'take' a large amount of unhappiness, anger or other difficult emotions. Anita earlier mentioned that during her marriage she struggled with guilty feelings due to sometimes having emotionally distant communication with her children; it can be hypothesised that this may also have impacted her daughter's ability to confront difficult conversations with her face-to-face. These specific difficulties with Anita's communication with her children may in fact reflect her more general difficulty around emotional

communication; the possibility acts as a reminder that the parents' relationship with adolescent children may have been far from ideal even before the separation.

Barry uses technology platforms to get more emotional with his children:

"let's say I've said goodbye but I want to get a little bit more emotional about how I say things and be a little bit . . . then the written word is better than the spoken word . . . So I use it like that, largely to express deeper emotions."

Mary, Clive, Anita and Barry all spoke about how it can be easier for them or for their adolescent children to bring up sensitive, difficult or emotional issues via technological platforms rather than face-to-face. Shared custody arrangements naturally promote more long-distance communication and families seem to have learnt to use communications technology as a shield, giving both parents and children the courage to say things they wouldn't otherwise be comfortable bringing up if all communication were face-to-face, as it often is in intact families. But since these can hardly have been emotionally intact families prior to the separation and divorce, there is a distinct possibility that communications technology may in some cases at least function as more than a stopgap or damage limitation exercise – it might instead represent a positive improvement on the damaged communications that characterized parent-child relationships before the separation.

3.3.5.2 Written communication is good for practical content

Shared custody arrangements can give rise to many logistical complications. Several parents spoke about the endless opportunity for arguments between themselves and their ex-partners, and between themselves and their children, with regard to practical details such as children's weekend plans, school updates, holiday dates and other day-to-day arrangements. As a result, parents spoke about messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, which retain a message history, as being hugely helpful. All information discussed, such as dates and practical content, could be referred back to for necessary clarification. This prevented arguments and reduced tensions.

Harry found this function of messaging platforms extremely helpful in keeping the peace with his ex-wife and daughter:

". . . all the time I can go back in history and see . . . what was our agreement one month ago or two months ago or half a year ago." (p. 5, ll. 16-18)

"it means there's now less space for miscommunication and no one can say 'oh this one said this and this one said that'." (p. 5, ll. 8-10)

Anita found technological messaging platforms, mainly WhatsApp, hugely helpful for the same reason:

"if one of us misconstrued something or you know cocked up a timing or something, actually we can all look back and go 'oh right, it is all there and okay, sorry' . . ." (p.7, ll. 1-4).

"When it's all done by phone or face-to-face then yeah he has a habit of forgetting what he said and so thinking 'oh I never said that' but then we can say 'um yes you did and you can see it here and we all read it. So I think it's probably the best platform actually for separated families, definitely a great platform." (p. 7, ll. 4-8)

WhatsApp records therefore hugely reduce the opportunity for miscommunication and consequent blame between individuals in a divided family. Similarly, the written medium allows practical content, such as instructions, to be consulted and reviewed.

Irene spoke more about putting lots of practical information on the family group to ensure that all her children have access to the same information and can't dispute it:

"Anything that I put on the group then everybody knows something, and I know that they have the information that they need all there and in one place and they often need to see it . . ." (p. 7, ll. 8-9)

Irene uses the group to post important information or logistics she wants her children to store for future reference.

Similarly, Janet uses WhatsApp to communicate a lot of logistical information to her children:

"if I'm away and I want to say something or just send a quick message to all the kids then I will do it there, but you know, I'd say it's 80% logistical." (p. 18, ll. 7-10)

All these parents spoke about the usefulness of communications technology, mainly WhatsApp Messenger, as a platform for sharing practical content, especially information one wouldn't want to be misconstrued or forgotten. It offers a clarity which can often become blurred when talking face-to-face. The opportunity it provides to review all past messages also helps reduce tensions in post-separation families, a particularly important consideration since such families are especially prone to friction.

In summary, all participants spoke of communications technology as vital in enabling them to sustain communication with their adolescent children. Although several commonalities run throughout this theme, various differences have also been identified in participants' view of the role of communication technology. The recurring theme throughout was that if used correctly, communications technology can be hugely helpful in extending not only the volume, but also the quality of communication: it allows communication to take place when there would otherwise be none; it helps families to communicate together as a unit and can allow sensitive topics to be brought up comfortably. Another recurring point was that although communications technology can be highly serviceable, it does not replace face-to-face communication; although video-calling may come close, live communication is still seen as overall the best way for parents to communicate with their adolescent children. Although not explicit, at the core of this entire theme was an additional more latent message; the section emphasized the complex nature of parent-child communications post-separation. The participants all repeated that they were navigating new territory and learning a new form of distance communication in order to best maintain and improve on their communication and relationship with their adolescent children. This post-separation communication seems to offer some parents a fresh start, allowing them to communicate in ways which they may find more effective and meaningful. Additionally, separation brought up a lot of fear for parents over 'losing' their children, due to not seeing them regularly. This meant that many parents seemed to invest more time and energy in to creating remote communication links to ensure that this wouldn't happen. These more complex underlying themes became increasingly evident in every sub-theme of this section, though rather less so in relation to the theme of written communication, which all parents found beneficial in its own right.

3.4 Theme Two: Live Communication is Irreplaceable

3.4.1 Live communication allows for tactile interaction

When parents are together with their children in the same room and space, there is a quantifiable difference from the nature of communication at a distance. The physical proximity enabled by live communication allows for sharing communication and emotions through touch.

Harry signified the importance of physical touch to communication between himself and his daughter. Rather than relying exclusively on non-sensory words, they often share hugs to show their emotions:

"whenever she has breaks between the lectures, she is coming out and hugging me because I am always there so that happens all the time. She's trying to be close . . . (p. 7, ll. 5-6)

. . . she can hug me and hold on to me whenever she needs." (p. 14, ll. 10-11)

Harry's adolescent daughter seems to be reassured that her father is physically there for her at Sunday school. Their sharing of physical contact seems an important dynamic in their attachment bond, with touch providing his daughter with comfort and confidence. Although he suggests, perhaps wistfully, that she can hold on to him whenever she needs, this is of course not possible on his non-custody days, so it may be even more important when they are together to reinforce the attachment bond in this literal way; the skin-to-skin contact afforded by physical contact is the closest form of communication available to parents and children, creating a symbolic unity which can transcend the immediate moment and remain a source of strength and comfort when they are apart.

Leo also discusses the importance of hugging his children, something which can only happen in face-to-face contact sessions and which provides its own form of non-verbal communication:

"I was always very, you know, sort of tactile with the children when they were younger when they would climb on top of me and everything else but that's become a very important part of um . . .

. . . it's become a very important connection for me . . . which is hugging my children when I see them and hugging them when they leave." (p. 22, ll. 15-19)

Leo suggests that tactile behaviour is a fundamental part of his relationship with his children. Just as parents' comments on offering their children reassurance conveyed an equally profound need for reassurance themselves, a similar dynamic seems to be at work here: in speaking about his children's need for physical touch, Leo is actually foregrounding his own need for such warm, reassuring physical intimacy. Hugging them when he sees them and when he says goodbye suggests that he is using this gestural form of communication to express what words are inadequate to communicate; phrases like 'it's good to see you' or 'I will miss you' are weak cliches that fail to convey the intense emotion they are intended to carry. Physical touch requires face-to-face contact, however, and is limited by the restrictions of contact time allowed under the terms of the custody arrangement. These boundaries impose an artificial, formal constraint on the encounter that is quite different from the circumstances of contact in the pre-separation home, where there is no sense that the time for the sessions is coming to a close.

Leo reflects this limitation when he suggests further that although he was initially busy planning activities with his children for their custody time, in reality what both he and his children needed was simply the physical presence of one another - the act of 'being together' side by side:

"We did silly things and we'd go shopping and all that kind of stuff and we would go on these special trips . . . But actually that's not really what they needed, they just needed to know that you are there . . ." (p. 23, ll. 14-15, 17)

As well as sharing physical connections through gestures like hugs, Leo suggests that the mutual physical togetherness itself communicates to his children that he is there for them and their needs. It seems fundamental for Leo to be able to give his children a sense of closeness and security, yet this parental responsibility can only be fully taking place when physically together.

Frank spoke about the many uses of communication technology and how he relies on it. But he also reaffirmed that

There's no substitute for actually having them in your arms and comforting them or talking to them face-to-face. (p. 6, ll. 4-6)

I have no problem showing emotion to my children, you know, I have no problem picking them up and cuddling them. (p. 8, ll. 21-22)

But for Frank, although technology is extremely useful, it is only ever a filler; only through live communication can he offer his children the physical comfort sometimes needed to properly communicate his emotions to them. He doesn't see the value of a non-tactile substitute which purports to offer the equivalent of holding, hugging and showing his real emotions to his children.

Similarly, Erika and her son can be very tactile when they are together, sharing communication through touch:

"He is always kissing me and saying 'mommy I love you so much. I don't know what I'd do without you and . . ." (p. 4, ll. 1-2)

"We always have a kiss and a cuddle and he constantly says 'mum, I love you'." (p. 9, ll. 19-20).

Tactile communication is very important for Erika and her son; cuddles and kisses serve to reassure Erika's son of their close attachment bond. This physical assurance can reaffirm the verbal declarations of love sometimes communicated simultaneously. Erika's repetition of the words 'always' and 'constantly' are particularly suggestive; it conveys an intensity of feeling that implies a total absorption of the mother in her son's life, as though she cannot contemplate the possibility that this closeness, with its overwhelming focus on kissing and cuddling, can only last as long as her son remains a young infant – there will come a time when such physical closeness will appear to both of them inappropriate. This aspect of the relationship is not, of course, necessarily the product of separation; rather, it seems characteristic of a mother's struggle to 'let go'.

Dalia echoed this sentiment, suggesting that

"I have realised that there is also much more to communication; as much as talking is important, they also sometimes need a cuddle, they just need that physical contact." (p. 9, ll. 15-16)

Clearly there is a level of comforting, reassurance and attachment that transcends the limitations of language and can be effectively communicated only through physical contact with both mothers and fathers; there seems to be no sense of any difference between the need for physical contact with either parent. Many participants felt this non-verbal communication was vital to maintain a close and strong parent-adolescent relationship.

3.4.2 Live communication enables body language to be fully experienced

Live communication allows parents and their children to see their emotions clearly, to experience face-to-face what the other is going through and to be able to read each other's facial reactions and body language.

Anita spoke about discussing her divorce with her daughter; she found it crucially important for her daughter to see the emotion in her face throughout the conversation:

"I think it's really important that people show their emotions . . . When I had this conversation with my daughter a couple of months ago and I was crying through it, it felt really weird but actually it was and I said to her, you know, this is what happens, and this is good." (p. 16 ll. 9-10, 11-13)

Anita's main concern was that her daughter should see that mums also get emotional and cry sometimes, especially when discussing sensitive topics. This attempt to close the generation gap between parent and child might well seem important to parents who see their children only occasionally and seek a closer, warmer relationship; by contrast, living together permanently in the same home, the generation gap would be more important to parents, if only as means of ensuring that their parental authority is respected.

Dalia too suggested that it was important to her that her children see her show and share her emotions:

"They have seen me upset and actually I think that is really important." (p. 10, ll. 22-23)

"I think it is important, they should see I have feelings, emotions, you get angry, upset, frustrated. And I get upset sometimes and they should see that I can discuss it. It shows them that I am human and otherwise it is exhausting holding up a facade." (p. 11, ll. 1-2).

For Dalia, showing emotion such as upset feelings or anger is fundamental in communicating to her children that she is human and, like them, has emotions which she is comfortable sharing. Anita and Dalia may be assuming that their children will be more open about sharing their feelings if they see their mothers take the lead in this regard. But while this closing of the gap has undoubted benefits in bringing parents and children closer, it runs the risk of offloading onto the children the burden of the parents' stress and anxieties. This is more likely in shared custody households where parents may have gone through an emotional and difficult separation, as well as no longer having a partner to offload their emotions to, causing them to be more emotionally volatile and anxious, whilst grappling with a new shared custody reality.

Frank also spoke about the importance of live communication; his daughter's body language is a crucial component of their interaction:

"for me the . . . the best form of that is face-to-face. Because you know, we're human beings, we see things through our eyes, you know, the one thing we are good at is reading body language, reading emotional states, we are supposed to have emotional intelligence" (p. 21, ll. 21-23)

Similarly, Harry spoke about the importance of being able to clearly see how his children react to what he is saying:

"That's very important as well to see how the person behaves when the person is saying something." (p. 14, ll. 16-17)

After discussing her occasional struggles in communicating with her adolescent son, Georgia highlighted body language as fundamental to communication with her children; it allows her to better gauge whether they are honest and genuine:

"If you talk to someone face-to-face then you get body language as well; it's harder to tell if somebody's lying if they are there than on text or phone." (p. 17, ll. 1-3)

Facial expression and body language offer additional non-verbal communication which is almost impossible to achieve when communicating remotely from afar. Part of the reason why so many parents prefer communicating live rather than at a distance is because they can also access the micro-communications which would otherwise be lost. Although several

parents mentioned appreciating that video-calling allows for this, it seems that close-up, in-person seeing and understanding facial expressions and body language is far clearer.

That said, it may be that parents over-estimate the correlation between face-to-face contact and honest communication. There may be many reasons why a child might put on an act, for example, by concealing feelings of depression under a veneer of smiling cheerfulness, in order not to alarm or upset a parent who has already suffered the trauma of a broken marriage. Appearances, like words, can be deceptive.

3.4.3 Live activities provide opportunity for communication and bonding

Activities offer many parents the opportunity to communicate with their children in more creative and dynamic ways. Rather than relying on static conversation, whether over technological platforms or face-to-face, several parents identified various activities as providing more natural communication opportunities. Additionally, parents spoke of activities also providing a unique bonding opportunity, something more rarely achieved when parents are separated.

Harry found himself able to bond with his daughter by playing games together. Spending time on activities with his daughter also meant that she spent less time on her phone and more time conversing with him, increasing their communication:

"Sometimes we are playing computer games . . . like I'm happy that we're spending some kind of like time together." (p. 9, ll. 7-8, 14)

"when I am taking care of her and I am saying let's go here or let's go there then she stops using her phone and she starts to be more open to use our conversations." (p. 18 ll. 15-17)

Erika used to take her son out for ice cream and these outings provided a setting for communicating about anything troubling either of them. The activity was a catalyst for sparking many deep conversations:

"I used to take him to ice cream parlour if there was ever a problem. I would say, you know what, it's time for ice cream and then we'd go for an ice cream and he said he loved that.

And we'd have a chat, pour hearts out both sides . . ." (p. 7 ll. 5-10)

Although going out for ice-cream was helpful in facilitating these deep conversations, Erika also shares activities at home with her son, such as cooking, in order to generate more face-to-face communication:

"Yesterday I said to him 'come and help me cook . . . This is our time where we are properly together, this is our time to chat." (p. 9, ll. 12-17)

"I didn't, didn't really need him there to help me cook but I just needed him there to have a conversation." (p. 9, ll. 18-19)

Erika seemed to understand instinctively that it takes more than fluency with language to foster verbal communication; the setting needs to be natural. Sitting down for a formal exchange of views renders the whole process artificial and awkward, inhibiting the true exchange of feeling, while the shared activity of cooking stimulates a more natural flow of conversation.

Frank wanted to have a 'thing' with each child, offering him enhanced one-to-one time and individual communication opportunities based on each child's specific hobbies.

"I'm really big into photography; my son's now got a passion for that, so that's something that is mine and his . . . Whereas my daughter likes flying helicopters. I love to fly helicopters - it is one of my hobbies. So that's mine and her thing. Work with my son is, you know, mine and his thing and the football so we go away to football and things like that." (p. 13 ll. 14-19).

Clive and Janet spoke about how sports and other creative activities provide quality time opportunities for themselves and their children. When Clive had custody of his children, they would:

"do lots of things together. We go climbing, we go hiking, what we else do we do . . . We do arts and crafts and we also cook together. (p. 6, ll. 16-18)

We go to the beach or to the lake . . . We also play football together." (p. 7, ll. 1, 4)

Janet identified sport as an opportunity for quality time:

"You know, I also do a lot of sport with my kids that's often our quality time. So we'll go running, sometimes we'll go for walks, we go and do weights together" (p. 17, ll. 15-17)

Janet also noted that dinner time is a key family activity and a main communication opportunity:

"It's our time out. There's no phones or anything allowed during dinner . . . we sit almost 80% of the time during the week to have dinner together" (p. 2, ll. 14-17)

The no-phone rule suggests that phones distract from the direct, face-to-face family communication that could be taking place. Similarly, Mary observed that many communication opportunities between her and her son arise at mealtimes:

We have a lot of together time. So, you know, we could make time in the kitchen, over breakfast and we can discuss stuff . . . So there is communication." (p. 6, ll. 16, 18)

Any activities, however mundane, provided parents with face-to-face communication opportunities. Some parents seemed to single out phones and technology as often distracting from this, hence their preference for activities in which technology is excluded. Although there are many mediums available to make distance communication easy, Barry best encapsulates all the parents' preference for bypassing technology in favour of direct communication:

"It's all about sharing experiences and being a part of each other's lives . . ."

Through shared experiences parents are able to bond with their children, both by simply being in each other's physical presence and through shared activities that enhance communication across a range of dimensions, implicit and explicit, verbal and non-verbal.

3.4.4 Face-to-face is ideal for in-depth and emotional content

Parents repeatedly emphasized that emotional content and any conversations deemed deep or important must take place face-to-face and not via any other platforms. This was only partly because of the enhanced opportunities for factoring in non-verbal communication via body language; more fundamentally, there was a unanimous impression that these conversations cannot be as meaningful if not conducted in person.

Speaking of difficult conversations, Barry remarked that:

"It can be sometimes tough to have these hard conversations and so I wait for face-to-face because I want it done properly . . . So for me face-to-face allows for deeper and more meaningful conversations." (p. 14, ll. 1-3; 6-7)

"It doesn't always have to be about a deep conversation, but it has to be about the deep connection, which is very often only felt on a one-to-one level." (p. 17, ll. 20-23).

For Barry, deep or important conversations not conducted face-to-face risk losing a precious sense of connection between him and his children. The comment that face-to-face is necessary when he wants the conversation "done properly" carries the implication that any other form of communication is somehow inadequate. For any important, difficult or deep content he sees face-to-face as essential - a vital connection and intimacy is sometimes lacking when communication is remote, blocking the development of a deeper connection within the relationship. In this sense, there is no such thing as an unimportant conversation; every shared fragment of phatic speech, however seemingly trivial serves to reinforce a bond that needs live contact to thrive. If this seems unconvincing, one need only consider the many tragic accounts of grandparents distraught at being able to see their grandchildren only through a window during the many months of lockdown, to know that however irrational in principle, there is simply no substitute for physical proximity.

Dalia expressed this idea in similar terms:

"I always prefer face-to-face, especially difficult conversations. I would only want to have those face-to-face, I wouldn't want to have them on any other platform . . . Normally the things that are uncomfortable are the important things so why would you want to communicate those things in any other way but face-to-face?" (p. 16, ll. 20-24)

Dalia, like Barry, invariably prefers face-to-face communication, no matter how difficult the conversation; she too feels strongly that all difficult, important and uncomfortable conversations should only be face-to-face.

Leo observed that he and his children need sensitive conversations to be face-to-face. He is bothered that the distanced communication enabled by technological platforms prevent them from 'go deeper'. He therefore prefers the face-to-face communication which offers the deep connection he looks for.

“If I was talking to them about a . . . You know a new relationship . . . I mean I can't communicate that on a platform . . . Some people might be able to, but I can't.” (p. 19, ll. 14-15)

He added that when using technology:

“what you don't have is the ability to go deep into a conversation or to deviate and be a little bit silly and still not lose the thing, you know, it's not . . . it's a keeping in touch rather than a real, real conversation.” (p. 21, ll. 8-9).

What Leo understands, though not expressing the idea in the technical language of linguistic theory, is that verbal communication plays only one part, albeit an important part, in communication. To take just one example, live communication makes the natural interaction between speakers, in which interruption regularly features, far more natural, whereas distance communication seems to demand the formal exchange of speeches more characteristic of a play; interruption at a distance seems rude rather than natural.

Despite differentiating between serious and casual conversation, parents were therefore unanimous in agreeing that with regards to having deeper conversations, face-to-face communication was always best. Frank, for example, commented:

“I think if, if the subject is . . . If the subject warrants a special conversation, then that should be done face-to-face . . . But if it's something of a more personal nature than I would always want to do that face-to-face because I can gauge their emotions better.” (p. 17, ll. 1-5)

Irene expressed similar views, commenting that for serious communication in particular she makes sure to have face-to-face contact:

“There are certain things like more personal stuff that I will specifically make sure to be sitting face to face with them and talk to them about it.”

“Especially for serious stuff like . . . I don't know . . . I've had drug conversations with them which I definitely won't do that through WhatsApp.” (p. 7, ll. 21-23)

There is a recurring sense that face-to-face communication is superior to technology-enabled distance communication; live interaction allows for the expression of greater depth of feeling. This may perhaps also reflect the fact that face-to-face communication

necessitates total concentration, whereas a telephone conversation allows speakers to distract their attention with other things – a silent television screen, for instance – while they talk.

However, Mary and Erika use both technological platforms and face-to-face encounters to discuss certain important topics. They broach certain sensitive or deep subjects over the phone or on WhatsApp and then suggest continuing the conversation in person later, when it can be developed in person.

Erika said:

"Even if I was on the phone then I would say with a certain conversation "okay, when we see each other we'll have a proper conversation, or we will sort this out or we will do that . . ." (p. 15, ll. 9-11)

Similarly, Mary mentioned that:

"With more in-depth things, I would mention something on WhatsApp and then afterwards we'd discuss it on the phone or in person." (p. 15, ll. 10-11)

Content regarded as deeper, more emotional, or more sensitive than casual day-to-day interaction was clearly experienced by most participants as best communicated in person. Even if other forms of communication were used to introduce or touch on certain topics, parents often found that anything more delicate was best expanded on face-to-face.

3.4.5 Conclusion

Participants pointed to a wide range of benefits of face-to-face conversation in preference to distance communication, which was widely perceived as a poor substitute. As well as the abovementioned sub-themes, there was a broad consensus on this preference.

Barry said, "*Telephone is much colder than um . . . I'd much rather have personal communication"* (p. 12, ll. 18, 20). Erika pointed out that *"Face-to-face is always better when you're trying to . . . actually for everything I think . . . Really it is better."* (p. 15, ll. 8-9) similarly Georgia would *"rather discuss most things face-to-face if I can"* (p. 17, l. 1), and Leo found that *"even in this sort of modern era, I think that there is no substitute just for the physical contact."* (p. 22, ll. 14-15).

Most of these parents regarded live communication as irreplaceable, unique, and superior to remote communication. They seemed to understand instinctively that there is a difference between the naturalness of face-to-face speech that does not transfer to the distance alternative, where features such as intonation, pauses, and timing are different, making the exchange more formal and artificial. In-person communication ensures that micro-communication, touch, emotion, and physical connection are not lost; these non-verbal aspects of communication were as invaluable to participants as the actual content of the conversation.

3.5 Theme Three: Communicating with a developing adolescent child

3.5.1 Adolescents benefit from open and honest communication from their parents

The need for honesty and openness in parents' communication with their adolescent children was a prominent theme, identified by all but two interviewees. Parents pointed to various reasons to explain why open and honest communication was vitally important for them. Some found that the development of honest and open communication channels was a consequence of their divorce, though they did not consider the question whether this consequence was the effect of causation (it would not have occurred without the trigger of the divorce) or correlation (it simply followed after the divorce but might have ensued in course of time even had there been no divorce). Others found it essential to have a meaningful relationship with their adolescent children, regardless of their separation. But valuing a meaningful relationship is not, of course, synonymous with actually enjoying such a relationship.

Barry spoke about the vast difference between his pre- and post-divorce life; although at first this change might have caused tension, he suggested that:

"*I think it's . . . that's all a little bit easier than it has been because it is more open and spoken about."* (p. 11, ll. 8-10)

Barry regards openness and honesty as fundamental in relationship building:

"I try to communicate umm . . . honestly, and, and eh deeply so that there should be a meaningful relationship." (p. 5, ll. 22-23)

The same consideration applies to Dalia, who found that her honesty and openness in communicating with her children was partly facilitated by her separation:

"I think since the separation I can be more open and honest with them . . .
I wasn't totally myself pre-divorce so the separation definitely has had a heavy weighting on how we communicate." (p.12, ll. 4-7)

She reflected further on how her adolescent son confronted her after the separation and how communicating openly and honestly was central to the development of their relationship.

Dalia made repeated references to having learned, partly in the course of therapy, how important it is not to lie to her children and to practise honest communication:

"My son also asked me some very difficult questions after we separated and it was quite difficult to look your child in the eye and tell them things that you possibly felt guilty about but that therapist we went to, her voice was always in my head of 'don't lie to your children, don't lie to your children.'" (p. 16 ll. 7-10)

"You just can't lie to your kids. they are so astute." (p. 16, ll. 15-16)

The role of the therapist in facilitating Dalia's parenting appears to have been crucial. While perhaps challenging, in that it imposed on Dalia a higher standard of parenting and a monitor to whom she felt accountable, the very presence of a third person 'in the room' by way of support was evidently hugely beneficial. The therapist acts as a third person in the parent-adolescent communication, taking on a discreet 'ghost' role in order to try and understand how parents and their adolescents communicate and how this can be improved.

Similarly, Mary stressed that honesty and truthfulness are fundamental to good communicating with adolescent children post-separation:

"I think it's very important to stick as much as possible, not to invent stories, to, to stick as close as possible to the truth. And when I say to the truth, I mean, of course it has got to be age-appropriate. But you sometimes, if you want to protect too much, I don't know if in the long run it's protective. So, kind of being very straight and almost quite honest and I think it is a very important thing to be honest." (p. 21, ll. 3-7)

Mary's words identify an important problem faced by all these parents, and indeed, by all parents, separated or not, of adolescent children: the decision whether to tell the truth to children is not a simple truth-or-lies binary. There is a calculation to be made each time as to how much of the truth is told, as well as the way it is framed. To take a simple example, when telling children that they are separating, parents can frame the event as a catastrophe or as a positive solution that will improve life for the whole family. It is not the fact – the 'truth' - itself that matters as much as the way it is presented to the impressionable adolescent child.

Harry tries to be completely open with his daughter and responding to a question about how he sees the best parent-adolescent communication, he highlighted honesty as the priority:

“If she should ask about something then I'm telling her exactly how it is.” (p.12, ll. 16-18)

“Just to be all the time honest to each other.” (p.19, ll. 14-15)

Likewise, Anita always tries to be as honest with her children as possible:

“I mean I think if they ask anything, I'll always answer honestly.” (p. 15, l. 16)

This rather implies a limit to Anita’s honesty with her children; she is prepared to answer their questions directly and truthfully, but there is an equivocal element to her response, which leaves open the possibility that she would not herself raise painful or difficult issues requiring her to open up to her children.

Where matters of empirical fact are concerned, there is less scope for equivocation. Erika opened up about the complexities surrounding her divorce. Her husband had come out to her as gay and she was left to communicate this, as well as the divorce, to her son. She chose to be completely open and honest and continues to communicate with him like this, in the belief that this is the only way to have successful communication with an adolescent:

“I told him about it and he said to me if I hadn't told him about it, then he would have gone off the rails and he is so pleased that I spoke to him and explained” (p. 5, ll. 5-6)

Erika’s experience of presenting her son with a potentially painful truth about his father illustrates the value of being thoroughly honest and open with adolescent children; it is, after all, not the fact itself, but the way it is imparted, that makes all the difference to the child’s reaction. A mother who can communicate her ex-husband’s sexuality with sympathy and understanding can also communicate an important lesson in empathy and acceptance to her child. Many people might think that as a young adolescent her son would not be able to grasp and internalise such details, yet Erika was determined to openly tell him the truth, in an age-appropriate way, as hiding the truth from him would be the antithesis of being protective:

“Because what a lot of people think is that keeping your child not in the know will protect them, but it doesn't.” (p. 5, ll. 7-8)

"I knew that it is better to be up front and honest in a, in a, in a way that they can understand for their stage in development really." (p. 5, ll. 17-18)

Parents may believe that shielding their children from what is going on around them is synonymous with protecting them but many of the parents interviewed suggested the opposite. It seems that for several participants, confronting difficult conversations, especially sensitive ones such as those surrounding the parents' separation, was conducive to an overall improved communication with their adolescent children.

Frank took a different perspective, focussing on why he feels honesty is imperative in his relationship with his children. He was convinced that dishonesty entails an unacceptable lack of trustworthiness, incompatible with strong parent-child relationships:

"I've always . . . I hate lying and I've always believed and instilled that in them . . . If, if, if I find out that you've lied, then there's . . .Then there's a trust issue . . . We don't tolerate it." (p. 9, ll. 9-16).

Janet and Leo spoke about the openness of their communication with their adolescent children. They believe in honest communication but also in being comfortable to openly discuss all conversation topics.

Janet said:

"I'm very open with my children . . . I'm very open as far as when I'm struggling, or when things are hard for me and I need them to step up. I'm very open with what I would expect from them or if I'm sooo proud of them or if I'm disappointed in what they did." (p.6, ll. 9-12)

Janet focused throughout on how she works on effectively communicating to her adolescent children an understanding of the real world; the hardships involved in negotiating that world; and how to openly communicate one's needs to each another. To properly complete this task, honesty and complete openness are required.

Leo was also determined to create an openness around his communication with his adolescent children, commenting that they are at an age at which honesty and openness are required in order to tackle the difficult challenges of adolescence:

“With all the children I have had very up front conversations around you know, smoking, drugs, alcohol and not just as a function of my own sort of you know background, but also we would talk quite openly about sensitive subjects.” (p. 4, ll. 23-25).

Leo also spoke about the importance of acting as a role model for his children; being open with them is even more important and he would want them to communicate to him in the same way:

“I'm relatively open with them, I may at times be too open with them about certain things, you know, about what I what I feel . . .” (p. 17, ll. 6-7).

I've always operated an open policy on stuff like that . . . You know, it's so . . . I do try to encourage them to be direct and honest but not but not rude and they know that”. (p. 17, ll. 10-11).

Like the other participants, Leo clearly valued the principle of open, honest communication with his adolescent children, adding that this served as an example he would wish them to follow. However, he alone qualified his remarks with the observation that he might at times be too open with them about certain things. This thoughtful comment raises the important question whether there should be limits to the openness and honesty of parents in their communication with their adolescent children. There might be cases or situations when no good purpose is served by communicating some ugly or painful truth. Leo’s comment, like Anita’s ambivalence, implies that complete openness might sometimes be too much of a good thing, and that a little reticence would better serve the child’s best interests. There is, after all, a difference between passively omitting to mention some difficult point, and active prevarication.

The situation around divorce can often be complex, and there may be secrets or details hidden from the children, who, knowing this to be so, sense a barrier of communication arising between them and their parents after the separation. Most parents accepted that at some point this was the case, or could have been the case, but that to communicate effectively with their adolescent children they had to be open, honest and avoid lies. The consensus was that this was vital for successful parent-adolescent relationships, no matter how arduous such honest and open conversations may be at times.

Many parents hope for openness and honesty from their adolescent children, but the interviewees showed that in order for this to be an option, adolescents require some

encouragement, beginning with their parents being open and honest in communicating with them. Although relevant to all parent-adolescent relationships, including those in intact families, what is unique about separated parents is that there may be more reason to lie or hide the truth, depending on the separation circumstances. Parents may want to 'protect' their children from the reality of their parents' failed relationship and from the nuances and complexities involved in the breakdown of long-term relationships and marriage.

But the issue of truthfulness and honesty is also complicated by the fact that, as noted above, in reality there is no simple truth/falsehood binary; a parent can only be honest about the facts of the separation and divorce as they appear through the lens of the parent's own perspective. There are two sides to every story and many shades of truth and bias, and a parent's openness and honesty can in practice dissolve into half-truths, misperceptions, and wilful self-deception – all communicated to their children in the parents' confident belief that they are being open and honest.

3.5.2 Regular communication offers a sense of attachment, security, and safety

Safe and positive attachment and security to parents is a fundamental feature of healthy adolescence and can only be maintained via effective communication. Bearing this in mind, several parents referred to the extra effort they have to make, drawing on every means of communication open to them, in order to keep their children feeling safe and secure during this challenging developmental period in their children's lives.

Many parents mentioned that they prioritised giving their adolescent children a safety net and a sense of secure attachment. Anita spoke of strong communication with adolescent children as a necessary precondition of their feeling safe:

"I would do whatever I needed to do to try and keep them secure." (p. 14, l. 20)

This implies that being there for her children at all times is central to the security she wants them to feel; her communication channels are always open.

Barry also spoke about the importance of giving adolescents a secure base to make them feel safe:

"I just want to give them a sense of safety and of security . . . that they have got somewhere to fall back, that they are strong and independent that I am there. I want them to feel that I am there, that I care and I love them." (p. 11, ll. 3-6)

"I want them to feel that they're not alone that they have a strong backbone and something that they can rely on and from here they can grow and go out and face the world and face all of those challenges from a . . . From a . . . from a place of knowing that it's ok and that they can't fall." (p. 18, ll. 13-17)

Like Anita, Barry emphasised wanting his children to know that they can rely on him as a safe and secure base to fall back on, should they ever need it. A critical component of the security both want to offer their children is the 24/7 element of non-stop availability. It is not only the manner of communicating that matters, but also the fact that, just as at home, when they were together as a family unit, the opportunity for communication is always there, night and day. He also mentioned that a key way he creates a secure base for his children is by communicating with them regularly and showing that he is always attentive to their needs:

"The fact that we all have quite constant communication even if it isn't face-to-face . . . It is very important . . . and also for them to feel . . . and I am always trying as much as I can to give them the feeling that I am engaged . . . that I am there for them, that I care . . ." (p. 18, ll. 10-13)

The key word in this comment is 'constant'; there is nothing intermittent about the attention he offers his children. Being at all times fully engaged and attentive in conversation with his children, be it face-to-face or via remote communication, is a fundamental way for Barry to ensure that they feel secure and safe with a reliable attachment base. This cannot of course be constructed from scratch; the relationship built with adolescent children during the post-separation period rests on foundations laid down during the infant and pre-adolescent years. Presumably parents as concerned and responsible as Barry and the other interviewees have not waited until this crisis in the family to begin forming secure attachments with their children, in which case the issue should perhaps be regarded not in terms of creating safe, secure relationships, but ensuring that such pre-existing relationships are not jeopardised by the new, post-separation arrangements. But if the relationships have been insecure or distant, it will inevitably be all the harder to begin winning children's trust in these unpropitious circumstances.

Like Barry, Dalia believed her adolescent children need support and a secure attachment base, even when at times they seem independent and confident:

"*Especially with teenagers because they often think they know everything and they can conquer the world and they actually cannot, they can be insecure and need support, sometimes they just need a cuddle and you need to take it even when they don't want to give it so they need to know that they are loved and are secure and from both sides really. Divorces are really hard and can be traumatic and very difficult."* (p. 19, ll. 4-9)

Janet found that her children relied on her strength in order to feel secure. When she felt strong and able to create a secure and safe space for them, they too could feel resilient in the face of the challenges around them, which were exacerbated by the divorce:

"What I did realize is that more and more the kids fed off of me. When I was strong, they were strong, when I was happy, they were happy, when I was falling, they were falling . . . Each one in their own way and it's very very evident like when you get divorced." (p.8, ll. 5-8)

Irene explained why she thinks it important that she and her children are able to reach out to each other. She felt motivated partly by a selfish desire to worry less in the knowledge that she understands their concerns; however, she also noted that her checking in on them shows them that she worries, cares and is concerned for their well-being. Irene largely credited technology for enabling these constant check-ins:

"It is literally all day, every day, that I can know exactly where my kids are, and they can always reach me too, and I do appreciate that." (p. 15, ll. 8-9)

The children of separated parents, more than those in intact families, understandably seem to require a greater sense of safety and security from their parents, in the face of a fractured family unit that might well leave them feeling vulnerable; unlike their parents, the children have played no part in contributing to, or negotiating the terms of, the breakup of the family, and are therefore all the more helpless. Parents, perhaps impelled by guilt as much as by love, expressed the different ways in which they can communicate a continuing sense of security to their children and how they can create a new, but equally secure base for them to fall back on, should they need it, during the challenging developmental stage of adolescence.

3.5.3 Adolescence leads to maturation of communication content

Parents' communication with their adolescent children was partly influenced by cognitive and developmental changes that occur as a result of adolescent maturation. Most parents, asked about the extent to which they have seen a change in the ways they communicate with their adolescent children post-separation, commented on changes resulting from maturation as the primary cause of change, rather than the separation itself.

Frank suggested that the content of conversations with his adolescent children had matured greatly:

"Definitely the content of it is has changed, the conversations are a lot more mature than they used to be." (p. 11, ll. 2-3)

Leo characterised his communication with his adolescent daughter as intelligent and adult-like – very different from the type of communication he would exchange with a child:

"I would characterize it as being quite a grown-up and almost on a friendship sort of basis and she's female and I think reasonably intelligent and, and is quite intellectually curious. So she wants to talk about things and wants to share her opinion" (p. 4 ll. 4-6).

He also found that as his son grows into the adolescent developmental stage, he is also communicating with his father in a far mature way:

"Also, I noticed that over the last 12 months it has really improved with him, he's becoming much more adult in terms of his . . . in terms of the things he wants to talk about." (p. 4, ll. 19-22).

The idea of communication becoming more mature and adult-like was echoed by Mary, who said about communicating with her adolescent son that:

"I find that now it's easier to talk to him than it used to be when he was much younger." (p. 2, ll. 16-17).

Anita felt the biggest changes in communication with her adolescent children resulted from their maturing rather than as a reaction to her divorce or any other factor. Once her daughter

entered adolescence, she was able to engage more in conversation about the divorce and other deeper, more complex exchanges:

"I think part of that is that they're getting older and communication does change." (p. 3, ll. 18-20).

"I think she's suddenly maturing and understanding" (p. 4, l.21).

The phrase "suddenly maturing" seems to be an oxymoron as children's journey of passing from a stage of infantile immaturity to mature adulthood is a long, often difficult process. Anita's use of this phrase perhaps suggests a wish for her adolescent children to be capable of handling the pain and impact of their parents' separation in a way that younger children might not.

Barry concurred that an adolescent child's conversation matures in alignment with their physical maturing. He believed this was definitely the reason for the change in his communication with his adolescent son:

"Of course, he has grown up, right? And changed . . . and he has changed and he has become more mature and the conversation changes." (p. 11, ll. 23-24)

In terms of content of conversation there definitely has been fundamental change." (p. 12, ll. 3-4)

With adolescence comes an advance in maturity which, according to the interviewees, also leads to changes in the content and style of communication, a change which is no less characteristic of parent-child relationships in intact families. It had been hypothesised that parents would point to their separation as the catalyst for changed communication with their adolescent children but in reality, the changes observed over time were also attributed to the normal processes of maturation which are common to all children during these transformative years. These parents overwhelmingly saw this, rather than the separation and changed family circumstances, as the reason for the more mature communication they were able to enjoy with their adolescent children.

3.5.4 Adolescent detachment impacts on communication

Detachment is common during adolescence as children begin to seek independence from their parents. Some parents found that communication with their adolescent children was impacted by their children's experience of detaching from the home nucleus.

Speaking about his older son entering the adolescence developmental stage, Clive described his son as:

"Slowly detaching himself from us and from his brother who he is very close to. But you know now he's kind of like trying to detach himself." (p. 3, l. 22).

He likes to spend time on his own." (p. 4, l. 2).

The pain parents may experience as their children move from the close intimacy of childhood to growing independence and inevitable alienation may be compounded for these separated parents by the additional enforced detachment of the separation and custody arrangements.

Erika struggled even more with her adolescent son's detachment; there was a sense of sadness that he was less reliant on her:

"we are still very close but it has changed in the fact that he needs me less." (p. 6, ll. 19-20)

"When I don't hear from him then I feel like he isn't thinking about me. But he is my son, he is thirteen years old, why should he be thinking about his mom all the time?" (p. 17, ll. 10-12)

Erika did feel that her son's increasing independence was a positive development, suggesting that she had given him many of the necessary tools for life (p. 7, ll. 1-2). Nevertheless, this rational satisfaction in her son's growing independence conflicts with a mother's sadness that her son is growing up and moving away from her emotionally. This may also explain why Clive seems less melancholy at his adolescent's son's growing independence; it lacks the sexual connotations of an altered mother-son or father-daughter dynamic. In this as in so many other ways, it is not the fact of the parental separation that is the salient feature of the altered relationship but the developmental change in the children themselves. Although parents may rationally understand their children wanting to communicate with them less, emotionally it takes a toll and has an impact on the parents.

Georgia's son expresses his detachment – perhaps better expressed as 'growing independence' - by preferring to communicate with his friends rather than his parents, by acting autonomously and not listening to his parents' instructions:

"I don't think he's so different from any other 17 or 18-year-old in terms of the fact that he doesn't communicate that much with his parents . . ." (p. 4, ll. 17-19)

"You know, he'll talk to his mates about anything but doesn't really talk to us." (p. 9, ll. 23-24)

"He will sometimes ask 'can I do this' and we will say no and then he goes and does it anyway." (p. 10, l. 1).

Although Georgia suggested that this is 'normal' for his age, she still seemed hurt by her son's lack of interest in communicating with her and in his ignoring her opinions and rules. Although reacting against parental control is an entirely normal and healthy phase of adolescent development, indeed necessary for the construction of an independent adult identity, it can nonetheless be difficult for parents who want increased communication with their adolescent children, especially those with shared custody, where communication time is more limited.

Harry spoke about his daughter's detachment from him; although he would like more communication with her, he finds that she shies away from being open with him:

"She started to be in this age of I know everything and don't give me any other advices on anything." (p. 6, ll. 18-19)

"I would like her to be more open to me. But because she's becoming teenager, she kind of okay and closed off." (p. 8, ll. 11-12)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Harry's wistful longing for the father-daughter bond to remain as close as it was in his daughter's pre-adolescence mirrors Georgia's parallel feelings about her son; in both cases, the parent who is most hurt by the changes wrought by adolescence is the opposite-sex parent – a fact which has nothing directly to do with the conditions of shared custody, though it may be exacerbated by the enforced separation.

Leo too found that for some of his children, reaching adolescence was a time when they would detach from him, seeking less communication and involvement with him:

"I guess adolescence has been a move away from the family . . . more of a separation." (p.11, ll. 10-11)

Like the other parents, it was for Leo the passage of time and the onset of adolescence, rather than the shared custody arrangement, that was responsible for his children's drifting away from their former closeness. Several participants found that their children had started to detach from them, often negatively impacting their communication. Part of these adolescents' detachment took the form of a greater reluctance to communicate openly and regularly with their parents. Some participants voiced this idea directly; others only alluded to it, but this detachment could be inferred from the way they described their communication with their adolescent children.

3.6 Theme Four: Parents' revaluation of their communication in light of their separation

Many participants felt that post-separation, parents wanting to maintain frequent, strong and effective communication needed to make a far more conscious effort than previously. There was a common awareness that custodial restrictions on when each parent may see and spend time with their children meant that without a conscious effort to converse frequently, parents could go days without communicating with their adolescent children. When living in the same home, parents could 'take communication for granted', knowing that their children were close by and 'available' should either parent or child wish to initiate dialogue. Interestingly, some participants found that they were able to communicate more effectively post-separation once they had made a more conscious effort and had begun to treat communication with their adolescent children as a working priority. This theme has captured a form of reassessment on the parent's part, not only of the importance of communication, but also of their parental role in the aftermath of their separation. Several participants implied feelings of guilt being present, with the recurring notion of post-separation parents making up for past communication failures. Additionally, parents spoke of how their face-to-face communication, during their custody time, has improved as they try to maximise it fully to make the best of their more limited time together.

3.6.1 Communication is not taken for granted

There was a recurring discourse of former complacency around marital family communications. Leo and Barry remarked that communication with their adolescent children post-separation had actually improved due to the necessity of making a conscious effort to maintain regular contact with them.

Leo observed that his communication had changed radically post-separation:

"I think it has for two real reasons - one is that I am much more present than I was . . . I guess when I was still with their mother, I was probably a little bit more complacent around that engagement . . . Not that it wasn't important. I just took it all a little bit more for granted and that's not the case now . . ." (p. 5, ll. 10-11, 13-15).

Post-separation, Leo may have realised that he could no longer take communication with his children for granted, given that their custody arrangements gave him only limited direct access to them:

"it was real effort on my part to keep in touch" (p. 12, ll. 5-6)

Without making a conscious effort to communicate with his children beyond his allocated custody time, he would surely lose out on a lot of opportunity to communicate. These changed circumstances, suddenly forced him to re-evaluate something he had always taken for granted.

Barry found that since his son had become a teenager and acquired his own mobile phone, he was able to become *"so much more part of his life . . ."* (p. 6, l. 20) He credits communication technology with enabling him to have *"quite constant communication even if it isn't face-to-face"* (p. 18, l. 10). Barry also tries to make a conscious effort to convey to his children that he is attentive, listening and present for them and not taking any of their communication opportunities for granted:

"it is very important . . . and also for them to feel . . . and I am always trying as much as I can to give them the feeling that I am engaged . . . that I am there for them, that I care . . ." (p. 18, ll. 11-13)

Like Leo, Barry seems to be expressing how keeping in touch regularly serves to communicate to his children that he is 'there' for them and that their communication is meaningful to him, even though his presence may at times be remote rather than literal.

Harry also found that despite the physical separation, the newfound responsibility to connect with his adolescent daughter regularly *"really actually enhanced the communication with my daughter."* (p. 17, ll. 13-14)

Leo, Barry and Harry all used communications technology to communicate their presence to their children, a shift from the emotional absence their children may have experienced when the family was 'intact'. All three of them make a more conscious effort to communicate with their children now that regular face-to-face communication is no longer guaranteed. There also may be an undertone of forms of residual guilt at not having made opportunities for communication when they did have the opportunity. In the following sub-theme, several participants referenced these sentiments of guilt when discussing their communication patterns.

3.6.2 A new awareness of the limits of time

Several parents suggested that although live communication time is more limited in a shared custody setting, face-to-face communication during custody time has improved and been enhanced by the sense that limited time is all the more precious because this type of communication can no longer be taken for granted. Some parents attributed this to having made less effort to communicate with their children during their marriages, but the enforced physical and emotional distance imposed by separation and limited contact times had impressed on them the huge importance of communicating meaningfully with their children.

A sense of urgency with regards to maximising face-to-face communication is perceptible in the way Barry spoke at length about the need to:

"make some use of the short time that you have together" (p. 14, ll. 17-18)

When he is with his adolescent son, he tries to enrich the experience of being together:

"I try to make the best of time here together and I try and make it as good as possible right . . . and make the experiences as rich as possible . . . and try to make them feel as loved this possible because time is short." (p. 6, ll. 3-7).

The strong impression created by these words is of Barry's newfound sense of the brevity of time. All parents are aware that their children are constantly growing and developing, and that they grow up quickly, but for Barry, as a separated parent, there is an added pressure: this precious, short time of childhood must be treasured and made "as good as possible . . . as rich as possible".

Similarly, Clive had given little attention to live communication with his children pre-separation, but his shared custody arrangement has led him to maximise face-to-face time with his children:

"A lot of the time when we actually used to live all together and be all together all the time . . . I didn't you know . . . I almost like switched off." (p. 10, l. 24; p. 11, l. 1)

"Whereas now . . . because . . . When I'm there I have to make the most of the time. So I actually really try to make the most of the time. So in that respect, I think it's actually an improvement in some way." (p. 11, pp. 3-5)

"Of course I see them less but the good thing is that when I do see them I spend quality time." (p. 10, ll. 23-24)

There is a sense of urgency in what Clive is saying, and his choice of language is revealing; phrases like "I have to" tell us about the pressure he feels to maximise all face-to-face communication with his children, a pressure strongly reinforced by his repeated references to time: "a lot of the time . . . make the most of the time . . . quality time" . This reiteration of the precious nature of time, which can be neither bought nor held back, conveys Clive's sense that 'you can't turn the clock back', so it is all the more urgent to make the most of whatever time remains to keep the relationship with his children alive. Suggesting that the time he now spends with them is "quality time", tells us there may be a new and improved intimacy in his relationships with his children. Clive's repeated references to the brevity and pressure of time recall the emphatic tripartite structure used by Barry to describe the enriched experience he feels bound to offer his children.

Finally, Leo had been unsure pre-separation how his post-separation communication would be with his children; however, truly maximising every minute of his custody time with them had resulted in enormously improved relations:

"after an initial period of anxiety about losing contact with the children . . . It actually has resulted in a much greater bond and much improved relationship with all of them." (p. 1, ll. 20-22).

*"I just focus 100% of my time on them when they were with me as it wasn't ever for that long and I mean I didn't do anything else when they were around . . .. I didn't make any other plans." (*p. 12, ll. 18-20).

Leo has taken the great absences from his children as a motivation to create a real bond with them whenever they can be together, ensuring that no other distractions would be allowed to impede or impair the precious family time. For Leo, as for the other parents, 'less is more'.

All had discovered the truth of the adage, 'absence makes the heart grow fonder'. The sensitivity of all these parents to the limited time available for live communication with their children, in contrast to the unlimited contact availability pre-separation, meant that parents made a greater effort to enhance and maximise face-to-face communication when they had

it, perhaps because the salience of limited time had made them more acutely conscious that their children were growing up and changing, with the potential to become completely estranged from their absent parents. This consciousness often led to what parents described as improved relationships with their adolescent children.

3.6.3 Guilt for past failures leads to more communication efforts

Some participants pointed to how their changing marital circumstances forced them to re-evaluate how they had been communicating with their children during their marriages and to consciously consider how they want to communicate with them going forward. For several participants, this reflection led them to feelings of guilt, sometimes at having broken up the family and other times at how they communicated with their children during their marriages.

Leo's changed circumstances may explain his new awareness of a sense of guilt, leading him to believe, rightly or wrongly, that he had been: *"a relatively poor parent in their early years"* (p. 8, ll. 5-6). Consequently, close communication was even more important for him than before: *"The children know that they are my priority"* (p. 8, ll. 5-6).

Relatedly, Dalia observed that due to her unhappiness during her marriage her communication with her children had been compromised but that following her separation, she had experienced a sense of guilt for having done so, prompting her to make an even bigger conscious effort to communicate well with her children:

"Definitely the communication for me really changed . . . Once I realized that I had to leave the marriage then I really tried to change how I was communicating." (p. 7, ll. 22-24).

Although she saw her children daily during her marriage, she still felt that she hadn't made enough effort to communicate with them properly when she had the daily opportunity to engage in live communication. This regret prompted her to make huge changes after her separation to create a deeper sense of closeness and a stronger attachment bond:

"I wonder if it was partly because of guilt, I felt as though I had been absent for so long emotionally and also because I felt guilt for breaking up the family so I really tried to focus on everything they would tell me and I hung on to every bit of communication and really listened to them." (p. 7, ll. 24-25; p. 8, ll. 1-2).

The unspoken sense of guilt at having 'broken up' the family, or at least, allowing it to be broken up, ties in with the metaphor of sustained communication as a form of 'repair', and particularly, with the idea of communication as a form of 'glue', holding together a damaged family. It may also indicate something about the failure or lack of communication in the pre-separation period that might have contributed to the parental break-up. Dalia commented several times on the current openness and honesty of her communication with her children, especially her adolescent daughters, with the strong implication that they had not enjoyed the same degree of openness while the family was nominally together. She was clearly making a point to highlight how she had been emotionally deficient pre-separation and now post-separation was able to move from absence to having a real presence. On subsequent reflection, she revealed that the candid communication they now enjoyed was the result of a conscious effort she had made post-separation:

"I have to be honest, I think that the communication that I described to you all came after the divorce; I don't think that we were that open or communicative before." (p. 7, ll. 19-20)

Dalia started communicating much more consciously with her children post-separation. The volume of her communication was enhanced by the more mindful effort she was making to create strong and constant communication with them.

Irene spoke similarly of the reassurance offered by communications technology; knowing that she could contact her children at any time made separating from her husband easier and at an unconscious level, may have assuaged her guilt:

"it probably eased the transition and I was probably very aware . . .Not that it made a difference to whether or not I would do it [divorce]" (p. 16 ll. 3-4)

"I knew that I could at any stage call them, check out how they were doing . . .
and maybe they weren't happy or they were feeling anxious and they knew that they could call me and I knew that and they did." (p. 16, ll. 5-7)

Irene's knowledge that her adolescent children, all of whom have mobile phones, could reach her from their father's house was extremely reassuring, both before her divorce and later, at times when she didn't have custody of the children.

Although many participants spoke about making more mindful efforts to communicate with their children, Anita's description of just how conscious this decision was for her stood out

with particular intensity. She seemed to have taken on board before separating that she could no longer take communication with her children for granted and that it would require special effort:

"I was incredibly conscious of, that they are now from a split family and that it can really affect them." (p. 3, ll. 20-22)

"I had made the conscious decision to try to have the best communication with the kids" (p. 19, ll. 12-16)

Anita's words and the decisive tone she used seemed to echo Dalia in that there was a sense of the parents 'making it up' to the kids through offering more consistent communication. It seemed as though some parents were atoning for previous communication challenges, or for breaking up their families, and were attempting to make a new, fresh start with improved communication as the key.

These participants' anecdotes make clear that many parents, after having gone through a separation, made the conscious decision not to take their communication with their adolescent children for granted, but to communicate with them regularly and as well as possible, maximising any opportunities for face-to-face communication. Some of the participants' guilt-laden narratives suggest that during their marriages they may have been too distracted by their marital difficulties to communicate effectively with their children, or that they feel guilty for breaking up the intact family home. Therefore, these participants may have been driven to make special efforts around communication in order to relieve their own guilt around past communication failures.

3.7 Analysis Conclusion

The findings of this section highlight several important points. The first sub-section yielded evidence for parents' belief that 'adolescents benefit from open and honest communication with their parents'. Parents were able to consider the potential of technology to maintain productive, honest communication with their adolescent children even at a distance. They were also clearly able to distinguish between the relative advantages and disadvantages of different types of communication, with written communication, for example, regarded as distinctly preferable in certain situations, particularly if the topic for discussion was difficult or delicate.

Nevertheless, the second master theme qualified this optimism to a considerable extent and placed these findings in perspective; regardless of the benefits of technology, all parents agreed that technology was only ever a *faute de mieux* – and that there was in reality no substitute for live, face-to-face contact. The reasons given for this varied, but the most salient point to emerge from the findings was that the tactile constituent of communication was integral to sustaining an effective relationship with their children, and that this could not be replicated in distanced communication, visual or not.

The third master theme focussed on the ways in which communications technology might be best exploited to allow parents to navigate the changed nature of the relationship with their adolescent children, at a time in which the transition from childhood to adult maturity was still a work in progress requiring careful, sensitive responses from the parents. In the course of discussing their children's needs, parents also inadvertently revealed their own need for reassurance and comfort. This served as a useful reminder that communication is a two-way dynamic, and that the needs of parents as well as those of children must be taken into account in any consideration of the effectiveness of communications technology in maintaining healthy parent-child relationships under the difficult circumstances of separation and custody.

Finally, the fourth theme concentrated on parents' reflections on how they had been communicating with their children during their marriages and how they have re-evaluated those communication patterns to communicate differently with their adolescent children in the present. Some of the participants found that the limited time offered within a custodial setting meant that they made a stronger effort to communicate more consciously and effectively than in the past. Other participants were able to recognise that part of why they currently communicate better with their adolescent children, or at least try to, is because they have been encumbered by guilty feelings of breaking up the family or not communicating efficiently when living in an intact home.

Chapter Four: Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the main findings that emerged from the research, related to the literature on the subject. Some presenting themes and participants' experience validate existing research; other aspects of participants' experiences, and associated themes, represent original findings. The chapter then discusses the general and clinical implications of the research, especially its application to the field of Counselling Psychology. Methodological considerations, strengths and limitations are reviewed, together with the procedural challenges that arose during the study. This is followed by suggestions for future research and a final reflexive account of the research process.

4.2 Summary of the Findings

Different aspects of separated parents' experience of communicating with their adolescent children were explored. The following section, in combining the findings with insights from existing literature, allows for a detailed discussion of the overlap and differences between this study and previous research.

4.2.1 Communications technology sustains the parent-adolescent relationship

As suggested in the literature (McManus & Nussbaum, 2011; Carr, 2006; and Segrin and Flora, 2005), the present findings show that the impact of separation on families obliges parents to restructure their communication patterns in order to sustain communication with their adolescent children.

All participants commented that communications technology offers them a 'sense of togetherness' during non-custody days and nights. Physical proximity, space and place are no longer limiting factors and all participants mentioned their reliance on technology to sustain their relationships, sometimes offering even more communication opportunities than existed pre-separation.

Palen et al. (2001) conceptualise mobile phones as 'umbilical cords', connecting parents and their children. This conceptualisation was echoed by Erika, Harry, and Dalia, who implied that 24/7 communication enables them to feel that the bond with their children is permanent, even at a distance, and when the relationship may have been fractured as a result of the divorce. Although parents spoke of wanting to offer reassurance to their children by always

being remotely available, it seemed that they themselves might be most in need of reassurance, of both the communication and the relationship. Technology and smartphones offered this by allowing them to maintain a high level of closeness and connection to their adolescent children. Frank even noted a surge in quantity and improvement in quality, of communication with his adolescent children since the separation. These experiences align with the findings of Kennedy et al. (2008) and Grant (2009), who observe that ICTs can increase closeness between family members and improve the quality of their communication. Williams and Merten (2011) similarly found that regular use of ICTs strengthens family connections, granting parents uninterrupted attachment to their children.

While communications technology offered an opportunity to maintain communication, this was felt to be a poor substitute for face-to-face conversation. The terms 'bridge' and 'filler' recurred frequently and parents' perspective on the usefulness of ICTs often depended on whether they were comparing it to no communication at all, or to face-to-face conversation. Mary, Janet, and Georgia saw communications technology as extremely effective in sustaining 'in between' contact, when face-to-face is unavailable. Although acknowledging its positive attributes, Leo, Barry, and Clive saw communications technology more ambivalently, as a 'necessary tool' and 'better than nothing', rather than valuable in itself. This narrative of communications technology as almost a 'necessary evil' resembles the findings of Bacigalupe and Lambe (2011), which revealed that while technology allows parents in transnational families to maintain their presence in their children's lives from afar, it did not effectively fill the void left by the lack of face-to-face contact.

Frank was the only participant who post-separation, due to a court order, had no contact with any of his children for over a year. Reflecting on this period, he suggested that evaluating the mediums that facilitate the highest quality contact is irrelevant; what matters is having access to communication with children post-separation – something he hadn't had. He noted that regular communication allows parents to 'pick up where they left off'; denied this opportunity, he had had to work extremely hard to cultivate new communication patterns with his children. Frank's overriding impression was of the vital need for regular communication to preserve and sustain the relationship with children at a distance. Sporadic communication, he implied, was broken communication - inadequate and inferior, regardless of communications technology. Frank's account is echoed in the literature which recurringly finds that regular communication post-divorce, regardless of platform, is fundamental in maintaining healthy parent-child relationships (James, 2018; Yarosh and Abowd, 2013; Neustaedter, Harrison and Sellen, 2013; Kelly and Lamb 2000)

Kim et al. (2007) found that communications technology, telephones and face-to-face contact serve different purposes. Face-to-face offers more in-depth communication; other forms merely keep the lines of communication open. Nevertheless, the best family communication was that which exploited all these tools as appropriate on each occasion. These findings broadly match those of the present study. Although some participants were more positive than others, there was a consensus that that when face-to-face is unavailable due a shared custody arrangement, phones and their associated applications provide a convenient and effective substitute.

Video-calling technology came across as an especially effective medium of communication. Several participants noted that talking with their children while being able to see them virtually through their phones went a long way to closing the physical gap, initiating face-to-face interaction that allowed them to feel closer to their children. Participants' favourable comparison of video-calling to phone calls aligns with the literature on the value of non-verbal communication. Most communication is conveyed through 'micro-communications' including tone of voice, body language and facial expression, especially relating to emotions and attitudes (Periyakoil, 2018; Pease and Pease, 2017; Mehrabian, 1981). Mehrabian (1981) comments that 55% of communication can be conveyed through facial expression, a contention supported by the high value participants placed on video-calling. Dalia rarely communicates with her daughters by phone when they are apart, preferring FaceTime, which allows them to "see each other's faces" (p. 9, l.5). This recalls the intense gazing shared by mothers and babies, itself a form of communication (Kuboshita et al., 2020). Even with adolescent children, video-calling technology means that mothers like Dalia have not had to fully give up on a precious element of the maternal role - simply looking into her daughters' faces. Like Dalia, Frank commented that through video-calling he can see the sights and feel the emotions that would normally occur only through face-to-face time; this offers parents the visual reassurance that their children are fine that is unavailable in audio-only phone calls. The visual reassurance afforded by video-calling sets it above other forms of communications technology in its ability to enhance parent's well-being by sustaining the close bond between themselves and their children.

Barry, Georgia, and Mary also singled out video-calling, especially Facetime and WhatsApp Video, as the most effective platforms for communicating with their adolescent children. They described it as the best alternative to face-to-face, allowing them to communicate and share experiences in 'real time' with their children. Mary's reference to the value of being able to share 'eye contact' through Facetime makes it almost equivalent to face-to-face interaction. Rudi et al. (2014) similarly report parents' strong wish to share audio and visual

synchronous communication, a function offered by video-calling applications. They conclude that these applications allow parents to replicate face-to-face communication with their distant children and see video-calling as enabling deeper parent-child connections than offered by other ICTs.

The participants' focus on the reassurance they received through seeing their children's faces, and how this positively impacted parental well-being, are worth emphasing here. Earlier studies, such as those by Yarosh and Abowd (2011, 2013), found that although many parents saw video-calling as beneficial and useful, few used it regularly. This was likely related to the newness of the platforms: Skype was released in 2003, FaceTime in 2010 and WhatsApp Video followed in 2016. While several research papers anticipated that video-calling might be extremely useful to transnational or separated families, with Neustaedter, Harrison and Sellen (2013) identifying the need for further research on this topic, to date no published research has investigated this. The unanimous agreement of the participants in the present study, that video-calling is the best alternative to face-to-face time, therefore constitutes an important first step in filling this gap in the literature.

Some studies focus on the need for social presence to communicate and build relationships (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1993; Wang et al. 2015), since effective communication usually requires a combination of speech, paralinguistics, and non-verbal body language (Mehrabian, 1981; Birdwhistell, 1952). Nevertheless, video-calling arguably offers all these features, suggesting that it can play a vital role in closing the gap created by shared custody arrangements. However, the reliability of video-calling must be borne in mind as impaired quality can obstruct the view of facial expressions, while frozen or broken connection can interrupt the flow of the conversation.

ICTs can be particularly helpful in dealing with tense or difficult relationships by enabling communication at a 'safe' distance, acting as a buffer when emotions are high (Stafford and Hillyer, 2012). Since confronting difficult conversations such as those surrounding the parents' separation has been found conducive to better communication with adolescent children in the long term (Afifi, Huber and Ohs, 2006), this feature has important implications. It also reflects the experience of several participants, who found written communication less emotional and conflictual, no doubt because it allows for 'cooling off' between exchanges, preventing the venting of rash outbursts that are later regretted. For Mary, communications technology offers a virtual shield to write about certain difficult topics. Clive, Anita, and Barry also found that as well as making it easier to confront things, writing offers their adolescent children the ability to articulate sensitive or difficult content they might otherwise struggle to

confront in spoken conversation. Although writing through text, instant-messenger applications and email are available to all families, separated and intact, it may be especially useful in separated households, where face-to-face communication is not always available and emotions can run especially high (Rodriguez-Jenkins and Marcenko, 2014). Of course, in a pre-technology age, written communication was possible by means of letters; however, the speed with which written communication is enabled by technology makes this a truly novel, 'hybrid' form of communication that families have quickly identified as playing a unique role in sustaining healthy relationships between parents and adolescent children in shared custody households.

4.2.2 Live communication is irreplaceable

One challenge mentioned by most participants was the experience of being unable to physically interact with their children during non-custody days. Although remote communication remained an option, participants described different aspects of live communication that were fundamental to them, making non-custodial days exceptionally difficult.

Participants mentioned how, during custodial days, communication was no longer limited to language; they were now also able to share live communication through touch. The value of this tactile behaviour was noted by Leo, Harry, and Frank, who spoke of the importance of hugging their children as a form of sharing and relaying emotions to one another. Leo and Frank spoke despondently about wanting to share more physical touch with their adolescent children. This suggested that they feel deeply pained by custody arrangements that limit and restrict their physical contact time with their children, reducing their ability to show their children affection, and receive warmth and reassurance from them in return. Similarly, Erika spoke of the need to often 'hug and kiss' her son, whilst Dalia spoke of her children sometimes needing to be cuddled. Without explicitly stating this, participants implied that sharing touch was fundamental to maintaining closeness to their adolescent children, a non-verbal affirmation of care, love, and affection.

Interestingly, the literature on adolescent development seems to suggest an entirely different trajectory for parent-adolescent tactile displays of affection, proposing instead that as adolescents strive for independence and autonomy, they erect boundaries between themselves and their parents (Finkenauer et al., 2008; Branje, Laursen and Collins, 2012). Pickhardt (2013) suggests that at this developmental stage, adolescents are less inclined to offer, or receive, tactile displays of affection with their parents, many experiencing it as

embarrassing or inappropriate. Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan (2002) also suggest that parents and adolescent children in separated households are generally less likely to enjoy close and intimate relationships, compared to intact families.

Nevertheless, the consensus of participants on the importance of hugging, cuddling, kissing, and generally holding their adolescent children suggests it is an important aspect of their relationships, a way for these parents to communicate affection, warmth, and care.

The findings suggest that a further aspect of parents' desire for their adolescent children's physical presence is the wish to communicate with them through shared activities. Not wanting to confine communication to static conversation, over half of the participants singled out various activities they share with their adolescent children, many of which started post-separation, in order to bond with them and create a more natural environment for fluid, relaxed conversation. Parents mentioned playing games and sports, creative activities, cooking or eating together as more conducive to comfortable and effective non-verbal, as well as verbal communication, and even, at times, comfortable silences wherein parents and adolescent children simply enjoy each other's presence.

After months of trying to make his children's visits extra special, Leo realised that all he and they really needed and missed when they were apart, was the normality of being in each other's presence, able to enjoy comfortable communication without any pressure. Virtual communication at a distance, in which interlocutors are placed at a fixed, unvarying distance from each other, is utterly different from the home setting, with its almost unlimited range of communication opportunities. In the family home, parents and children can sit side by side, at the dinner table, or at a distance from each other, and may move around during the course of the conversation; nor need the conversation be confined to the same room – calling to each other up or down stairs is all part of the normal repertoire of family communication that is impossible in the formal setting of a video call.

Like Leo, Janet mentioned that when her children are with her, she makes sure they eat dinners together, maximising their communication opportunities within a natural and comfortable setting. Mary spoke similarly of how mealtimes offer a natural and convenient setting for communication with her adolescent son on custodial days. Sociologists concur that the 'ritual' of dining together is one of the most important settings for family interaction and communication, combining the quasi-formality of a family gathering with the affirmation of family unity and the sharing of emotionally and culturally significant foods (Griffin et al., 2000; Fritz, 2006; CASA Columbia, 2012).

Several papers reviewed in Nielsen's (2011) study concluded that shared custody offers children the best possible post-separation outcomes. They suggest that separated parents often make a special effort to participate in activities with their children and communicate with them regularly. Nielsen (2011) found that engaging in everyday activities such as household chores or the cooking with their adolescent children mentioned by Clive and Erika, creates the foundation of a strong post-separation parent-child relationship. Participants' focus on 'ordinary' activities offering the most fruitful communication opportunities exemplifies the relational strategy of encouraging family members to communicate with one another and spend time together engaged in ordinary chores or activities (Ramirez and Broneck, 2009).

Cashmore, Parkinson, & Taylor (2008) and Fabricius, Diaz, & Braver (2011) found that children benefit exponentially from overnight stays with both parents, the latter study suggesting that the number of days adolescents spent with their fathers correlated with the quality of their relationships; those with better relationships spent at least one third of their time at their fathers' homes. The 'in between' communication, the standard activities which in 'intact' households may be taken for granted or seen as painful chores, appear to be among the most valuable opportunities for parents in shared custody arrangements to communicate straightforwardly and contentedly with their adolescent children. These activities promote the regular face-to-face interaction associated with stronger parent-child bonds and improved psychological welfare of parents and children (Ferguson & Dickson, 1995; Smyth's, 2009; Nielsen, 2011).

Over half of the participants maximised and took advantage of any communication opportunities available, especially through specialised or ordinary chores and activities, augmenting their limited opportunities for communication with their adolescent children. Although some had up to 65% custody time, no participants saw this as 'enough'; all expressed a desire to communicate more often or more meaningfully, with their adolescent children. This complements Suleman and Meyers (1999) finding that fathers with shared custody are as involved in their children's lives as fathers in intact homes. Like the parents in Suleman and Meyers's (1999) study, parents in the present study also tried to amplify their face-to-face time with their children to create more meaningful interactions through ordinary activities and communication channels. The present findings also match those of several papers cited in Nielsen's (2011) meta-analysis, which showed that regular activities with their children fortified the parent-child bond in shared custody households.

Anita and Dalia deemed live communication essential for emotions to be adequately exchanged between parents and their adolescent children. Anita implied that allowing her children to experience her emotions educates them about emotions and the importance of expressing them. She and Dalia commented that during their marriages they often found themselves hiding their emotions, perhaps as a way of protecting their children. Nevertheless, post-separation, neither saw this as helpful, either to themselves or their children, indicating the importance of parents and their adolescent children seeing and feeling one another's emotions.

Frank and Harry felt live communication was most helpful in enabling them to see their adolescent children's bodily and facial reactions; this allows them to better gauge their children's emotional well-being and is perhaps especially important considering adolescents often share less with their parents and keep more personal information private due to their growing detachment from their parents (Finkenauer et al., 2008). Seeing the adolescent's emotions on their faces or through their body language may therefore communicate more to parents about their children's emotional well-being than words alone, as Georgia suggested when she noted that children's emotions are more transparent in face-to-face conversation.

Participants appeared to choose their medium of communication according to the nature of their proposed conversation. Most wanted to wait for the opportunity of face-to-face communication, or custodial days, to enable deeper, more personal, or sensitive conversations. Harry, Barry and Frank value custodial days, when they can see their adolescent children's body language and better assess their emotions around difficult conversations. Conversely, on non-custodial days, Erika and Mary sometimes broach difficult subjects over the phone or on a messenger application; however, they then propose that the conversation can continue at a deeper level when they next meet their children in person.

In the end, parents concurred that live conversation is best as they can see their adolescent children's reactions better, easily check how they are feeling, better notice nuances of tone of voice and 'hear' their children's silences. Unlike virtual conversations, face-to-face conversation leaves no option to hang up, end the conversation or blame it on bad internet connectivity. In face-to-face conversation emotions are far less likely to be misconstrued (Wang et al., 2015). Parents and children are thus more likely to follow through the communication until the end, or if they do choose to get up and leave, this itself can be understood as a communication. Similarly, Stern and Messer (2009) found that face-to-face interaction facilitates the richest and most meaningful conversation.

4.2.3 Communicating with a developing adolescent child

Open and honest communication fosters trust between adolescents and their parents, a foundation for developing and maintaining a successful, intimate relationship (Shek, 2010; Kerr, Stattin and Trost, 1999). Positive, open communication has been found to underpin the parent-adolescent relationship and serves as a protective factor in the mental health of both (Xiao, Li and Stanton, 2011; Liu, 2003).

Almost all participants noted the importance of being honest with their adolescent children and creating an environment which fosters open communication between them. Barry believes open communication channels facilitate a more meaningful relationship with his children. Similarly, Mary, Harry, Frank, Janet, and Leo see truthfulness and honesty as vital to creating positive relationships with their adolescent children, especially in the context of the recent marital separations which have disrupted their pre-separation communication with their children. Erika perceives her transparency with her son about sensitive information as laying the foundation of their trusting relationship. Anita takes the idea of being open with her children beyond verbal communication in her reference to the importance of their seeing her express her emotions. By setting this example, Anita hopes her children will feel able to openly communicate their own struggles to her.

Participants' hope that honesty and openness with their adolescent children would invite openness in return, as well as improve their overall communication, is reflected in the literature. Afifi, Huber and Ohs (2006) found that children who were more comfortable to communicate openly with their parents about general or divorce-related struggles developed more positive relationships with their parents and coped better with their parents' separation. They also found that children to whom parents had confided their distress were better able to deal with other stressors associated with their parents' separation (Afifi, Huber and Ohs, 2006)

At the same time, a balance must be struck between healthy honesty and unhealthy 'offloading' of the parent's emotional difficulties. Dalia was initially unsure how to handle sensitive, divorce-related conversations with her adolescent children. However, after several sessions of psychological therapy she realised that her openness and honesty about the divorce and other difficult issues was vital for her children's recovery from the rupture to the family. Parental separation or divorce can trigger a chain of distress, loss, and broken communication (Nichols, 1985). Therapy can help families navigate this transition in a way

which benefits all family members. Certain Family Therapy models focus specifically on guiding families in developing balanced and effective communication patterns (Huff and Hartenstein, 2020; Carr, 2009; Ramisch, McVicker and Sahin, 2009; Rivett & Street, 2009).

Participants emphasised the ways they had to change their communication styles and content to accommodate their children's transition into adolescence. Frank, Leo, Mary, and Barry commented that as their children have transitioned into adolescence, the content of their communication has evolved. Several participants also noted that they sometimes communicate less with their adolescent children than previously, but that communication content has matured and improved, suggesting a trade-off of quality over quantity. The parents' suggestion that the reduction, yet maturation in, their communication is the result of the transition to adolescence rather than of their separation is backed up by the literature, which illustrates the modification in parent-adolescent communication caused by adolescence (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Rudi et al. (2014) found that transitioning into adolescence gave teenagers more control over who they talk to, how often, and what about. As adolescents' grasp of language and abstract concepts expands, they are also able to communicate far more coherently than younger children (Rudi et al., 2014). Thus, developmental models point to the evolution in communication adolescents undergo during their biological maturation (Branje, Laursen and Collins, 2012).

Moreover, children entering adolescence also experience significant hormonal changes that render them sometimes emotionally volatile (Jenson and Nutt, 2015). Family communication often undergoes disruption during this time, including less frequent or different parent-child communication (Collins and Laursen, 2000). All parents, in both intact and separated households, must negotiate these changes, striking a balance between offering security through regular communication on the one hand and gradually 'letting go' on the other. Shared custody, when children may be exposed to varied treatment by their separated parents, might make striking this balance more difficult.

4.2.4 Parental communication revalued in light of the separation.

Participants emphasised the numerous ways they needed to re-evaluate and alter their communication with their adolescent children to accommodate their shared custody and transitioning relationships. Several participants explained how the sudden constraint on their time with their children required them to maximize every moment; they could no longer take this precious time for granted.

The literature similarly notes that fathers in shared custody households can become a “fixed feature” in their children’s lives, more than in intact or sole-custody homes (Bjaarnaso and Arnarsson, 2011). These authors earlier found that parents, especially fathers, spent more quality time with their children in shared custody homes, attributing this to the fact that parents who could no longer rely on seeing their children daily made greater efforts to make the time valuable (Arnarsson and Bjarnason, 2008). Three fathers in the present research spoke of the need to make more effort than pre-separation to maintain a high level of contact and closeness with their adolescent children. Leo, Barry, and Harry found that communication had improved due to their conscious efforts to communicate regularly and ensure that the time spent together is quality time. Going beyond the literature, these fathers also mentioned how communications technology has enabled this, with ICTs filling in the gaps when they can’t see their children.

Families need to restructure themselves and their communication patterns after a separation (Carr, 2006; Segrin and Flora, 2005). Clive, Barry, and Leo spoke of no longer taking for granted their physically togetherness with their adolescent children and described adapting communication patterns to maximise their face-to-face time. Clive mentioned that this time with his children has become more precious. Barry and Leo are no longer ambivalent in their relationships with their adolescent children, striving harder to improve their bond and communication. The literature complements these findings, suggesting that parents in shared custody arrangements are just as involved in their children’s lives as those in intact or sole-custody homes and that fathers’ high levels of involvement may result from efforts to make the limited time with their children more meaningful (Suleman and Meyers, 1999).

Still, the present findings are more optimistic than some of existing research suggests. Portugal and Alberto (2019) found no significant difference between parent-child communication in shared custody and intact homes. By contrast, some of the fathers in the present research felt that communication was more meaningful than in the past, now that

they no longer took for granted their limited opportunities for contact. This optimism sheds light on how parents can exploit recent technological advances to maintain regular, healthy distanced communication. These technological advances are especially relevant to communication with adolescent children, who are likely to have the necessary phones and technology. Parents have also been found to maximize their limited face-to-face time, allowing for deeper and more meaningful connections and conversations, potentially overcoming the lack of regular daily contact with their children.

4.2.5 Conclusion of Findings

The findings of this study confirm and extend those of the literature on parent-child communication after separation. Mobile phones and ICTs generally provide a vital lifeline connecting separated parents and their adolescent children, maintaining, and even enhancing family communication, especially since such communication is not limited by space or time. This distant communication proved to have unexpected benefits, notably in enabling tense or difficult conversations at a ‘safe’ distance.

Another striking finding was that the benefit of communications technology is as potent for parents as for their children, offering them the reassurance of maintaining open, honest communication; parents’ urgent need to maintain the relationship with their adolescent children makes their reliance on communications technology all the more important as a subject of research. Yet despite these benefits, participants were unanimous in feeling that communications technology, no matter of what kind, lacks the physical intimacy of live, daily face-to-face contact with their children. Further, parents found that the challenges of virtual communication were compounded by the changes in their relationships triggered by their children’s sometimes sudden transitioning and maturing into adolescence. Communications technology, in short, appears to be a necessary second-best, which could never replace the authentic communication facilitated by non-verbal communication, touch, hugging, kissing, and shared activities.

4.3 How Results Can Inform Clinical Practice

The results can inform several different relevant forms of clinical practice including therapy for the family, or for specific family members; therapeutically oriented parenting sessions; psycho-educational groups for family members of separating or separated families; as well as generally educating mental health practitioners and clinicians. All of these clinical practices can help parents to see how previous communication patterns can and perhaps should be restructured, in line with the transition that they have undergone, in order to sustain and even improve parent-child communication post-separation.

When thinking further about using this study's findings to inform clinical practice, techniques from FST would be tremendously helpful. Even when family members are not willing to go to therapy together, or when parents go without their children or children without parents, clinical approaches stemming from systemic family practice can have a profound therapeutic impact. Systemic practices can allow for family members who are unable or unwilling to attend to be given a 'chair' or to act as a 'ghost' (Hedges, 2005). This is when the absent individual's personal experiences are considered as part of the individual's therapeutic process (Dallos and Draper, 2006). A systemic space for families as a whole or specific family members can be beneficial in enabling family members to understand how they are still connected to one another and how they can best develop their relationships, and communication, within the context of their post-separation family structure. Using FST to inform such clinical practices is especially helpful as the clinical approaches informed by FST enable clinicians to reframe the ruptures and separations as events which create the space for family relationships to undergo certain transitions, allowing them to evolve and develop. For psychologists working with family members in a shared custody arrangement, there can be great value in focusing on the importance of communication, of understanding one's family scripts and interaction patterns, and in allowing family members to talk about the emotional themes that surfaced for them pre- and post-separation in a non-judgmental, encouraging space (Nichols, 1985). Clinicians can use this study's results to better frame their support of parents, adolescents, and families as a whole, including by making them more aware of the benefits of flexibly using different forms of communication.

Many participants seemed to carry a great deal of responsibility and guilt about the disrupted relationship with their adolescent children and seemed to be trying to overcome through effective communication what they perceived as the negative impact of their separation. With

this in mind, psychological or educational support services could be relevant to those parents and children who might be struggling to adjust to post-separation communication. Some of the present qualitative findings could therefore offer beneficial guidance to professionals in the field and help direct psychological and educational interventions. Furthermore, psycho-educational groups for parents and adolescent children could use results from this study which show the extent to which parents and their children can develop a 'sense of togetherness' through using ICTs to communicate with one another, especially on non-custodial days or nights. Both the literature and the participants' findings pointed to the fact that regular use of communications technology can offer families strengthened connections and uninterrupted attachment. It would be valuable for parents to have the opportunity to learn about the benefits of using ICTs regularly as these could be highly effective in ensuring that parents and their adolescent children maintain regular communication even at a distance, thus sustaining and preserving their relationship.

Additionally, this study highlighted the significant hormonal and behavioural changes that adolescents undergo. These findings could be included in psycho-education groups for all parents, not just separated parents, as less frequent or changing parent-child communication is to expected during this time and it can be especially difficult for parents to navigate the balance of offering a secure attachment with regular communication whilst enabling their children's individuation process to take place. Through explaining the biological processes that adolescents undergo, psycho-educational groups could help parents to better understand and navigate the transitions that their children will inevitably experience.

Within therapeutic parenting sessions or family and individual therapy, clinicians can help to emphasise the importance of consistency in communication. This came out strongly within this study wherein the literature and participants saw sporadic and inconsistent communication as inadequate. Especially post-separation, regular and consistent communication is fundamental in maintaining healthy parent-child relationships, regardless of the platforms used and of whether the communication tools used are face-to-face or virtual. The importance of regular communication, with some of this ideally being face-to-face or through video-calling applications, was also shown to reassure parents and improve their well-being. Part of the unique value in face-to-face contact which can be emphasised by clinicians is the value of touch, sharing the same presence and participating together in regular activities and chores which allow for natural communication opportunities to arise. Thus, through working with clinicians, family members should be assisted in understanding that regular communication is advantageous and supportive for all family members alike.

Lastly, the findings of this study echoed some of the literature (Suleman and Meyers, 1999) in that parents in shared-custody arrangements can be as involved in their children's lives as those in non-separated households. Clinicians can use this knowledge, and the even more optimistic findings from this study which showed several fathers talking about improved communication post-separation, in order to counter the fearmongering narrative that often surrounds parental separation.

Parents and children who have undergone family structural changes resulting from parental separation could find the Counselling Psychology space, which is empathic, respectful and non-judgemental, extremely empowering – allowing them to explore the meaning of the separation for their communication with family members, on both an emotional and practical level. Clinicians can use the study's outcomes to guide families in realising that shared custody need not have negative consequences for parent-adolescent communication. On the contrary, the findings are at times positive and uplifting, suggesting that some post-separation communication was an improvement on the communication within the same families' intact pre-separation homes.

4.4 Relevance and Implications for Counselling Psychology

There is a well-established, productive connection between qualitative research and Counselling Psychology, with therapeutic skills often adding value to the interview process, helping participants feel comfortable about sharing their experiences (McLeod, 2001). The present research has aimed to capture the entirety of participants' experiences in order to clearly communicate to mental health professionals, including counselling psychologists, an understanding of this particular group of separated parents and their unique experience. Thus, in line with the ethos and values of Counselling Psychology, the research techniques employed, eliciting individuals' diverse, unique, as well as subjective and intersubjective accounts, enabled the voices of these parents to be accurately heard and their stories to be effectively analysed (Kasket, 2016). The study set out to obtain findings that would be useful, applicable, and educational to both the general discipline of Counselling Psychology and to clinicians working within it.

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The research also has clear clinical and practical implications with relevance beyond researchers and clinicians; the researcher therefore hopes to engage the wider population by disseminating the research results more broadly, through appropriate magazines or as a blog post accessible to separated parents or those considering separation.

4.5 Reflections on Quality Criteria

Yardley's (2000) guidelines on the criteria of good qualitative research include:

- Sensitivity to context
- Commitment and rigour
- Transparency and coherence
- Impact and importance

In relation to this study, the context of the research subject was reviewed and researched before, during and after the data was collected. This ensured that prior to the interviews, the researcher was well versed in the literature on various relevant fields and remained up to date with new research as the data collection and analysis stages progressed. Sensitivity to ethical issues and to the delicacy of participants' individual experiences has also been repeatedly considered. The rigorous nature of the ethical and professional standards adhered to, and the methodological decisions taken, testify to the researcher's 'commitment and rigour'; this included the researcher's engagement in the literature, interviews, and analysis process. The analysis process was transparently laid out in the methodology section and accurately followed throughout the stages of data analysis. Additionally, the clear arguments presented in the methodology section, showing the associations between the theory and methods chosen for this study, display high levels of coherence. Throughout the research the impact and importance of the study has been critically reflected on. The clinical implications of the study, its applications to the field of Counselling Psychology, and to wider society, were all reflected on in the introduction and earlier in this chapter.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for effective Thematic Analysis emphasise the need for in-depth understanding of the data. This is best achieved by completing their rigorous step-by-step analytic process. To ensure production of high-quality research, Braun and Clarke (2006) offer a 15-point checklist, adhered to throughout this study, to ensure that the data is carefully, ethically, and effectively deconstructed in order to generate a systematic and rigorous Thematic Analysis. Some examples showing how Braun and Clarke's (2006) checklist was followed are outlined below.

Validity in qualitative research is the “extent to which our research describes, measures or explains what it aims to describe, measure or explain” (Willig, 2013 p.24). In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative designs methods often use much smaller, less representative samples, normally reducing the external validity of the data. The extensive time required to complete the interviews, transcribe the data verbatim and thoroughly analyse the material, placed an insuperable constraint on the number of participants possible to include in such a comprehensive qualitative research study. However, the research process was rigorous. Richer and more detailed, in-depth data was collected, increasing the overall internal validity and quality of the research further than would be possible in an equivalent quantitative study (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The researcher sought to maximize validity by asking open-ended questions in order not to influence the interview process, and to prevent imposing the researcher’s assumptions on participants. However, despite these efforts, in a qualitative study such as this the researcher has an inevitable influence on the data analysis stage, imposed through their coding and interpretation of the data. Thus, acknowledging the role of the researcher’s influence is essential, something that was considered throughout the study and addressed through engaging in various reflexive practices.

Reliability cannot be guaranteed using qualitative measures as no objective measures are generated (Yardley, 2008). Therefore, researchers engaged in qualitative research appreciate that they may reach different conclusions since each researcher’s choice of qualitative designs influences the research process. Instead of trying to produce a generalizable global theory, the aim of the present research is to create a trustworthy phenomenological account of participants’ experiences of communicating with their adolescent children in a shared custody context. To maintain maximum ‘reliability’, the researcher’s preconceived ideas, and how they impacted the data analysis process, were mindfully noted and bracketed off as honestly as possible through the use of a reflective diary and by eliciting feedback from the research supervisor.

Credibility was sought by recruiting a homogenous sample (Smith et al. 2009). Homogeneity was determined by the study’s requirements (Braun and Clarke, 2013); participants were self-selected on the basis of matching the research criteria, namely sharing the experience of being parents of adolescent children in a shared custody arrangement. The ethical manner in which participants and their data were treated, their ability to withdraw at any time and their consent to participating and having their data recorded, all support the study’s credibility.

As in all qualitative research, objective generalisability was not a realistic or intended goal (Johnson, 1997). However, Sandelowski (2002) and Yardley (2008) suggest that the findings of qualitative studies can still be generalised to other relevant groups and situations if applied correctly. Although not statistically representative, the conclusions therefore also have the potential to be transferred to other people, contexts, or situations (Finlay 2006).

4.6 Strengths, Limitations, and Proposals for Further Research

4.5.1 Strengths and Fulfilling the Research Aims

The present study provides new information about parents' experience of communicating with their adolescent children in shared custody households. Some of their experiences and anecdotes echo those recounted in similar research studies, but other findings were novel, perhaps due to the twenty-first century technologically driven context in which this research was conducted. This study also complements existing research. Carvalho, Francisco and Relvas (2015) suggest that further research should investigate the context and content, as well as the quality and significance, of parent-child communication in order to better understand their influence on family relationships. Wang et al. (2015) further identify the need for further research into the diversity of family members' communication, the range of ICTs available for family communication, and how ICTs influence family communication. These topics were taken up here.

Additionally, although this study set out to engage clinicians working with separated families or parents who have separated or are in the process of separation, the results were also found to have a broader impact. Some conclusions had a significant relevance for other fields which focus on communication, and notably on the impact of changing social and technological trends in family communication. Thus, an additional strength of the research is its cross-disciplinary relevance.

4.5.2 Limitations and Further Research

Various limitations surfaced throughout the research process, prompting several ideas for further research.

Bing et al. (2009) identify parental conflict levels, as opposed to family structure, as the most significant indicator of parents' and children's well-being post-separation. Portugal and Alberto (2019) also reflect that future research requires a measure to account for the levels

and effects of parental conflict. This study did not specify conflict levels between parents as a research criterion, so this factor may have caused additional variation between participants. Ensuring that only low-conflict parents were interviewed would have been useful in better establishing the transferability of the study. Nevertheless, although a point to consider for future research, within this study no participants disclosed having a particularly high-conflict relationship with their ex-partner. Not including this as a recruitment criterion may thus not have had a tangible impact on the findings, though it is impossible to be certain about this.

Another limitation was the large variation between the times of parents' separation and the research interviews. In reflecting on the findings, it became apparent that this variation could have led to parents reaching greatly different conclusions about their communication patterns, with some having had several years to adjust and perfect their communication patterns while others were still grappling with the drastic changes to their family structure. This variation also meant that while some children were adolescents at the time of the separation, others, whose parents had separated several years earlier, might have been pre-adolescent at the time of the separation. This difference, constituting a major variable, might have significantly impacted the findings, since the response of infants and adolescents to parental separation is likely to vary greatly. Afifi et al. (2014) and Lansford (2009) found that the age of children when parents started the separation procedure was a critical variable for understanding children's adaptation to the changes in family structure and should be accounted for. Thus, controlling for time since separation and the age of children at time of separation would have been useful and should be considered in future research.

Additionally, participant samples within Thematic Analysis research necessitate a certain level of homogeneity (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Within this study homogeneity was defined according to the inclusion criteria (Appendix B). These did not include any specific socio-demographic factors such as gender, ethnicity and culture thus, it was hoped that the participant group partaking would reflect socio-demographic diversity. Nevertheless, all of the participants who chose to take part in the research were White, albeit coming from different backgrounds. This can be seen as a limitation to the study and further research may benefit from seeking out a more diverse sample.

The criteria for participation required parents to have at least one adolescent child aged between 12-18 in order to cover the fact that most adolescent children live at home. Nevertheless, when completing the analysis and reflecting on the findings it became apparent that older and younger adolescents (12-14 as opposed to 15-18) may require

different forms of communication from their parents and may also be at very different stages of their transition into adolescence. Williamson (2017) discusses the two very different developmental stages of younger and older adolescents; however, he believes that the last decade, partly due to the rise of the internet, has seen these two phases of adolescence morph into one. If so, using one adolescent group may have still been the appropriate decision.

Nevertheless, future research could confirm whether Williamson's (2017) assumption is correct by completing a comparative study of parents with children in each adolescent age group. Additionally, further research could consider interviewing the adolescents themselves to elicit their experiences of communicating with parents in shared custody homes. A supplementary comparative study of parents and their adolescent children's perspectives would also be helpful.

Finally, the research did not specifically focus on differences between mothers and fathers. There were seven female and five male participants and when analysing the results, it became apparent that some experiences were noted only by fathers. Further, neither in the interview questioning nor in the analysis was there any reference to any apparent differences between adolescent sons and adolescent daughters. Future studies may consider comparing mothers' experiences to those of fathers to identify any differences. Studies may additionally find that communication with adolescent sons and adolescent daughters in shared custody homes is significantly different; this would also constitute an area for further research.

Whilst noting the above limitations, it is worth bearing in mind that the research was intended to be largely exploratory. It aimed to combine several bodies of relevant, psychologically-informed literature to generate better understanding of an important contemporary topic. Therefore, as well as the findings, the research has also brought to light areas for further research in this field.

4.6 Research Reflections

Throughout the research process, I made a conscious effort to practise reflexivity and to evaluate my professional and personal practice. During the interviews and when analysing the interview transcripts, I noticed a lot of personal thoughts surfacing. I found myself needing to bracket my own thoughts and feelings and I was encouraged during these moments to record my thoughts in my self-reflective journal, ensuring that I maintained an

adequate level of self-awareness. I use this to reflect on my experience of the world and its place in my research. My meetings and exchanges of material with my research supervisor provided me with instrumental support throughout the research process. I was able to reflect on the research within a safe and encouraging environment which offered me the mentorship I needed to develop as a capable researcher within the field of Counselling Psychology. Also helpful was the use of personal therapy as a reflexive space; I found that a lot of what I brought up in therapy was related to family communication, and how divorced members of my family have had to learn an entirely new form of communication. This increased my desire to pursue research in the field and made me acutely aware of the role of insider positioning in research (Greene, 2014), an interesting contrast to the 'outsider' position I had experienced when conducting the interviews. However difficult, by using these supportive tools I tried to limit the impact of my own thoughts and experiences on my interviews and the analysis process.

When embarking on this research project, I was enthused by the subject and the existing literature on it. Through my active role as a researcher in this study, I noticed the extent to which my understanding and appreciation of parents' lives after their separation had increased, and how so many variables can impact on their communication with their adolescent children. In giving a voice to these participants, I became aware of how this research could be useful to myself in my work as a counselling psychologist, to others working in the field, and to the participants and other parents in similar situations. Additionally, I realised that some of my findings could be helpful to different types of sole-custody or intact families wherein parents may be struggling to communicate with their adolescent children, or in families where one parent may often be absent from the family home.

Finally, writing up this study during the coronavirus pandemic allowed me to reflect on how many families started using video-calling applications to remain in touch with one another since the interviews were conducted. Prior to the pandemic, video-calling was a function on many smartphones but was not regularly utilised in family communication. The pandemic has made video-calling far more mainstream, as evidenced by the surge in use of Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Hangout, among other video-calling mediums. This again demonstrates the speed at which communication shifts, adapts and changes. Thus, I am aware that had I conducted my data collection during the lockdowns or COVID-era, very different material would perhaps have been elicited. Some parents with shared-custody arrangements were unable to see their children at certain periods of the pandemic due to the government's strict travel restrictions, or their face-to-face time may have become more

limited. This may have caused parents to rely more on technology to communicate regularly with them, with video-calling becoming the modus operandi for almost everyone during this time. There were a few parents whom I interviewed who did not use video-calling as regularly as some of the others and I could not help but wonder if, and to what extent, this may have changed as a result of the pandemic. Therefore, as a research recommendation for the future, I would suggest conducting the same or a similar piece of research, whilst thinking about the impacts that COVID may have had on parents' previous communication patterns with their children, to see the extent to which the pandemic may have brought about and produced significantly different results.

Reflecting on the entire study, I believe it has achieved its primary aims; nevertheless, I hope many more studies will follow in the future, building on this study's findings and limitations, and increasing the pool of research on this topic.

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6. Appendices

6.1. Appendix A. Ethical Approval

City, University of London

Dear Sophie

Reference: ETH1819-1591

Project title: Exploring how parents communicate with their adolescent children in shared custody households.

Start date: 26 Oct 2018

End date: 27 Sep 2021

I am writing to you to confirm that the research proposal detailed above has been granted formal approval from the Psychology low risk review. The Committee's response is based on the protocol described in the application form and supporting documentation. Approval has been given for the submitted application only and the research must be conducted accordingly. You are now free to start recruitment.

Please ensure that you are familiar with City's Framework for Good Practice in Research and any appropriate Departmental/School guidelines, as well as applicable external relevant policies. Please note the following:

Project amendments/extension

You will need to submit an amendment or request an extension if you wish to make any of the following changes to your research project:

- Change or add a new category of participants;
- Change or add researchers involved in the project, including PI and supervisor;
- Change to the sponsorship/collaboration;
- Add a new or change a territory for international projects;
- Change the procedures undertaken by participants, including any change relating to the safety or physical or mental integrity of research participants, or to the risk/benefit assessment for the project or collecting additional types of data from research participants;
- Change the design and/or methodology of the study, including changing or adding a new research method and/or research instrument;
- Change project documentation such as protocol, participant information sheets, consent forms, questionnaires, letters of invitation, information sheets for relatives or carers;
- Change to the insurance or indemnity arrangements for the project;
- Change the end date of the project.

Adverse events or untoward incidents

You will need to submit an Adverse Events or Untoward Incidents report in the event of any of the following:

a) Adverse events
b) Breaches of confidentiality
c) Safeguarding issues relating to children or vulnerable adults
d) Incidents that affect the personal safety of a participant or researcher

Issues a) and b) should be reported as soon as possible and no later than five days after the event. Issues c) and d) should be reported immediately. Where appropriate, the researcher should also report adverse events to other relevant institutions, such as the police or social services. Should you have any further queries relating to this matter, please do not hesitate to contact me. On behalf of the Psychology low risk review, I do hope that the project meets with success.

Kind regards,

Aylish O'Driscoll, Psychology low risk review, City, University of London

Ethics ETH1819-1591: Sophie Bollag (Low risk)

6.2 Appendix B: Research Advert for Participants

Department of Psychology, City, University of London

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH ON:

PARENTS' COMMUNICATION WITH ADOLESCENT CHILDREN IN SHARED CUSTODY HOUSEHOLDS.

Are you a parent with a shared custody arrangement?

Do you have at least one adolescent child?

If yes, we would love for you to participate in our study in order to hear more about your experience.

Our study aims to explore through interviews the ways in which parents communicate with their adolescent children.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to participate in a ten minute phone call, followed by a one-to-one, face-to-face interview that would last approximately one hour. Anonymity will apply for all published data.

In order to participate:

- You should have a shared custody arrangement with neither you or your spouse having your children for less than 33-35% of the time.
- You need to have at least one adolescent child aged 12-18.
- You must have a smart phone.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer,
please contact the researcher.

Researcher: Sophie Bollag – sophie.bollag@city.ac.uk
Supervisor: Dr Daphne Josselin – Daphne.Josselin@city.ac.uk

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through the City, University of London, Department of Psychology Research Ethics Committee, [ETH1819-1591].

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, please contact the Secretary to the Senate Research Ethics Committee on 020 7040 3040 or via email: Anna.Ramberg.1@city.ac.uk.

City, University of London is the data controller for the personal data collected for this research project. If you have any data protection concerns about this research project, please contact City's Information Compliance Team at dataprotection@city.ac.uk

6.3 Appendix C: Demographics Questionnaire

Demographics Questionnaire

I would like to start by asking you some background information about you and your family.

Do you identify as male, female or non-binery?	
How old are you?	
What is your ethnicity?	
What city or area do you currently live in?	
How many children do you have?	
What gender are your children?	
How old are your children?	
How long has passed since your separation?	
What is the approximate percentage time that you spend with your children?	

6.4 Appendix D: Participant information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Study: How do Parents' Communicate with their Adolescent Children in Shared Custody Households?

Name of principal investigator: Sophie Bollag.
Project supervisor: Dr Daphne Josselin.

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

This research is part of a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology project which is investing how parents with shared custody arrangements communicate with their adolescent children. The thesis will aim to explore through interviews what modes of communication parents use, how they feel about their communication with their adolescent children and what the role of communications technology is in their communication. The study is a part of my Dpsych accreditation and it will be held by the library and some of its findings may later be published. The research will be completed over three to four years.

You have been invited because:

- You have adolescent Children aged 12-18.
- You are currently in a shared custody arrangement where neither you or your spouse having your children for less than 35% of the time.
- You have a smart phone.

Do I have to take part?

All participation is voluntary. During the interview you can choose not to answer any questions which you feel is too personal, intrusive or uncomfortable. Following the interview you will be able to withdraw your data for a period of six weeks. After six weeks I will have begun analysing your data and data withdrawal will no longer be possible. Not answering questions or withdrawing from the project will not result in you being penalized or disadvantaged in anyway.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What will happen if I take part?

- A brief phone call will be arranged prior to the interview, during which the researcher will check that you meet the necessary requirements for participating in the study (as outlined above). You will also have the opportunity to ask any question you may have on the study.

- If you decide to participate a consent form will be sent to you, which you will be asked to sign prior to the interview.
- The interview will take place in a private location convenient to you, either at City University London or at your own home.
- Before the interview begins you will be asked to fill out a short demographics questionnaire.
- You will participate in a single one-to-one interview for approximately one hour. During the interview, you will be asked specific questions about the research topic.
- Following the interview you will be given a debrief form explaining the aims of the research.
- The interview data will be analysed, coded and interpreted through thematic analysis.
- All data will be processed to the standards required within the European economic area (EEA).
- The research study itself will take approximately three years to complete.

What do I have to do?

Several days before the interview you will speak to the researcher over the phone for about 5-10 minutes. Following the phone call, you will be sent and asked to read and sign a consent form. You will then meet the researcher face-to-face where you will first be asked to fill out a demographics questionnaire, followed by a face-to-face interview. This will take place at City University London or at your own home. The interview will last approximately one hour.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The interview process is unlikely to cause you severe distress or sadness. However it is possible that when talking about your separation or communication with family members, you may feel upset.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

You may feel better after talking about a topic which can be quite sensitive and may be a subject that you have not explored before with anyone else. An indirect benefit of participating in this study is that the results of the study intend on benefitting individuals in the future who are going through or have recently been divorced.

What will happen when the research study stops?

If the research study is paused then the researcher will keep the data on password protected devices and in locked filing cabinets in case the research resumes. This will only be kept for up to ten years at which point it will be destroyed. If the research ends completely with no intention of resuming, all data will be completely destroyed and deleted immediately.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

- Only the researcher will have access to your data before it has been anonymised.
- In order to keep your data (recordings and transcripts) as well as your personal details safe, these will be kept in password protected files on a password protected laptop. Hard copies of your transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. All identifying details and demographic details will be kept separately from your transcript in order to ensure client confidentiality. Your data will not be shared with any third parties.
- Following transcription the recordings will be deleted from the recording device.
- Your personal information and contact details will only be used by the researcher in order to inform you once the project has been published in case you wish to receive a copy of the study, and these details will only be used with specified consent.

- None of your personal data will be shared with other individuals unless the researcher is concerned about harm that you may cause to yourself or someone else, such as being informed about violence, abuse, self-harm or criminal activities. In this event, the researcher will inform her supervisor who will advise on how to deal with this disclosure.
- Once the researcher has graduated and her research has been published, all remaining data files will be deleted. If the project is abandoned, the data will also be deleted in all its forms and destroyed from all devices through file shredding technology.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

Upon completion, the thesis will be printed and stored in City University of London's library. It will also be available on the City Research Online catalogue. Additionally it may be published in the future in reputable academic journals, in which case all participants' names and any details which make them identifiable will be altered. Before the thesis is uploaded online, the researcher will ensure that any information which could breach participant anonymity will be redacted.

All participants will be informed once the study has been completed and they can choose whether or not they would like to receive a copy of the publication or a summary of the results. Any participants wanting a copy will be sent an electronic version of it.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by City, University of London Counselling Psychology Research Ethics Committee, [ETH1819-1591].

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?

You are free to withdraw, without explanation or penalty, at any time during the study.
Up until 6 weeks after the interview, all of your data can be withdrawn and will be destroyed.

What if I have concerns about how my personal data will be used after I have participated in the research?

In the first instance you should raise any concerns with the research team, but if you are dissatisfied with the response, you may contact the Information Compliance Team at dataprotection@city.ac.uk or phone 0207 040 4000, who will liaise with City's Data Protection Officer Dr William Jordan to answer your query. If you are dissatisfied with City's response you may also complain to the Information Commissioner's Office at www.ico.org.uk

Data Protection Privacy Notice: What are my rights under the data protection legislation?

City, University of London is the data controller for the personal data collected for this research project. The rights you have under the data protection legislation are listed below, but not all of the rights will apply to the personal data collected in each research project.

- right to be informed
- right of access
- right to rectification
- right to erasure
- right to restrict processing
- right to object to data processing
- right to data portability

- right to object
- rights in relation to automated decision making and profiling

City, University of London is the data controller for the personal data collected for this research project. Your personal data will be processed for the purposes outlined in this notice. The legal basis for processing your personal data will be that this research is a task in the public interest, that is City, University of London considers the lawful basis for processing personal data to fall under Article 6(1)(e) of GDPR (public task) as the processing of research participant data is necessary for learning and teaching purposes and all research with human participants by staff and students has to be scrutinised and approved by one of City's Research Ethics Committees. For more information, please visit www.city.ac.uk/about/city-information/legal

What if I have concerns about how my personal data will be used after I have participated in the research?

In the first instance you should raise any concerns with the research team, but if you are dissatisfied with the response, you may contact the Information Compliance Team at dataprotection@city.ac.uk or phone 0207 040 4000, who will liaise with City's Data Protection Officer Dr William Jordan to answer your query. If you are dissatisfied with City's response you may also complain to the Information Commissioner's Office at www.ico.org.uk

What if there is a problem?

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through the University complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you need to phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is: Exploring how parents communicate with their adolescent children following parental separation in shared custody households: A thematic analysis.

You could also write to the Secretary at:
Anna Ramberg
Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee
Research Office, E214, City University London
Northampton Square. London. EC1V 0HB
Email: Anna.Ramberg.1@city.ac.uk

City University London holds insurance policies which apply to this study. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

This study has been approved by City University London Counselling Psychology Research Ethics Committee, [ETH1819-1591].

Further information and contact details

Researcher: Sophie Bollag – sophie.bollag@city.ac.uk
Supervisor: Dr Daphne Josselin – Daphne.Josselin@city.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

6.5 Appendix E: Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Title of Study: How do Parents' Communicate with their Adolescent Children in Shared Custody Households?

Please initial box

1	I confirm that I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the participant information sheet, which I may keep for my records.	
	I understand this will involve:	
	Completing a short demographics questionnaire	
	Being interviewed by the researcher face-to-face	
	allowing the interview to be audiotaped	
2	This information will be held by City as data controller and processed for the following purpose (according to GDPR regulations for personal data. Public Task: The legal basis for processing your personal data will be that this research is a task in the public interest, that is City, University of London considers the lawful basis for processing personal data to fall under Article 6(1)(e) of GDPR (public task) as the processing of research participant data is necessary for learning and teaching purposes and all research with human participants by staff and students has to be scrutinised and approved by one of City's Research Ethics Committees.	
3	I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any reports on the project, or to any other party. No identifiable personal data will be published. The identifiable data will not be shared with any other organisation.	
	I understand that if I request it, I will be able to ask the researcher for a transcript of data concerning me for my approval before it is included in the write-up of the research.	
	I understand that the thesis will be made available in the City Research Online repository.	
4	I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or in all of the project, and that I can withdraw my data up until six weeks following the interview without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.	
5	I agree to City recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) set out in this statement and my consent is conditional on City complying with its duties and obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).	
6.	I agree to the arrangements for data storage, archiving, sharing.	
7	I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publication.	
8	I agree to take part in the above study.	

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

When completed, 1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher file.

6.6 Appendix F: Participant Debrief Sheet

Participant Debrief Form

Research study title: Exploring how parents communicate with their adolescent children in shared custody households.

PARTICIPANT DEBRIEF INFORMATION

Thank you for taking part in this study. Now that it's finished we'd like to tell you a bit more about it.

This study explores individual parents' subjective experience of how they communicate with their adolescent children in shared custody households.

The aim of the study is to understand how parents and their adolescent children communicate, how often they communicate, what modes of communication they use and how they feel about their communication.

A lot of people go through separation and divorce and this causes the family structure to change. This research ultimately aims to assist researchers and clinicians working with individuals and/or families by providing them with valuable new insights into the role and nature of communication between parents and adolescents in shared custody households. Communication changes within families can have ramifications for the overall family dynamics as well as for both the parents' and the adolescents' well-being. Therefore, understanding these trends better should greatly benefit clinical work as well as counselling psychology research.

If you found this interview distressing, we would suggest contacting:

- The Samaritans on: 116 123
- The Family Lives helpline on: 0808 800 2222
- Your local GP
- Alternatively, online support, advice and tips are available on: www.parenting.co.uk

We hope you found the study interesting. If you have any other questions please do not hesitate to contact us at the following:

Researcher: Sophie Bollag – sophie.bollag@city.ac.uk
Supervisor: Dr Daphne Josselin – Daphne.Josselin@city.ac.uk

Ethics approval code: ETH1819-0120

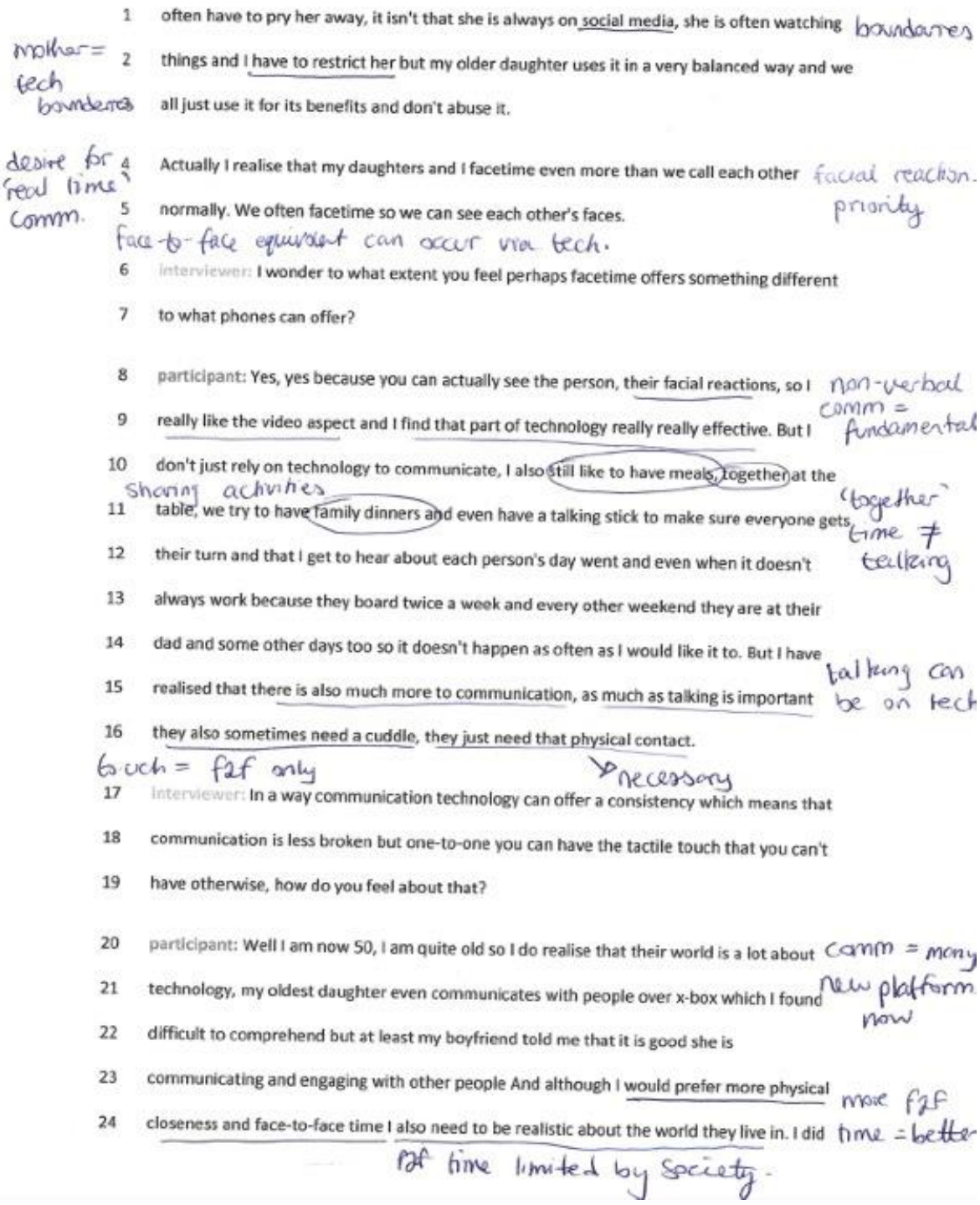
6.7 Appendix G: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

Prelude: Can you explain your current family set up (custody arrangement)? I am looking for a little bit of context to your current communication patterns and relationship with your children.

1. Can you tell me about your communication patterns with your adolescent children… both when you are with them and from afar?
2. How often would you say you communicate with your adolescent children?
   **prompt what happens when they are home and vice versa.
3. How would you describe your communication with your children?
4. In general, what sort of things do you find important to communicate to your children? / What do you find important for them to communicate to you?
5. Do you feel that your communication with your adolescent children has changed since they reached adolescence?
6. Thinking about your children being adolescents and your custody arrangements, what factors do you think most influence the way you currently communicate with your adolescent children?
7. For those with more than one adolescent child; are there currently differences between how you communicate with your adolescent children?
8. What does good communication with your children mean to you?
9. Can you explain what sort of things you mainly talk about with your adolescent children? If there are things that you are reluctant to share with them, what would those things be?
   9a) Are there things you are more comfortable talking to your children about on certain platforms or face to face?
10. When do you usually hear from your adolescent children?
    10b) How do you feel when you do / don't hear from them?
11. Do you feel that your communication with your children is ever impacted on by your communication with your ex-partner?
12. Do you feel that your relationship can improve through communicating differently with your children?
13. Do you see yourself communicating differently in the future? If so, how can do this most effectively?
14. Can you tell me about what forms of communication you perceive as being the best to bring about the most harmonious parent-adolescent relationship?

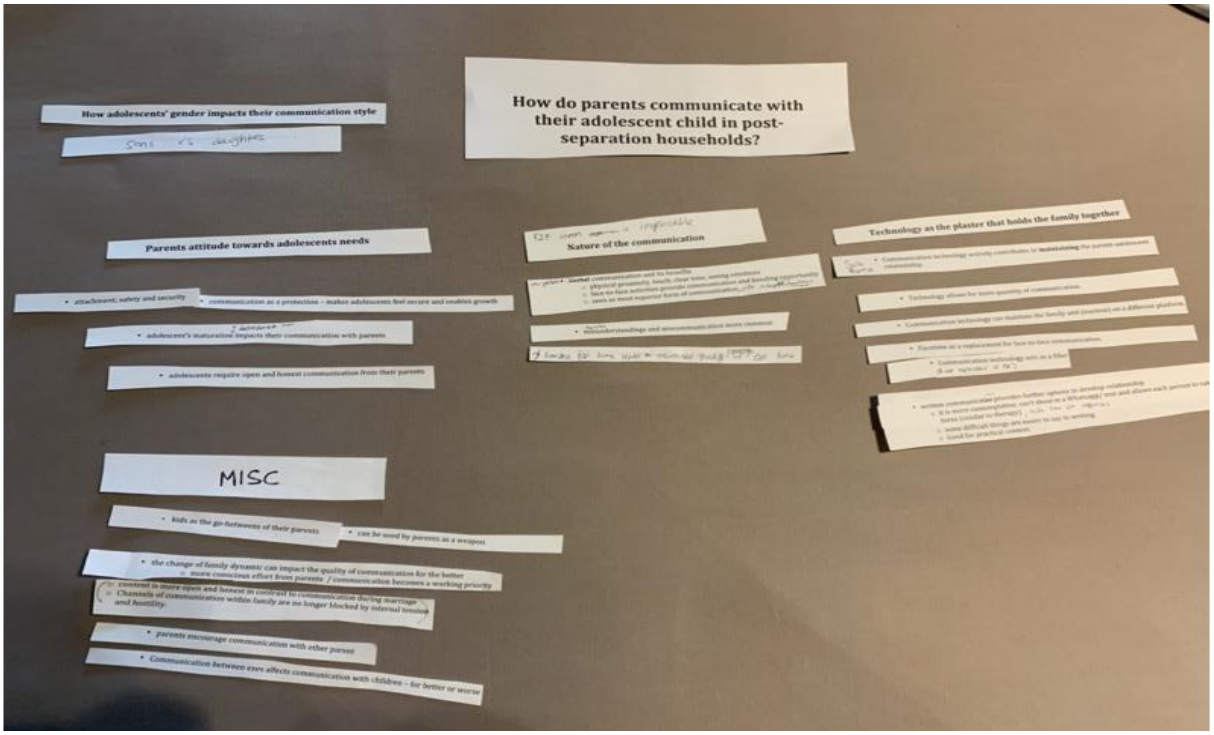
6.8. Appendix H: Sample of Initial Phase of Coding



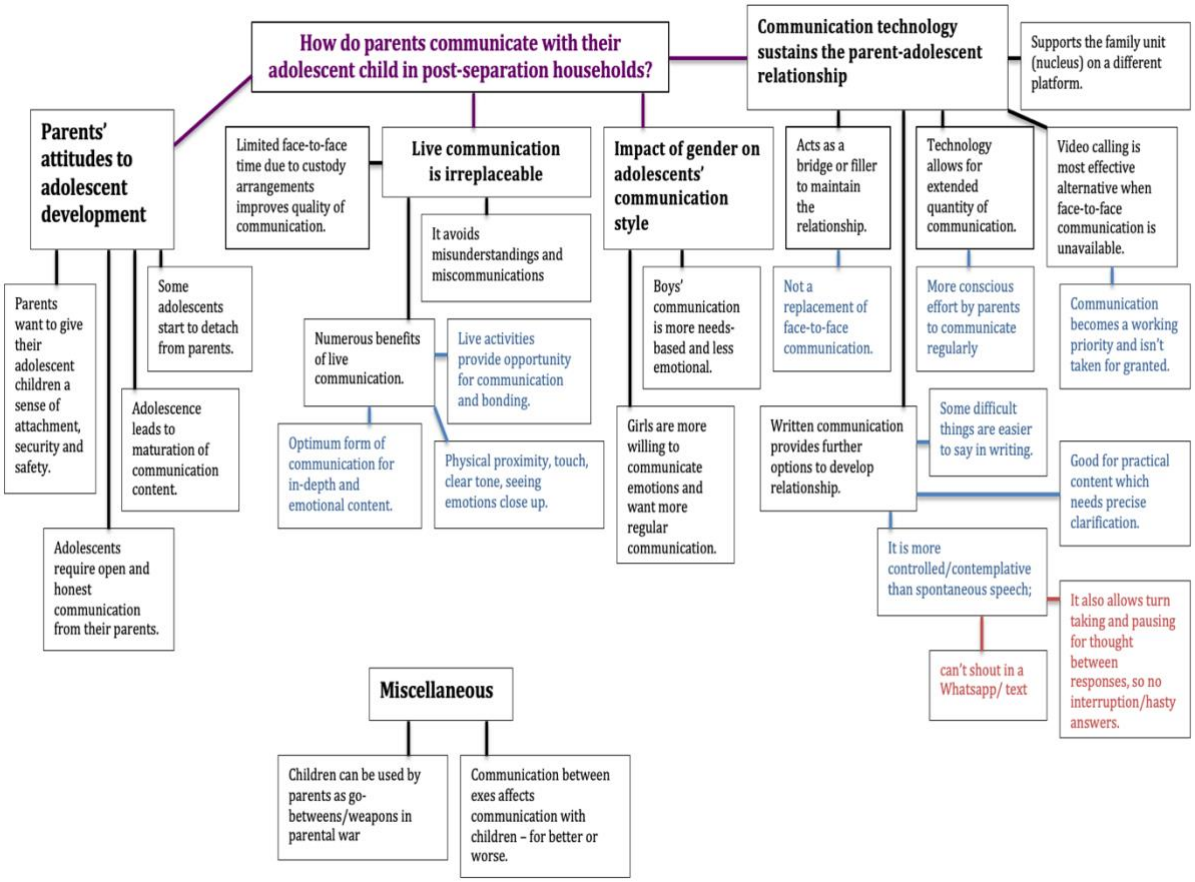
6.9. Appendix I: Example of Coding Table with Participant References

P	Code	Page/ line Ref.	Quote
P1	**Multiple Whatsapp chats**:	Pg 2 lines 1-3	I mean we have various whatsapp groups, so we've actually got a WhatsApp group for the four of us still. Okay, then we have one for the three of us and then they individually send me random weird individual messages.
P1	**Phone calls when apart**	Pg 2 lines 5-6	if I'm not around they are with him and we speak too.
P1	F2F more difficult	Pg 2 line 8	(when home) I talk to them if I can get the headphones out.
P1	**Sharing presence**	Pg 2 line 15	So actually, my house is quite a quiet house, just the three of us.
P1	**texting**	Pg 2 line 20	it tends to be much more by text rather than phone. Occasionally they'll call or I'll call them
P1	**Each parent has quality time**	Pg 2 Line 22- pg3 l.1 Pg 3 lines 2-3	usually the weekends that they are with their dad I may not speak to them um unless there's an issue. I don't speak to them that much because they don't need to speak to me.
P1	**Good communication = good relationships**	Pg 3 line 5-7	(response to describing comm with kids)
P1	**Technology and divorce = more frequent communication**	Pg 3 line 6-9	we probably have a better relationship and better communication than most families… Actually, I communicate with my kids far more than my parents ever did with me but that just maybe the times we are living in.
P1	**Whatsapp when apart**	Pg 3 lines 13-14	(asked what platforms used) So mainly whatsapp... and sometimes actually on the phone talking and then the occasional normal text message. That's probably it.
P1	**When together = talk F2F**	Pg 3 line 16	(asked about at home) We talk face-to-face. Yeah shouting Upstairs and Downstairs.
P1	**adolescence = change in comm.**	Pg 3 line 18-20	(asked if comm. Changed over time) I think part of that is that they're getting older and communication does change but I think part of that is our family situation....
P1	**Conscious decision to communicate more**	Pg 3 lines 19-22	(asked if comm. Changed over time) but I think part of that is our family situation.... That for me, I was incredibly conscious of, that they are now from a split family and that it can really affect them. And so we're really actually quite an open family.

6.10 Appendix J: Examples of Initial Code Groups



6.11. Appendix K: Example of Initial Map of Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes



6.12. Appendix L: Final Map of Themes and Sub-Themes