The Parent-Child Relationship when Parents' Contact with their Children is Supervised

Daniel Borg

A thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of East London for the Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology

May, 2012

Student declaration

University of East London
School of Psychology
Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology

Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted for any degree and it is not being concurrently submitted for any degree.

This research is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology.

This thesis is the result of my own work and investigation, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by explicit references in the text. A full reference list is appended.

I hereby give my permission for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loans, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Name: ....

Signature: .... Date: ....

Abstract

This study focuses on the personal experiences and perceptions of non-custodial parents' relationship with their children where the only contact is supervised. It explores the subjective experience, meanings and processes that non-custodial parents construct when faced with these circumstances. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with nine supervised non-custodial parents in Malta. Using a methodological approach based on constructivist grounded theory, four main categories have emerged from these parents' discourse which capture how and where perceptions of the non-custodial parent have changed. These relate to external influences, on being a parent, the parent and child relationship and concerns about future relating. The key issues that emerge show that supervised parents are very sensitive to external influences around them. These are often embodied in the presence of the supervisor who thus becomes part of a triadic relationship, with trust being a key determinant of how this relationship develops. Indirectly, supervised parents provide a profound definition of what being a parent is all about for them by also describing those factors which they consider important for a relationship with their child to develop. From this explorative study, a number of potential areas for related research emerge. Finally, and at a practical level, the study also serves to highlight those areas where improvement in supervision services is recommended for a better relationship between the parent and the child to be fostered.

This thesis is dedicated to my loving family.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my special gratitude to the following individuals:

Dr. Mary Robinson

Dr. Tina Rae

My brother Reuben

My friends and colleagues

Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Appendices

Contents of cd

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The main purpose of this qualitative study is to understand in detail the personal experiences and perceptions held by non-custodial parents on their relationship with their children where the only contact is supervised. Supervised contact is a result of a serious problem in the natural family setting of the child which necessitates separation for the protection of the child. Even if supervised visitation aims to continue the relationship between the child and the non-custodial parent in a safe environment, the nature of supervision means that the child's development with the parent has been interrupted and is limited. This break in the natural relationship has several impacts on both the child and his parent.

The perspective of the supervised non-custodial parent on the development of the relationship with her/his child is the main focus of this study. Few studies on supervised visitation have focused on the parent-child relationship as perceived by these affected parents. In fact, Birnbaum and Alaggia (2006) highlight the need for further research in this area which focuses particularly on children's and parents' experiences. The available literature does not extend sufficiently and may lack firm conclusions and guidance to practicing professionals. Moreover, since different regulations, institutional set-ups and social cultures vary across countries, it may not be straightforward to draw heavily from research done in particular settings.

It is hoped that this research will shed more light on the experiences of these parents, especially in the Maltese context which has not been explored before using the applied approach. In this way, commonalities or differences with other research abroad could be compared such that best practices can be crystallised and developed. In view of this, a complementary and parallel purpose of this research is to be exploratory. According to Stebbins (2001, p. 6), "the main goal of exploratory research is the production of inductively derived generalisations about the group, process, activity, or situation under study". As Burck (2005) states, an explorative study generates ideas

which can then merit further examination. Thus this study is also a step in that direction, and could therefore lead to further research on the topic.

1.2 Supervised visitation in the local context[1]

The Foundation for Social Welfare Services (Malta) provides a wide spectrum of social welfare services in Malta and operates through a multidisciplinary team of professionals most of which specialised in social service provision such as social workers. This public organization consists of three national agencies:

- *Agenzija Appogg* provides social welfare services to children, family and the wider community. Its services mainly cover cases involving child abuse, domestic violence, youth with behavioural difficulties and children in care.
- *Agenzija Sedqa* provides services to persons experiencing addiction problems.
- *Agenzija Access* covers services related to providing social work and support to persons with disability and their care givers.

The so-called 'Supervised Access Visits Service' (SAVs) is provided by *Agenzija Appo*gg and falls under the 'Children and Young Persons' Support Services' which includes other services like the 'Looked After Children's Service'. The SAVs service is provided in cases where there are care proceedings or serious breakdown in parents' relationships (Appogg, n.d.). Children are usually referred to the service either through a care order or a court order (Laws of Malta, 1870, 1980). It is the aim of the service to support and provide children with a safe, beneficial, child-focused supervised contact with the non-custodial parent/s, and other family members. The non-custodial parents could be both parents - in cases of children in foster or residential care - or otherwise it could be one of the parents in cases of serious marital breakdown. It is important to note that this is the only service of its kind in Malta and mostly involves one-on-one visits with a

---

[1] It is recommended that the reader refers first to Appendix 1 to understand better the context of supervised visits and what the procedures are prior to supervised contact being put in place. This is also intended to sensitise the reader to some of the multiple and complex issues that these parents and children pass through. This part will particularly cover the Maltese context which is the location of this study.

supervisor continuously present. Sessions are coordinated by the Social Worker on the case (FSWS, 2011).

Since its inception, the supervised access visits service has experienced a sharp increase in referrals. In 2009, Agenzija Appogg had 108 open cases, 36 of which were opened during the same year. According to the report by the Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS, 2011), cases are opened depending on the available resources.

Visiting parents can only avail themselves of a maximum of four hours of contact time per week. The Children and Young Persons' Advisory Board can however recommend and pay for hours exceeding those stipulated by the policy (as cited in FSWS, 2011) when it feels strongly that children would benefit from more contact.

A voluntary service is also provided prior to the issuing of a care order in cases where there are allegations and when parents feel the need for someone to witness their interactions with their children usually in custody dispute cases. The service also caters for parents who need to meet in a safe and neutral place hence permitting the session to be monitored from time to time but not continuously. This is usually needed in cases of parental disputes. Moreover, this voluntary service is also offered to parents who have not seen their children for a while and fear their children's reactions. These voluntary cases however have been excluded from the focus of this research and only those cases where there was concern about the child's welfare were studied.

Sessions are usually scheduled on a fixed day and time and are not necessarily confined to Appogg premises, although many of them are. Replacements are usually given for cancelled sessions whenever possible (FSWS, 2011). Following every supervised access visit a report has to be filled by the supervisor and forwarded to the professionals taking care of the service. The format of the report is standard and mainly requires an assessment about the transition, and about how parents and children relate during this time.

1.3 Researcher's position and rationale

The author has a long and direct experience as a 'supervisor on access visits' and is knowledgeable about the local services provided. The author has witnessed various situations where non-custodial parents struggled to maintain a relationship with their children. The stress involved in these supervised cases is high and most often appears detrimental to both parent and child. The initial circumstances which lead to such situations stem before the actual supervised visits, and are clearly conducive to further problems. However non-custodial parents often face a much different reality when they see their child under supervision and may find it difficult to relate to the supervision environment itself which can become another problem in itself. With the benefit of this background, this research seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of these parents' perception of the continuity of their relationship with their children through the use of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2001, 2006). By focusing on supervised parents, it tries to capture the perspective and understanding of this relationship with those having direct experience. The insider or 'emic' perspectives of those affected are important when considering something so personal and subjective as the experience and meaning of a relationship.

The researcher's position was guided mainly by a social constructionist epistemology (Charmaz, 2001; Crotty, 2005) and a critical realist ontological framework (Snape & Spencer, 2003; Willig, 2008). The research process itself was informed by symbolic interactionism (Woods, 1992; Griffin, 2006) and systems theory (Dallos & Draper, 2003). Against this background, a reflexive stance was adopted in the study for the sake of trustworthiness. These issues will be further discussed in the Methodology chapter.

This study has two main aims. In part, it is intended to be explorative by covering several issues that arise during the research but which further elicit and require more research. It also aims to fill an apparent gap in the literature which deals with such cases by going into the detail of the communicated experiences and perceptions of the non-custodial parents and categorising them in a useful way. The outcomes of this

study will be presented in the Findings chapter, while the Discussion chapter will then highlight the main contributions to the field.

1.4 Research questions

In order to reach the purpose of the research, the following was the primary research questions set:

- What is the impact of supervised visitation on the non-custodial parent's perception of the relationship with his/her child?

This was further broken down into secondary questions to further guide the researcher in reaching the aim of the research:

- What changes are likely to occur in the non-custodial parent's perception of the relationship?
- What aspects of the relationship are perceived to continue? What helps continuity of the relationship?
- How do their perceptions of being a parent change?
- What helps parents maintain a positive relationship with their children?

These research questions were informed by the author's theoretical assumptions which further influenced the methodology used in the research.

1.5 Relevance to the educational and child psychology profession

Our learning in infancy and for a considerable period afterwards, takes place in a dependant relationship to another human being. The quality of this relationship is vitally important for our development, since it deeply influences the hopefulness required to remain curious and open to new experiences, and the capacity to perceive connections and to discover their meanings. (Salzberger-Wittenberg, Williams & Osborne, 1999, p. 160)

Being inspired by the quote above, the author firmly believes that the parent's feelings, experiences and perceptions in relation to the child and her/his environment are a key component of child development in itself. The child reacts to his parent's feelings and behaviour and in the process is also shaped by them (Pridham, Lutz, Anderson, Riesch & Becker, 2010).

The importance of the child's contact with her/his parents is supported by myriad psychological theories focusing on children's needs. It is recognised that close relationships and secure attachments to loving parents are the ideal context of development (Kraus & Pope 2009). Even when close relationships are perceived not to be present, parental contact is thought to be important for the child's knowledge of a family background and the seeking of identity (Andersson & Arvidsson, 2008).

Children who use supervised access are a potentially vulnerable group of children (Park, Peterson-Badali, and Jenkins, 1997) whose early experiences could have been traumatic (Johnston and Straus, 1999). It is therefore very likely that these children are referred by school administrators for follow up by educational and child Psychologists.

By better understanding supervised parents' perceptions of their parent-child relationship, Educational and Child Psychologists working in this field would in turn understand better the experiences of these children. Moreover, since the parents are often a direct link and a source of information to the children's wellbeing, understanding the experiences of these parents is especially relevant when considering that contact and consultation with these same parents could be problematic.

2. Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will review literature that deals with the parent-child relationship to explore the key issues arising when studying the impact of supervised contact visitations. In the review of literature, the researcher's objective was to identify major studies from peer-reviewed journals relevant for the purpose of this research. A number of key terms (in multiple forms of the same root/stem word) were used for this search as will be outlined below. All literature was searched in the period between September 2010 and March 2012.

Initially, studies on supervised visitation carried out in the last fifteen years (between 1997 and 2012) were sought. It was decided to focus on this period as the utility of older studies was questionable when considering that supervised visitation services in many countries have developed mainly over the last decade, as confirmed by Birnbaum and Alaggia (2006). The terms used for this part of the search revolved around the use of the word 'supervised' combined with either 'access', 'visitation' or 'contact'. This resulted in 103 studies retrieved using the following databases from EBSCOhost: PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, Family Studies Abstracts, Academic Search Complete, Index to Legal Periodicals and Books Full Text (H.W. Wilson). Studies focusing on other types of visitations (such as those in post-separation and divorce) excluding supervised ones were not included, thus leaving only 15 relevant studies (refer to Appendix 2 for a summary of these studies from peer-reviewed journals). A search for local studies on the topic was done at the Melitensia section in the library of the University of Malta. Only two studies of particular relevance were found using the search terms mentioned above.

Background reading on 'attachment' and 'internal working models' led the researcher to focus on parent representations. This was searched on EBSCOhost databases (PsycARTICLES and PsycINFO) using the term 'parenting representations' in peer-

reviewed journals from 2005 till present. This yielded 21 results which was narrowed down by choosing only those that made reference to behaviour – leaving only two. Another study was included which was found through background reading from Mayseless (2006).

Studies on the experiences of incarcerated parents was searched from EBSCOhost databases (PsycARTICLES and PsycINFO) using the terms 'Incarcerated parents' and 'contact' from peer-reviewed journals. The search, which was narrowed down by choosing only articles from 2000 onwards, produced 5 articles. Out of these, only those which specifically focused on incarcerated parents' perspectives and the parent-child relationship were chosen. A combination of other terms from 'incarcerated parents', 'visitation' and/or 'access' were then used to find more articles. However this increased the number of articles immensely. The references of the only relevant study found were used to find the other articles used here.

Other literature from books and journals was found using online databases such as the University of East London, University of Malta Library Catalogues, and EBSCOhost to search for articles through key words like attachment theory, parent-child relationship, and parent-child separation. Terms were used in various combinations to narrow the search. Most of this literature formed part of background reading.

2.2 Parent and child: the relationship

The relationship between a parent and her/his child is unique. At its most fundamental level, it is a biological link whereby the parent recognises the relationship to the child as being one of her/his own making whereby the child embodies part of her/his nature. The bonds that develop with the parent since the child is born are naturally intimate and complex such that the early phases of childhood can have a tremendous influence on the child's later development (Kraus & Pope, 2009). These early phases of the relationship between parent and child become so ingrained in the nature and mind

of the child that any kind of separation would impart a deeply felt sense of disruption of the existing continuity (Scott, 2011).

The consequences of the removal of a child from her/his parent have to be understood by first recognising the importance of the developed relationship between the two. In analysing this relationship, this review starts by recalling studies that emphasise that this relationship is not unidirectional or static, but one whereby the child also plays a role in shaping the interactions of his parent. The kind of relationship that evolves with the parent shapes the child's psycho-social development in its different dimensions (the social, cognitive, emotional, learning and long-term mental health outcomes) and will remain significant for the child throughout his/her life (Pridham, Lutz, Anderson, Riesch & Becker, 2010; Van Ijzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, and Sagi-Schwartz 2006). The child's development continuously affects the relationship between her/him and the parent.

Trommsdorff (2006) and Pridham et al. (2010) stress that the interactions between the parent and the child are the source of the individual development of the child. It is through these interactions that the relationship is developed and changed. These interactions are not only influenced by the parents' behaviour and goals but also by the child's activity. Thus there is this bi-directionality in the interaction of parents and children where children are not simply recipients of parenting activities and tasks, but they are also active participants in their relationships with their parents. Trinder (2009) emphasises that the child is attentive and reflective about what is happening.

This parent-child relationship cannot be seen in isolation but as part of multiple contexts. Bronfenbrenner (1999) portrays child development and parenting as taking place in an ecological context where the parent-child relationship is at the core of this setting (refer to Figure 1). Building on this model, Bornstein and Cheah (2006) explain that the parent-child relationship is embedded in a mesosystem of broader contexts that, at the closest level, includes the immediate family, neighbourhood, day-care and school, and peers. It also shapes and is shaped by another layer called exosystem - composed of factors such as the extended family or workplace – and further

surrounded by a macrosystem of values, law, social class, and culture that supports and encourages parenting cognitions and patterns of parent-child interaction. The authors see culture as playing a major role in shaping the ecology of parenting and childhood. Apart from playing an important part in the short- and long-term goals parents have for their children and the practices parents employ in attempting to meet those goals, culture is also seen as shaping and determining the immediate contexts experienced by children. This ecological contextual perspective helps us appreciate the complexity of the parent-child relationship and that it is not only determined by the parent and the child alone but by the wider influences.
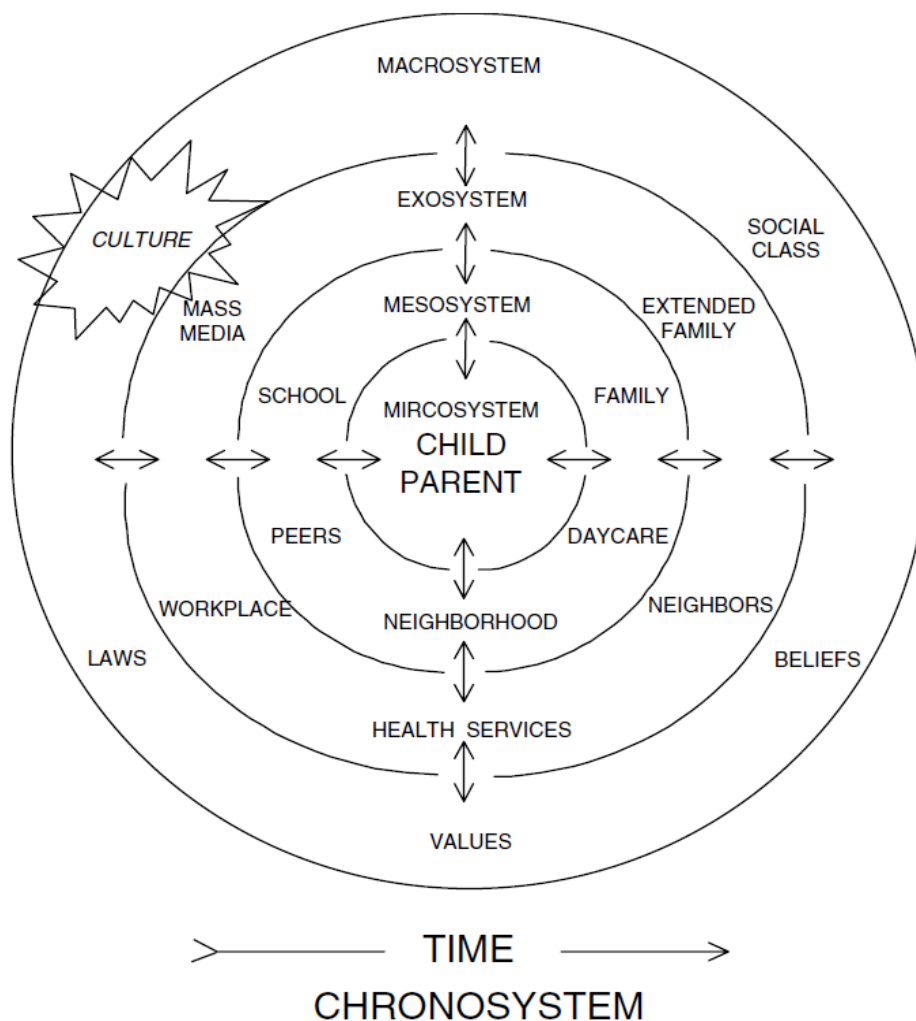
Figure 1: The contextual ecological view of development (Bornstein & Cheah, 2006, p.4)

2.3 Attachment theory

2.3.1 Attachment and caregiving

The parent-child relationship has certainly been the focus of a lot research. Bowlby (1973) - who is considered as one of the most influential in the development of attachment theory - discussed two reciprocal behavioural systems that work to facilitate the child's survival: attachment and caregiving (see also Mayseless, 2006). These two characteristics – attachment and caregiving – explain much of the interplay between parent and child.

One branch of this parent-child research that is fundamental to this study is associated with attachment. Attachment refers to the motivational system of the infant to maintain proximity to an attachment figure that ensures the child's protection (Bowlby, 1973). As the child develops and grows older, the nature of attachment starts to change to allow the child to bridge out to the world, and so does the nature of the relationship. During the infant's initial months of life, a secure attachment between the child and the caretaker provides the child with a safe environment where the child will be protected from harm and have his or her needs met (Kraus & Pope, 2009). As the child gets older, through a secure attachment s/he becomes able to regulate her/his emotional responses to the environment and to soothe herself/himself in response to emotionally charged situations (Sroufe, 1996, as cited in Kraus & Pope, 2009). Simultaneously, the child starts internalising the caregiver thus being able to evoke needed experience of the attachment figure in her/his absence. This then enables the toddler child to widen her/his exploratory behaviour and subsequently to form new relationships (Vetere & Dallos, 2008; Kraus & Pope 2009). Here, the need for physical proximity will then start to be replaced by psychological proximity (Fonagy & Target, 2003 as cited in Kraus & Pope, 2009). The latter effectively suggests that children separated from their parents at a later stage may not suffer so much the lack of physical proximity to their parents as much as the loss of psychological proximity.

Studies on attachment theory have flourished and there are now differing views relating to Bowlby's earlier notions of attachment theory. For instance, Ainsworth further developed attachment theory through her studies on attachment patterns (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Her studies highlight individual differences in attachment, and today there is an extensive body of research on this area. There have also been various criticisms of attachment theory by some specific disciplines. For instance, a number of psychoanalysts disagreed with certain concepts in Bowlby's theory (Bretherton, 1992), such as his notion of attachment as being an instinctual behavioural system which was seen as disputing the 'drive theory' in psychoanalysis. Yet attachment theory as conceptualized by Bowlby still remains a very relevant point of reference, including for the scope of this study where it was thought that it provided a sufficiently meaningful framework for the aims of this research.

2.3.2 Internal working models

The concept of internal working models is useful to link the interplay of attachment with caregiving. Bowlby (1969) used the term 'internal working models' to refer to the process whereby through repeated patterns of interactive experience children build up a set of models of the self and others. Apart from guiding a child's expectations about parental accessibility and responsiveness, these internal working models inform the child on whether relationships are likely to be secure or insecure. These working models also set the emotional tone of relationships and shape psychological experience often on an unconscious level (Bowlby, 1973; Kraus & Pope, 2009).

Similar to attachment, caregiving is also seen as governed by higher processes of integration and control (see Mayseless, 2006), and likewise can be characterised by internal working models. The term caregiving is used here to distinguish this form of attachment between parent and child from others that can also be constructed with other significant people in the child's life. Caregiving refers to the motivational system of the parents/caregivers to protect and support the child, while striking a balance with other personal goals (Mayseless, 2006; Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). In the course

of daily transactions, both caregivers and children construct internal working models of self and other in the attachment relationship (Bowlby, 1969). Thus the child's developing working models of self and attachment figure(s) mesh with the parents' internal working models of self and child (Bretherton, 1989). These working models serve to regulate, interpret, and predict the care-receiver as well as the caregiver's caregiving-related behaviours, thoughts, and feelings.

According to Mayseless (2006), the internal working models constructed through attachment and caregiving are based on actual experiences which are shaped by the joint interactions between the parent and the child. However, the process goes further than that. Since attachment and caregiving are behavioural systems, the internal working models of both caregiver and child can be considered to be flexible to some extent and can be updated by new experiences and self-reflections. Thus, these models are dynamic in the sense that they are shaped with how parents and children keep interacting together and, even more so, the attachment patterns that develop can be passed from one generation to another (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986, as cited in Kraus & Pope, 2009). Research has in fact found that parents' representations of their own childhood attachment experiences with caregivers may shape their mental models of the relationships with their own children (Slade, Aber, Belsky, & Phelps, 1999). This intergenerational effect can be quite important but for the scope of this study it was not researched further. Instead, parental representations (discussed in the next section) encompass these possible effects in a broader context.

2.3.3 Separation and the parent-child relationship

There are several different types of separation between parent and child, besides death or marriage separation - including divorce - when the parents do not continue to live together and consequently the child lives with only one parent. In certain cases, children end up depending upon custody and supervised contact arrangements to continue their relationship with their parents. There are then other cases where removal from an attachment figure is unavoidable if the child's well-being is to be

safeguarded. In such cases, supervised contact visitations can serve as a way to maintain the parent-child relationship for the benefits of both the child and her/his parent, especially when reunification is seen as a goal. The loss in the parent-child relationship due to separation affects both the child and the parent and thus this separate effect on each of them affects the future parent-child relationship. A short review of the key impacts of separation on each of them will serve to understand better how separation affects the future parent-child relationship.

2.3.3.1 Impact of separation on child

Attachment is disrupted when a child is removed from a parent or a family of origin. Separation is never painless, even for the child who might be detached from, or has a poor attachment to, the biological parents (Stahl, 1990, as cited in Bruno, 2006). Within the context of parental unavailability, separation is commonly experienced as significant rejection or loss and it could lead to potential problems for the child to adjust and attach to future caregivers (Bowlby, 1969, 1982 as cited in Scott, 2011). Similarly, Bowlby's (1969) Maternal Deprivation Hypothesis, which refers to children who had a relationship with their mother but who had lost or been removed from her, states that any separation during the critical stage of development will affect the child in later life. Scott (2011) states that much of the literature shows that disrupted attachment can have significant implications over the child's psychological wellbeing.

In child welfare cases, removal from home is commonly thought by professionals to be preferable for a child's social and emotional developmental outcomes, however literature on the matter is sometimes inconclusive (Scott, 2011). Even though the child might not show immediate reaction to the separation, the symptoms of early attachment loss and disturbance may resurface at a later developmental stage (Kraus & Pope, 2009). Changes brought about by separation can result in an improved living environment, however these changes still require the child to adapt to them (Emery, 1988). Referring to the psychological impact brought about by separation through divorce, Emery (1988) states that consideration must be on at least two levels:

adaptation to change that every child must go through and the long term adjustment. Similarly this can be applied to any long term separation that a child experiences from an attachment figure.

One would also need to consider what the implications this separation would have on the attachment figure given that the parent and child's internal working models are mutually shaped by their relationship. However, while literature on the impact of separation on children is abundant, few studies have focused on the impact separation has on parents, excluding those which have seen this in the context of divorce (see Kelly & Wallerstein, 1977; Manning, Stewart & Smock, 2003; Cashmore, Parkinson & Taylor, 2008; Trinder, 2008).

2.3.3.2 Impact of separation on parent

Built on his notion of caregiver's internal working models, Bowlby (1973, as cited in Hock & Lutz, 1998, p. 92) acknowledges that feelings of alarm and anxiety also result in adults during a period of separation from a child they are attached to. Hock and Lutz (1998) define separation anxiety in parents of young children as an unpleasant state that reflects concern and apprehension about leaving the child, and this may be evidenced by feelings of guilt, worry, or sadness that accompany separation experiences. These might be the same feelings evoked when children are removed from home or when contact is restricted.

2.4 Parental representations

Parents' thoughts and feelings play a vital role in shaping the developing parent-child relationship and this influence on actual behaviour has long been acknowledged (Steinberg & Pianta, 2006). According to Mayseless (2006), parental representations can be defined as the parents' views, emotions, and internal world regarding their parenting. Researchers largely agree that parental representation involves both the

cognitive (how parents reason about and explain relationships with their children) and the emotional aspects of their reasoning (Sokolowski, Hans, Bernstein & Cox, 2007).

According to Bornstein and Cheah (2006) there is a lot of variation in parental beliefs and behaviours towards their children and their origin are multivariate and extremely complex. They include "biological processes and personality attributes of parents; actual or perceived characteristics of children; and contextual influences, including social situational factors, family background, socioeconomic status, and culture" (p. 6). They further state that some parenting cognitions and activities initially arise due to biological processes associated with pregnancy and parturitions. Others reflect the transient feelings and emotions the parents pass through as well as personality traits. The same authors also emphasise the influence of child characteristics on parenting behaviours and beliefs.

Research confirms that indeed parenting representations influence parental behaviour towards the child, and can also change and evolve by time, affected also by the actual relationship formed between the parent and the child. For instance, in their study with women (N=51) attending a Family Guidance Clinic, Fave-Viziello, Antonioli, Cocci, and Invernizzi (1993) found that representations of the child and of the self (as mother) change from pregnancy to postpartum period. The authors attribute this change to the real interactions linked to the need to provide care for the child. Research has also found that even prenatal representations influence postnatal parenting behaviour thus suggesting that internal representations also serve to guide behaviour throughout development. For example, Dayton, Levendosky, Davidson and Bogat (2010) examined the relationship between a mother's prenatal representations of her child and her future parenting behaviour with her child of one year of age (N=164) through semi-structured interviews and observations. Mothers' representations were found to be significantly related to parenting behaviour at one year postpartum. Interestingly, the study controlled for a variable of exposure to intimate partner violence and no difference was found between abused and non-abused women in their parental representations. However, as acknowledged by the researchers, the exposure to intimate partner violence could be less important in predicting parenting outcomes

than are subsequent trauma symptoms that may develop. The researchers conclude that internal representations elicited in the prenatal phase of the research impact on the mother's subsequent behaviour towards her child. However, the study falls short from recognising the influence that the child might have later on the relationship, especially when considering that the child of one year has little control or intentions over what happens in the relationship (Berk, 2006).

Further to the study by Dayton et al. (2010), the findings of the study by Sokolowski, Hans, Bernstein and Cox (2007) actually show that conflicts with close relationships (e.g. with child's father or grandmother) can have an impact on the parents' representations of the child. Relational conflict was related to different kinds of maternal representations depending on the relationship, whether it is with the child's father or grandmother. Conflict with the father was found to lead to distorted representations sometimes characterised by over-involvement with the child, while conflict with the grandmothers was found to lead to disengaged representations characterised by a detached, unemotional interactions of mothers with their children. It was thus hypothesised by the authors that worries about conflict with close relatives might interfere with the mothers' relationship with their children, especially if conflict was about the children. According to the authors, the results also suggest that mothers who think of their children in distant and negative ways act on their representations when they interact with their children. This research suggests that a shift in parental representations and consequently parental behaviour is highly likely in supervised contact cases especially where relational conflicts exist. However, one must acknowledge that differently from the participants in this study, visiting parents in supervised contact cases can only relate through the limited time available, and thus this could impact on their thinking about the children, especially as visiting is a choice they make.

2.5 Outcomes of supervised visitations

Few studies have examined the longitudinal associations between supervised visitation and outcomes for children and families. Even if most studies seem to suggest that children benefit from frequent and consistent supervised visitation (Ansay & Perkins, 2001; Cantos, Gries, & Slis, 1997; Leathers, 2002; McWey & Mullis, 2004), literature about the outcomes of supervised visitation leads us to different conclusions especially due to the variability in service delivery across programmes (Saini, Van Wert & Gofman, 2012) . Moreover, one must distinguish between child welfare and custody disputes cases due to the variability that exist between these cases. While in child welfare cases children are usually removed from home, in custody dispute cases, the child usually remains with the parent who has custody. Thus, the relationship between supervised visitation and outcome for children is not straightforward and one must be very cautious when interpreting research findings.

2.5.1 Outcomes of supervised visitations in child welfare cases

Many studies have highlighted the beneficial effects of children's contact with their biological parents while they are in out-of-home care (see Benedict & White, 1991; Milner, 1987; Oyserman & Benbenishty, 1992). In her review of research findings as part of her report for developing supervised child contact facilities in Coventry, Learner (2004) points out that contact may make a positive contribution to placement stability with lower levels of fostering breakdown, and that children benefit from returning home if they experienced positive contact while looked after. She further adds that erosion of contact may leave children and young people in long term care and decrease the possibility of supportive relationships with family in the future.

The study by McWey & Mullis (2004) about the quality of attachment of 123 children in foster care receiving supervised visitation with their biological parents found that in cases where reunification was a goal, young children who had more consistent and frequent contact with their biological parents showed more secure attachments and

better adjustment than those who did not. Other studies have shown that lack of regular physical contact with biological parents could disrupt the parent-child attachment and negatively affect the emotional development and well-being of children in foster care (see Grigsby, 1994; Hess, 1982; Simms & Bolden, 1991). However, according to McWey & Mullis (2004), despite the accumulation of studies showing positive outcomes of visitation for children in foster care, the findings are not always consistent. For example, Leathers (2003), whose results seem to show otherwise, also adds that one must be cautious when reporting such studies as many of them only report bivariate analyses, thus excluding other factors which might be responsible for the correlations reported. For instance, children who are visited more often might have an already better established relationship with their parents. Furthermore, many of them use a lot of exclusion criteria thus making the study less generalizable.

It is not always the case that visitations with biological parents have beneficial effects on children in the long run, especially when reunification is not a goal. For instance, some researchers reported visitation having negative effects on the adjustment of children who had been in care for several years (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978 as cited in McWey & Mullis, 2004; Leathers, 2003). In her research on children's conflicting allegiances to foster families and biological parents, Leathers (2003) found that some children in foster care had difficulties with adjustment, and exhibited externalising behaviours (such as destructiveness, stealing, swearing, aggression and disobedience) in relation to visitation. This was especially so for children who had strong relationships with both their biological parents and foster parents thus experiencing greater loyalty conflicts. A 'weak correlation' was also found between loyalty conflict and allegiance to the biological parent. She concluded that the results were consistent with similar studies who failed to find a connection between parental visitation and fostered children's positive adaptation. However one main limitation of the study is that the 'foster family allegiance' and 'loyalty conflict' constructs were measured only through interviews with foster parents and case workers, without including children and biological parents' accounts.

2.5.2 Outcomes of supervised visitations in custody disputes cases

Children involved in high conflict custody and visitation disputes are identified as being the most "at risk" and psychologically vulnerable group of children (Birnbaum & Alaggia, 2006; Jenkins, Park & Peterson-Badali, 1997). Research with children using supervised visitation services shows that these children show higher levels of psychological distress and also internalising and externalising behavioural difficulties (Jenkins, Park, & Peterson-Badali, 1997; Johnston & Straus, 1999; Saini, Van Wert and Gofman, 2012). Other research indicates many psychosocial difficulties, including the likeliness of hypervigilence, distrust, poor reality appraisal and a preoccupation with control and safety (Johnston & Straus, 1999). However it is not clear what influence supervised visitation plays in all of this as these symptoms could be the resultant effect of the conflict between the parents.

Research with parents using supervised visitation shows a perceived improvement in their parenting skills (Pearson & Thoennes, 2000). Moreover, another study showed that there was also an increase in participation, frequency and consistency of visits by visiting parents over a six month period with a significant decrease in interparental conflict (Flory, Dunn, Berg-Weger & Milstead, 2001). However other research finds no evidence for a decrease in parental hostility (Jenkins, Park, & Peterson-Badali, 1997)

The implications of a child's removal of contact from an attachment figure are never straightforward and one needs to appreciate the complexity that every case brings with it. Even if assessment prior to removal can show that this would be more beneficial, one can never be sure what the real impact will be because this depends on various factors. The way the parent (or attachment figure) will experience separation might influence the future contact and relationship with the child. Therefore one cannot look at the outcome of the maintained contact visits without considering the experience that this situation imposes on parents.

2.6 Difficulties in relating brought about by supervised visitation

The nature of contact experienced by the non-custodial parent necessarily changes upon separation. As explained above, supervised visitation ensures that contact between parent and child is maintained. However, there are several factors that come into play as a result. One factor that surely changes is the lack of continuous access to the child or the parent as the contact is timed and limited. It is no longer natural or unrestricted like in a family environment. Secondly, this contact is supervised. This imposes constraints on the parent and thus the way parents experience supervised visitations is important.

Referring to the non-custodial father's relationship with their children in cases where parents have separated, Seagull and Seagull (1977) state that the parent may experience negative feelings at just the moment when he should ideally give the full attention to the children. Even though this may not be recognised as such, just being with the children at this time can remind the parent of the losses s/he has sustained. It can therefore happen that the parents become emotionally detached thus not being sensitive to their children's emotional and psychological needs (Seagull & Seagull, 1977). This detachment can also happen to parents whose children have been removed. Burgheim and Dalmar (2002), state that little recognition is paid to the grief suffered by these parents. The feelings experienced by any grieving person are complex and this is particularly so for these parents according to these two authors. They add that even though there might have been abuse, this does not mean that they do not love their child. The ability of the non-custodial parents to work through their grief is a major factor in the children being able to express and deal with their move to a different home and the loss and grief that this entails for them (Burgheim & Dalmar, 2002).

A basic need for anyone who is grieving a loss is to have someone who is willing to enter into how the experience is for them (Burgheim & Dalmar, 2002). Often, the only support available would be either the social worker or the supervisor, who are both employees of the same organisation which is seen by these parents to have

contributed to bringing this situation about. However, according to James and Gibson (1991), supervised parents' feelings can range from relief that a neutral third party will document their ability to have positive relationships with their children, to feelings of shame or rage at having supervision required. This is corroborated by a study carried out in Malta by Sciberras (1998) on supervised access visits, whereby visiting parents reported frustration at being limited by the supervised session.

According to Seagull and Seagull (1977), saying "hello" and saying "goodbye" are two of the most difficult parts of any visit with a non-custodial parent. This is in accordance with Sciberras (1998) who, working in the local context in Malta, found that one of the most difficult moments during the 'supervised access visit' was the handing over during the beginning and end of the session. Seagull and Seagull (1977) add that the transition can be very stressful and children may show signs of emotional disturbance both before and after parental separation. In fact, contact with an absent parent can activate a child's attachment system thus leading to an increase in children's problematic behaviour such as clinging, whining and acting out (Poehlmann, 2005a). It often happens, as was found in research with incarcerated mothers, that this behaviour leads the custodial caregivers to restrict or control children's contact with their non-custodial parents (Poehlmann, 2005b).

In custody disputes cases, confrontations are sometimes used by parents to exert control over the relationship. In the study carried out by Sciberras (1998), supervisors on access visits stated that it was not uncommon for parents to denigrate the other parent in front of the children. According to Lund (1995) there are often charges of abuse by one side and counter charges of parental alienation by the other side. Trinder's study (2008), which looked into how mothers influence the father's involvement and the father-child relationship in a post separation situation, concluded that both parents exert a continual, bidirectional, and reciprocal influence on each other. Therefore this is something which is co-constructed by both parties. This can however put undue pressure over the parent-child relationship, especially if it impacts on the communication between the non-custodial parents and their children. Seagull and Seagull (1997) find that in cases of marital conflict, children might feel torn

between the parents in a very direct way. This is especially so if children feel forced to choose between the parents, which according to the same authors is a guarantee of destructive feelings. They add that children should not be afraid to express how they feel about either parent, as this would result in feelings of mistrust and can impact on the communication between the parent and the child.

According to Sciberras (1998) supervisors on access visits thought it not uncommon for communication difficulties to result between the non-custodial parent and his/her children. In most cases however, even if there was limited communication, the children still looked forward to meeting their parent and also gave indication that they want more contact with them. There were only few cases where children refused to see the non-custodial parent at all. However, since relationships need what might be thought of as 'quality time' to grow and develop, the lack of interaction can have an adverse effect. Relationships are limited when there is little time to communicate. Several studies confirm this (Buttigieg, 2005; Trinder, 2009; Cashmore, Parkinson & Taylor, 2008).

It also happens that sometimes the non-custodial parent doesn't have the necessary skills to relate properly with the children (Seagull & Seagull, 1977). Or else the emotional impact of a placement decision might negatively influence the parent's self-efficacy (Ansay & Perkins, 2001), thus making her/him feel deskilled and unable to scaffold new learning experiences for the child. For children it is also important that parents use the time to focus on parenting and make the effort to keep the relationship alive (Trinder, 2009). According to Cashmore, Parkinson and Taylor (2008), closer relationships and more authoritative parenting by non-resident parents have been found to be associated with better medium- and long-term outcomes for children. From the author's experience, it sometimes happens that non-custodial parents find it difficult to relate appropriately to their children. The circumstances sometimes do not permit the parent to adopt an authoritative parenting role, and leave this role to the custodial parent or the other care-givers. This results in lack of boundaries sometimes between the child and the parent which may further

complicate the relationship between the parents and the child and their future sessions together.

2.7 Parents' views in the context of supervised visitation

Research with supervised parents has focused on different aspects of their views in the context of supervised visitation. One such study, particularly relevant for this research because it has been carried out locally in Malta, attempts to capture the experience of biological parents whose children were fostered. In her research, Buttigieg (2005) carried out six in-depth interviews with mixed gendered parents of fostered children. The removal of children from their home was reported to be a difficult experience for these parents with associated negative feelings. Participants reported feeling they have failed as parents with associated guilty feelings that their children are living with another family. Another theme that emerged related to parental involvement, with participants reporting feeling left out and not informed about their children. Parents thought that the focus of professionals revolved more around the child and the foster family and less importance was given to them. With regards to their relationship with their children, parents found visitations to be of utmost importance to keep ties with their children. In fact, parents longed for more contact with their children and showed the wish to contribute to the child's wellbeing to fulfil their role as parents. They wanted to be more involved in their children's life.

The study by Pearson and Thoennes (2000) looked into the experience of both custodial (N=114) and visiting parents (N=87) with supervised visitation services after leaving the programme. The findings show that around a quarter of visiting parents reported that during the visitation programme they wanted more contact with their children, however they were unable to increase their contact time due to personal financial restrictions and also shortage in availability of supervisors. Another thing that came out was that while most custodial and visiting parents felt that they were treated with respect by supervisors, around a quarter of the interviewed visiting parents thought that supervisors were not neutral. They were also annoyed with programme

rules which were thought to be too strict and felt that they and their children were not comfortable during visits. Moreover, visiting parents were more critical of the legal system than of supervised visitation. These parents wanted the visitation services to communicate more with the courts so that factual information and recommendations based on the observations could be passed on. The need for more and better communication could also be seen in parents' satisfaction with receiving helpful feedback during the programme. Participants were chosen from four visiting sites in the United States however there is no explanation of how and why these sites were chosen which could lead to selection bias in the results. Furthermore, no comparison group was used for this study to control for certain characteristics.

Jenkins et al. (1997) also looked into the reactions of family members to supervised visitation services. Custodial and non-custodial parents (N=121), were interviewed about their satisfaction with supervised visitation, with a slight oversampling of custodial parents possibly impacting on results. A subsample was also interviewed about family relationships and children's wellbeing at Time 1 and after 5 months. Custodial parents (90%) reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction than non-custodial parents (70%) with supervised access. Satisfaction seemed to be related to staff neutrality, safety for children and safety for themselves. Non-custodial parents were dissatisfied with being restricted to the site for visits, although this was viewed favourably by custodial parents. When checking whether supervised access reduced feelings of anger and hostility between custodial and non-custodial parents, results showed that it did not improve attitudes towards one another and no evidence of reduced disturbance in other aspects of family relationships. Results show that attitudes, mood and behaviours of parents and children tended to remain stable over time. However as acknowledged by the authors, the measures used could have failed to identify changes in attitude. Flory et al. (2001) show that during a 6 month period, frequency and consistency of noncustodial parents' access to children dramatically increased. Contrary to the findings by Jenkins et al. (1997) inter-parental conflict was found to have decreased significantly. However the sample used by Flory et al. (2001) also included parents from custody exchange services which only provide supervision

when handing over the child from one parent to the other as a means to lessen conflict in front of the child.

The study by Dunn, Flory, and Berg-Weger (2004) also looked at non-custodial and custodial parents' perceptions about their children's behaviour and overall adjustment related with supervised visits. Initially, there was a significant difference between custodial and non-custodial parents' perceptions about the children's overall adjustment, with non-custodial parents perceiving children to be better adjusted and showing less externalising behaviour than their custodial counterparts. However, during the six month duration of this study, non-custodial parents' perceptions became more congruent with those of custodial parents'. One explanation put forward by the researchers for this result was that more frequent and consistent contact gives the non-custodial parent a better opportunity to form an accurate understanding of their children and their behavioural responses thus preparing them to handle child-rearing more effectively. Another explanation could be that increased contact encourages children to build higher levels of trust and confidence with their non-custodial parents. They state that the parent-child relationship therefore becomes more secure thus giving children the opportunity to show more typical childhood behaviours that were previously supressed during the limited contact.

2.8 Incarcerated parents' views of supervised visitation

Other studies which can provide some useful information about this experience as seen from the parents' perspective is research with incarcerated parents. Similarly to the nature of this research, most children of incarcerated parents experience disruptions in family relationships due to separations and changes in living arrangements (e.g., Poehlmann, 2005a). However, one must highlight that the nature of experience for incarcerated parents can be very different from that experienced by supervised parents like the ones in this study.

While being a painful experience, contact was considered by incarcerated mothers to be very important for the continuation of the relationship as was found in a study carried out by Snyder, Carlo and Mullins (2001). In this study, the researchers focused on the impact that children's visitation programmes and parenting classes can have on their relationships with their children. Part of the study included interviewing the female prisoners participating in the visitation programme (N=31) and a comparison group of women in a wait-list control (N=27) to gain their perceptions of their relationships with their children. A limitation of this study is that in many chi-squared tests the significance fell between an alpha level of 0.05 and 0.10 and was still purported as significant. Their findings show that many of the interviewed mothers highlighted the importance of maintaining contact with their children. Through the visitation programmes, mothers and children were more likely to keep in contact through other means (such as letter and telephone conversations), when compared with those who did not participate in the programme. Thus visitation enabled more frequent communication between mothers and their children, and mothers thought this enabled them to have a better decision making role about their children. In their communication with their children, the mothers spoke of everyday topics, and they thought that through the conversations they were able to provide love and reassurance. Other themes that emerged through the interviews with these mothers were fear and concerns about re-building their relationships with their children, about their children being mistreated, and about disruptions in living arrangement for their children. The authors conclude that greater contact and communication between mothers and their children might produce more positive perspectives of their relationships.

Apart from reporting more positive feelings about their children (as in Snyder et al., 2001), research by Tuerk and Loper (2006) also shows that higher levels of contact between incarcerated mothers and their children through letters, phone calls and visitations resulted in reduced parenting stress related to attachment, parental competence, and visitation. This research has however failed to look into other causal factors leading to parental stress and only relies on self-reports by the inmates to measure the parenting stress as acknowledged by the authors.

Another research found that lack of contact is also associated with incarcerated mothers experiencing negative feelings. In a study with incarcerated mothers (N=98), Poehlmann (2005b) researched perceived links between the mothers' experiences of separation from children and their feelings of depression. The research, which had a lot of exclusionary criteria for choosing participants, has found that less frequent face-to-face contact with children during incarceration was associated with mother's symptoms of depression. However additional factors which might have contributed to the feelings of depression were not accounted for. From the qualitative analysis it emerged that women found the initial separation from their children intensely distressing. Similarly to what was found by Snyder et al. (2001) mothers reported that they longed for physical contact with their children such as touching and hugging them. They also missed ways of connecting which are not possible via telephone and letters such as witnessing their children's developmental accomplishments and providing them with direct physical care. The quality of mother-caregiver relationship was found to contribute to frequency of contact between mothers and children during maternal incarceration. It was found that when the mother-caregiver relationship was characterised by conflict and lack of warmth, children were less likely to visit their mothers and talk to them on the telephone. Poehlmann (2005b) concluded that visits contributed to the mother's emotional well-being. It may be assumed that this augurs well to future contact with their children.

2.9 The children in supervised visitation

Research about children in supervised visits is scarce and mostly taken either from other people's views (such as parents or supervisors), or else indirectly through the use of behavioural checklists and other clinically assessed ways. It is the opinion of the author that children's experiences of supervised visitation impacts immensely on the parent-child relationship, especially if it impacts their behaviour.

In the second part of their study, Jenkins et al. (1997) evaluated the perspectives of children in custody dispute cases about their experience of supervised access. Through the use of open ended questions 29 children were interviewed among other things about their experience at the visiting centre, and their understanding of various aspects related with supervised contact. The findings show that a significant number of children (58%) could not give any account of why they came to the centre, while 17% had minimal understanding. Older children (7 years and older) were more likely to show an accurate understanding of the reasons why they had supervised access visits. Children also showed a limited understanding of the function of the staff at the centre. Most children did have awareness that the staff were there to watch them, but they had not specifically related this to their parent needing supervision in his or her interaction with them. Sometimes the awareness of being watched was a source of anxiety though sometimes this was also felt as protection for them. While most children were happy with the arrangement of going to the centre, some children showed dissatisfaction with the restrictions in place which reduced the activities they were allowed to do especially since most of them also complained about not having age appropriate toys. Children were also annoyed with some of the centre's rules such as being watched and supervised and not being able to leave the premises. These findings are quite worrying when considering the trauma experienced by some children. However the interviews were carried out at the centre right after a visit with the non-custodial parent and, considering that such period is usually emotional, the timing could have possibly influenced the children's responses.

Johnston and Straus (1999) looked into the range of trauma experienced by children in supervised visitation due to custody disputes between parents. Through the use of projective measures, such as the Rorschach Personality testing, and clinical observations, they described common themes in the development of the personalities of these children aged 7 to 13 years (N=48). Comparisons were drawn between the results of this population, and a sample of 'traumatised' children aged 7 to 17 years (N=63) who had experienced a range of traumas common to children in supervised visitation, such as abuse. No comparisons were however drawn to 'normally developing children' thus sampling may have been biased towards children on the

higher end of emotional and behavioural difficulties thus possibly influencing the results. The small sample size also makes the findings difficult to generalise. Two main themes emerged from the findings. The first one shows that children in supervised visitations are distrusting and have poor reality appraisal. Through the use of Rorschach, results showed that these children were likely to be hyper-vigilant and distrusting of others. The authors noted that rather than turning to others to solve problems and interpret social reality, these children turned inward towards themselves to make sense out of the contradictory views they were getting from their significant adults. Moreover, the majority of these children were found to have significantly distorted perceptions of their interpersonal world. Further to this, the other theme shows a preoccupation with control and safety with children showing concern about the emotional and physical wellbeing of their parents. It was also noted that these children often had problems asserting their own needs and wishes and aggression was not a very noticeable feature of these children. Instead they were thought likely to maintain an underlying, negativistic, oppositional, and alienated stance masked by a compliant eagerness to please others. This is however only maintained until children become overwhelmed by their own needs at which point they regress, become irritable and/or show demanding behaviour. These findings give us a better understanding of what difficulties children coming to supervised visitation might have but one cannot generalise these findings to all supervised children. What comes out clearly though, as also stated by Johnston and Straus (1999), is that attention to these children's psychological needs should be provided as much as the attention given to their physical safety.

Another interesting study by Forsberg and Pösö (2008) using focus group interviews researched how supervisors in Finland (N=17) thought children viewed the supervised contact. Their findings show five different child perspectives of supervised contact as perceived by supervisors working with these children:

- The '*Fearful child*' was a common theme in the supervisor's perspectives. This fear was partially explained by the unfamiliarity of institutional meetings for the child, but was also sometimes related with fear of parent especially in cases where there was history of abuse.

- The *'Confused child'* theme was seen to be the result of confusion brought about by a lack of understanding by the child about things in the supervised meetings which have not been explained to the child. Supervisors attributed this to a lack of understanding by the children about the need for supervision as it was never explained. Sometimes supervisors were unaware of the reasons for supervision which made their position ambiguous and unhelpful. Another factor causing confusion was related with parents' wishes being expressed in front of their children when they were not so realistic such as the parent's wish to have her child back when this seemed not possible. Confusion was also brought about by disappointment when parents do not turn up for visits.

- The *'Manipulated child'*, which was also reported to be a recurrent theme in the interviews, referred to situations where the resident parent is believed to have alienated the child against the non-custodial parent. Supervisors thought that they were generally able to know when the child was repeating adult words. Supervisors reported that they monitored the situation and intervened in cases where manipulation was excessive. The parent-supervisor relationship was thought to be effected not only by the parent-child relationship but also by the relationships between the parents.

- The '*Responsible child*' referred to children who were thought to take the progress of the visit in their own hands thus assuming the role of the adult to help the parents to relate to them in an appropriate way, such as by bringing to the parents' attention any inappropriate behaviour.

- *Another recurrent theme, the '*Happy Child*' related to the child's happiness to meet the parent. Talk of happy children was essentially linked to time – child's fear changes with more meetings as meetings become more pleasant. Supervisors think they have sometimes contributed to the child's happiness by encouraging the parental relationship.

This research by Forsberg and Pösö (2008) is particularly interesting because through supervisors' description about the children, much could be deducted about their perceptions of the parents. It is also interesting to note that supervisors were reflective about their impact on children's behaviour which is particularly visible in the 'confused child' theme. It would have been interesting indeed if the study also looked

into supervisor's perceptions of children removed from home due to child welfare cases and also if the supervisors selected were more diverse and did not only include qualified social workers. Moreover, the aims of the research are not always clear and some key terms are not defined properly.

2.10 Professional's views of supervised visitation

Research with people working with supervised parents helps us to get a richer picture about supervised parents and their experience. In the research by Park et al. (1997), supervised centre coordinators and staff (supervisors themselves) were aware that parents' reports of satisfaction was related to whether they perceived supervisors to show neutrality and not to side in favour of one parent over the other one. Some of the interviewed staff acknowledged that it was difficult to behave neutrally sometimes especially when difficult situations arose. These difficult situations included: deciding when to facilitate parent/child interaction, deciding when to talk about a parents' behaviour or language, deciding how to respond when a parent recounts a story and requests support, and/or deciding how to respond to a child's comments about a parent. Moreover, staff felt that they would benefit from increased training in the areas of conflict resolution and the effects of divorce on family members. This shows that supervisors are very aware of their involvement, as was also found in the study by Forsberg and Pösö (2008), and their views relate to those expressed by the parents in other studies (Jenkins et al., 1997; Pearson and Thoennes, 2000).

While parents and supervisors showed similar views about supervised visitation on certain aspects, there seemed to be a disparity in views with those expressed by lawyers (N=14) and judges (N=13) taking part in the study by Peterson-Badali, Maresca, Park, and Jenkins (1997). The respondents in this study seemed to be more optimistic about supervised visitation and the way centres functioned. However, the researchers report that judges showed less knowledge about centre functioning than lawyers. Interestingly, the respondents suggested that parent support programmes (eg. Counselling, mediation, parenting skills training) should be made available to

families, either as part of the centre or through other community services thus wanting to reinforce and improve the functioning of the centres. With regards to parental disputes, both lawyers and judges thought that the hostility between parties decreased through the use of the supervised access programme. This cannot be verified with other research which shows different conclusions (Flory et al., 2001; Jenkins et al., 1997).

Professionals working more closely with supervised parents seem to show more awareness and understanding of these parents' situation. This could also be reinforced by shortcomings in communication between social services and the courts as suggested in the research carried out in Sweden by Andersson and Arvidsson (2008). From their group interviews with family law social workers (N=20), social files and individual interviews with contact persons (supervisors; N=13), the researchers looked for a social services perspective of supervised visitation as a court-ordered solution. Among others, their findings shows that social workers thought it not possible to express their doubts when a court decision on supervised visits was not seen as realistic enough to be implemented. Similar to the findings by Forsberg and Pösö (2008), another interesting finding was that contact persons (supervisors) thought that some of the children perceived them as providing protection and safety from the visiting parent, with some children appearing happier seeing the supervisor rather than the non-custodial parent. This would however be expected if there are allegiances issues due to parental alienation. From their findings, Andersson and Arvidsson (2008) seem to suggest for more responsibility to be taken by the social services in court-ordered cases and for decisions to be based on better communication between social services and the court. In fact they recommend that full responsibility is taken by social services for following up interventions.

Professional's perspectives about supervised visitations clearly show that there is much more than what actually happens during the supervised session. There could be a lot of different agendas shaping certain decisions and this could relate not only to the immediate issues of the parents and the children involved. This then necessitates careful consideration especially when evaluating sessions using particular models such

as the one developed by Ansay and Perkins (2001). This conceptual model can however enrich our perspectives about the parent-child relationship in the context of supervised visitation.

2.11 The parent-child bond in cases of supervised visitation

Few studies have focused on what really happens between parents and children during supervised visitation that amounts to a relationship (Birnbaum & Alaggia, 2006). For the purpose of their study, Ansay and Perkins (2001) developed a conceptual model on the parent-child bond adapted from Hirschi's (1969 as cited by Ansay & Perkins, 2001) social bonding model. The model provides a means of demonstrating the level of parental bondedness with the aim of being used in relation to case outcomes and also to serve as a risk evaluation tool. Even if its purpose is to serve as an evaluative tool, it can however highlight possible factors at play in the parent-child relationship when parents' contact with their children is supervised and also possibly explaining the outcome of such a relationship. However, the study doesn't look into the correlation of the different variables and while possibly assuming certain patterns, one cannot know how much influence each variable can have on the other ones.

As can be seen from the Figure 1, the model presents a linear view of the hypothesised relationship between parent-child bonds and placement outcomes, and consists of four major variables: family demographics, initial placement, parental bond attributes, and case outcome.
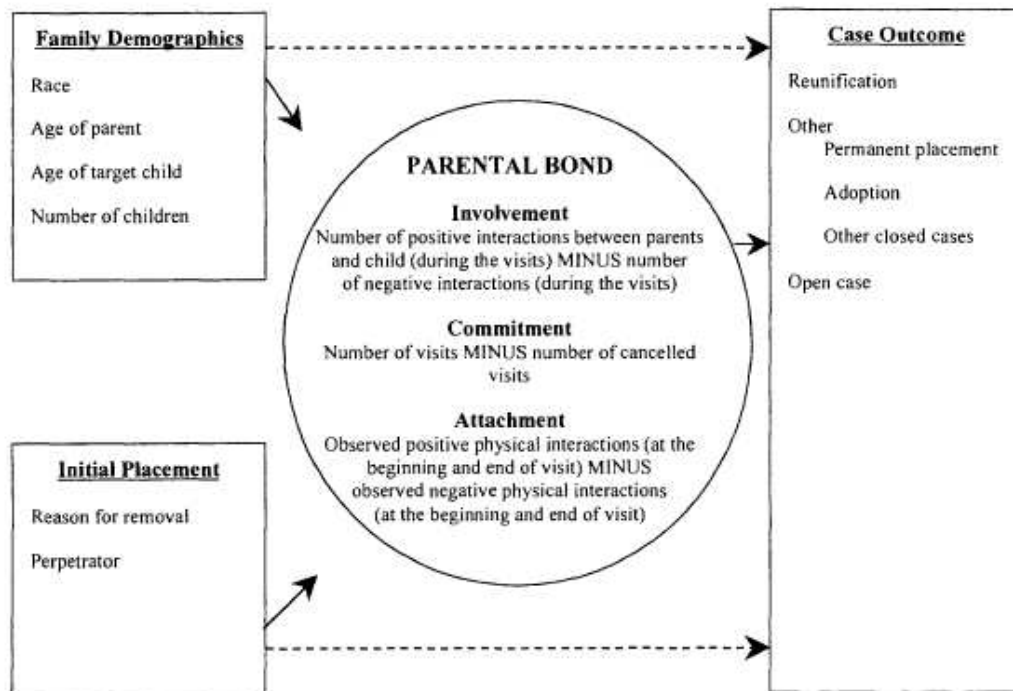
Figure 2: Conceptual Model of Parental Bonding and Outcome Relationship (Ansay & Perkins, 2001)

For the purpose of this model, the parental bond is defined by the "deliberate physical interactions between parents and their children as judged appropriate to the specific task of reunification and is indicated as the sum of attachment, commitment, and involvement indicators" (Ansay & Perkins, 2001, p. 224).

1. The attachment component is built on assumptions from attachment theory and relates to the observed positive and negative (physical) parent-child interaction at the beginning and ending of each visit.

2. The commitment component is compared to "Hirsch's (1969) emphasis on belief in family as a social value or norm" (p. 225) and can be shown by how frequent and regular contact happens between parents and their fostered children.

3. The involvement component takes the assumption that participation in family activities promotes cooperation between the members of the group "with greater participation inducing a greater desire and opportunity for harmonious interactions and vice versa" (p. 225). In observable terms, this relates to appropriate behaviours that provide a safe and nurturing environment for the children.

A preliminary test of this model was carried out for the purpose of testing the model with 43 families by examining the specifically designed 'Family Visitation Observation Forms' which were completed by visit supervisors. The total number of positive comments from these forms was then subtracted from the negative ones, thus yielding an indicator of the parent-child bond. According to the Ansay and Perkins (2001), even if the model remains to be tested, the preliminary test has yielded interesting patterns and trends. For instance, one such finding has been that child abuse cases had the highest reunification percentage with fathers as perpetrators being more likely than mothers to be reunited with their children. However, one major limitation during this preliminary test was that the inter-rater reliability was not taken into account. Moreover, for a better conclusive application of the model, continuous observation reports over a longer period of visitations with a larger sample size are needed (Ansay & Perkins, 2001).

2.12 Conclusion

Child development cannot be seen outside the context of the parent-child relationship and wider influences. Attachment theory has shown that the presence of an attachment figure is very important for the child's well-being (Kraus & Pope 2009). Apart from attachment, caregiving is also an instinctive and reciprocal behaviour system thus one cannot be separated from the other (Bowlby, 1973). Through their relationship, the parent and the child mutually shape each other's internal working models thus becoming psychologically connected. As shown by research, parent representations change among other through the interactions experienced within the parent-child relationship (refer to Mayseless, 2006). It is therefore important to consider parental perspectives especially if these will influence parental behaviour.

Separation can have an adverse impact on both the child and the parent. Maintaining contact is often found to be beneficial for both the child and the parent. However, as can be seen from this literature review, what happens to the parent-child relationship during 'supervised access visits' is very complex. Few researchers have focused on the

relationship between non-custodial parents and their children in cases where access to them is supervised. This is especially so in the local context. It is an area which is somewhat under-researched and is clearly a research gap to be filled. It is with this background in mind that the purpose of this research is to look into the perceptions of non-custodial parents on their relationship with their children in the context of supervised visits through the research questions identified in the Introduction chapter.

There are alternative theories that could have been related to this research topic such as social cognition theories focusing on parents' beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, attributions and expectations. Among others, these theories have focused on the relation between parents' social cognitions, child rearing behaviours and parent-child relationships (Okagaki & Bingham, 2005). They also cover the impact of broad contextual factors on parents' social cognitions (Okagaki & Bingham, 2005). Attachment theory was however thought to provide better coverage of various relevant aspects of the parent-child relationship and the influence and impact of separation. Moreover one of the main assets of attachment theory is that both the parent and the child are at the heart of the theory. Due to its broad coverage and to retain focus on the specificities of this research some aspects of attachment theory were however not included. For instance, attachment patterns (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970) were not seen to be of significant relevance for this research as the focus was primarily on parents' perceptions of the relationship with their children in the widest sense possible and not specifically of the attachment patterns involved.

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with and explains the process of research that is used in this study. The motivation of research is to uncover new insights or concepts with the aim of expanding knowledge, in this case in the field of psychology. There are several ways of understanding and interpreting reality and likewise of doing research. The way we understand determines to a great extent the way we do research. In so far as there are myriad possibilities of arriving at a new understanding, each of which can potentially change, add to or even contradict the outcome of another, it is fundamental for such a professional exercise to be as transparent and detailed as possible in the respective positions adopted.

It is important to understand the process of research itself. Hollway and Jefferson (2000), in their critical review of the assumptions, claims and methods of qualitative research, define research in psychology as a more formalised way of knowing about people compared to knowledge from everyday experiences. It is usually considered to be a process of systematic inquiry that is designed to collect, analyse, interpret and use data (Mertens, 2005). This process can be thought of as quite complex especially within the realm of social sciences (and psychology in particular) where the researchers have much in common with those they study (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 2002). In such situations, the researcher's background and cultural point of view may be influential or biased in the interpretation of certain behaviours which may not always conform to those across different cultures. Also referring to the process of psychological research, Law (2004, p. 2) emphasises that it is common for research to try to describe things which are "complex, diffuse and messy". He goes on to say that while some things are brought into awareness through research, there are many things which are missed or changed in the process of representing them. What is missed, or changed, in the process could be important and significant to the extent that the understanding, and even application, of the research results could have an

impact on society and its behaviour. One could, for example, mention here the profound and enduring impact that Freud had with his psychoanalytical perspectives. As Hollway and Jefferson (2000) mention, another potential pitfall is that on certain occasions, through its systematic process, research loses much of the subtlety used in everyday knowing.

There are also various ways of approaching and of doing research – two key aspects in the research process. In psychology, the way research is approached is just as important, and in certain cases may be even more important, than the methods used. The methods used may be standard tools of enquiry similar to those applied by researchers in other scientific fields and may be also those used by other applied psychologists. In this sense, the methods can be replicated from one study to another, and may not represent something novel per se, even if the application of these methods to new areas may lead to novel results. The term 'approach' here can be taken to mean something more general: it includes all those factors that determine the point of view, including that emotional and analytical, of the researcher before and during the research process. This encapsulates as well the reasons behind the selection of those methods, but also includes the initial thoughts of the researcher. For example, one researcher may view an aspect of behaviour differently from another which as a result leads him to approach it differently from others. According to Law (2004), the way research is conducted is much more than the set of techniques used or the philosophy of the research process espoused. Most fundamentally for Law (2004), research is about a way of being – the "kinds of social science we want to practise", about the "kinds of people we want to be, and about how we should live" (Addelson, 1994 as cited in Law, 2004, p. 10). This view sheds more light on the complexity of the research process which entails a process of reflexivity much deeper than the methods used or the words that are put on paper and presents a further challenge to those who write in a non-native language.

All these reasons and factors assert the importance of being transparent and rigorous in the explanation of every step of the research process such that readers can understand the author's background and his adopted understandings. It is hoped that

through such a clear explanation of the researcher's world view and its influence on the process and results, the reader will be able to arrive closer to the position adopted by the researcher vis-à-vis the researched topic, and thus may be able to replicate or contradict the results. This would help the reader to form an opinion not just on the results but also on the research process used. At the same time, it expands the possibility of peer review and critique in order for the results to be strengthened or refined. Only when the results pass the filter of other experts can the new knowledge be judged to be closer to being sufficiently rigorous and reliable and in a position to be added to the body of existent knowledge. The application of these new theories or practices may well have sensitive impacts on individuals and society at large.

This chapter will start by exploring the researcher's paradigms and theoretical perspectives. This is intended to uncover part of the researcher's set of beliefs about the world and the conscious access to it, together with the framework chosen, to arrive at the research outcome. The subsequent section will serve to bridge the paradigm and theoretical perspectives to the strategy of inquiry and method used for collecting and analysing data. Following this, issues related with quality and trustworthiness of this research are highlighted. This is then followed by a brief overview of the researcher's context and background. The last part of this chapter will look into ethical and moral considerations adopted by the researcher.

3.2 Paradigms and theoretical perspectives

Research is a process that follows a paradigm. A formal definition of paradigm is "a philosophical and theoretical framework of a scientific school or discipline within which theories, laws, and generalizations and the experiments performed in support of them are formulated; or broadly, a philosophical or theoretical framework of any kind."[2] Several authors stress the importance that the chosen paradigm comes to play on the research. On a general level, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) assert that research is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it

---

[2] Definition taken from Merriam-Webster online dictionary.

should be understood and studied and thus all research can be considered to have an interpretative element within it. On similar lines, Crotty (2005) opines that the justification of the choice and particular use of methodology and methods is something that reaches into the assumption about reality that researchers in the social sciences bring to their work. Thus each interpretive paradigm makes particular demands on the researcher, from the questions asked to the interpretations the researcher gives them. One could extend this interpretation to the different academic disciplines in the sense that each discipline brings in its own paradigms to bear and within those paradigms there could be various other forms of paradigms or theoretical perspectives. Thus, as an example, the meaning of a simple observation like a monetary transaction in a market may be viewed and interpreted differently by an economist, a lawyer, an evolutionary biologist or a psychologist.

As with other academic disciplines, there are different paradigms within psychology. The literature is vast and sometimes confusing on the concept and applicability of paradigms in psychology, and thus there are no obvious boundaries but rather different paradigms overlap. Nonetheless the researcher has to state a priori his position in order to follow a particular structure, and to explain the associations between different paradigms for readers to understand. If necessary the different paradigms which overlap may also be mentioned.

A useful and formal conceptualisation of paradigm is that given by Denzin and Lincoln (2005). A paradigm is usually thought of as the net that contains the researcher's epistemological, ontological and methodological premises. This description helps the researcher to categorise his position along these three lines. Other writers of qualitative research acknowledge that apart from bringing paradigmatic assumptions, researchers may in addition want to present their theoretical perspectives that guide their study (Crotty, 2005). The researchers' ontological and epistemological positions serve as a good basis to inform the theoretical perspective chosen. While there is no clear distinction between paradigm and a theoretical perspective as such, the former can be thought of to be more general while the latter generally refers to an established body of theory accumulated during the years by new research and interpretations

within the same field. The terms paradigm and theoretical perspective here are used to suggest that paradigms cannot as such be seen separate from the theoretical perspective. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggest, by presenting the theoretical perspective, the researcher intends to bring more clarity to the research process.

This introduction thus motivates the structure of the next sections. The epistemological and ontological positions of the author vis-a-vis this topic of study will be explained alongside the theoretical perspective. From this background the methodological approach is expounded.

3.2.1 Epistemological position

Epistemology is derived from Greek etymological roots: *episteme* meaning knowledge, and *logos* meaning explanation. It is a branch of philosophy concerned with the sources and limits, rationality and justification of knowledge (Stone, 2008) which necessitates thinking about the nature of knowledge itself, about its scope and about claims to knowledge (Willig, 2008). In simple terms, it "is concerned with ways of knowing and learning about the social world and focuses on questions such as: how can we know about reality and what is the basis of our knowledge?" (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 13). This subject is much more complex than a simple description and draws on a rich philosophical tradition; nonetheless, in practical terms, it is important to talk about the epistemological approach taken because it represents the researcher's position about what kinds of things it is possible to find out (Willig, 2008).

The epistemological position adopted for this study is that of Constructionism (Crotty, 2005) and **Social Constructionism** (Gergen & Gergen, 2008) in particular. Constructionism is nowadays one of the dominant research paradigms in psychology, counteracting objectivism from the positivist stance. While objectivism views the world as independent of and unaffected by the researcher, constructionism holds the view that our meanings are construed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting through their consciousness (Snape & Spencer, 2003). According

to Crotty (2005) while not ascribing objectivity to meaning or truth, constructionists do not describe meaning or truth as subjective, but rather as being at once subjective and objective. This is because meanings cannot be considered simply as imposed upon reality but rather as emerging through our interaction with the world (Crotty, 2005). Thus the constructionist researcher does not discover meaning but rather constructs it as s/he engages with the world and objects within it (Charmaz, 2001; Crotty, 2005).

A derivative of constructionism, *social constructionism*, traces the origins of knowledge and meaning and the nature of reality to processes generated within human relationships (Gergen & Gergen, 2008, p. 816). While humans may be described, in constructionist spirit, as engaging with their world and making sense of it, such a description is misleading if it is not set in a genuinely historical and social perspective. According to Crotty (2005, p. 54) we come to the world embedded in institutions that precede us and thus we inherit a "system of significant symbols" which are likely to bear different connotations in different contexts and cultures. This requires the researchers not to remain constrained by the conventional meanings that they have been taught to associate with the object but "to approach the object in a radical spirit of openness to its potential for new or richer meaning. It is an invitation to reinterpretation" (Crotty, 2005, p. 51).

Social constructionist epistemology emphasises the sensitivity of interpretation and meaning to the language used. It effectively stresses the point that meaning makes sense within a context, where the context of course varies from one person to another, irrespective of the proximity of their circumstances. What is called for by adopting the social constructivist approach is an appreciation that language is not just the medium but also the context in the sense that the discourse used inevitably attempts to describe reality. As will be explained later in the next sections, the participants, although sharing similar circumstances, bring their own context and even given this context, they transmit their thoughts through language, which again may have a different meaning or may transmit a different 'reality' to the researcher to that intended. This awareness of the scope for distortion between the thinking, expression, understanding and textual phases is crucial. To a great extent, such an understanding

sets apart the approach taken in this study from a positivist approach where clear boundaries necessarily have to be set to arrive at clear causal outcomes, irrespective of the fluidity of the boundary lines.

3.2.2 Ontological concerns

While epistemology asks 'how can we know?' ontology deals with the question 'What is there to know?' (Willig, 2008). Ontological concerns can be considered to be fundamental as it is impossible not to make at least some assumptions about the nature of the world (Willig, 2008) especially since ontological issues and epistemological issues tend to emerge together (Crotty, 2005). The researchers' ontological and epistemological positions cannot be seen separate from each other as ontology implies epistemology, and epistemology implies ontology (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009).

There is an important difference between the ontological and epistemic forms of constructionism (Edley, 2001). While a constructionist epistemology does not go into whether a reality exists independent of the knower, constructionist ontology rejects the notion that there is an objective reality that can be known (Mertens, 2005). This is a very fluid way of looking at the world and thus a **critical realist ontological position** represents better the researcher's views about the world and the objects in it.

Critical realism resulted as a critique to the positivist approach and can be thought of as a position in-between the 'realist' and 'relativist' endpoints of the continuum. It is a "perspective that combines the realist ambition to gain a better understanding of what is 'really' going in the world with the acknowledgement that the data the researcher gathers may not provide direct access to this reality" (Willig, 2008, p. 13). Critical realism claims that an external reality exists independent of our beliefs and understanding, and this reality is only knowable through the human mind and socially constructed meanings (Snape & Spencer, 2003).

3.2.3 Adopted theoretical perspective

The researchers' ontological and epistemological positions inform the theoretical perspective. The theoretical perspective is a way of looking at the studied phenomenon and making sense of it. This is usually constructed from the theories and experiences the researcher draws upon while conceptualising the study. It further informs the methodology and provides the context for the process and grounding of its logic and criteria (Crotty, 2005).

This research study is conceptualised within the **social theory of symbolic interaction** (Woods, 1992) and **systems theory** (Dallos & Draper, 2003). Both perspectives are related. The emphasis here is on the social context of the individual and the way the individual interacts with her/his broader environment. The individual is part of a broader system that includes other people and several environmental factors, each of which can be mutually dependent on, and reinforcing, each other. There is a constant reflection between the actions of the individual vis-a-vis his environment in a way that both influence each other to different extents. This view essentially holds that, given that the individual is part of his system, s/he cannot be understood properly by neglecting this context. Defining this context thus becomes critical for the researcher.

Bryman (2008) defines symbolic interactionism as the process of understanding social phenomena not as that undertaken by individuals in isolation but rather as occurring in interaction and conversation with others. Referring to the personal experience of a researcher from this theoretical perspective, Griffin (2006, p. 57) adds that "it is all about those social interactions whereby we enter into the perceptions, attitudes and values of a community, becoming persons in the process". A comprehensive yet compact understanding of the view of symbolic interactionism is that given by Blumer (1969, as cited in Woods, 1992, p. 338) in his three central principles, stated as follows:

> (1) human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that
>
> the things have for them,

(2) this attribution of meaning to objects through symbols is a continuous process, and

(3) meaning attribution is a product of social interaction in human society.

Following from the definitions above, unearthing these 'meanings' becomes crucial. Both the experiences of and the events surrounding people are essential to the construction of meaning. Berg (2001) notes that to understand the meanings that emerge from the social process of people's interactions, the researcher must either enter into the defining process or develop a sufficient appreciation for the process so that understandings can become clear. It is also in this sense that Griffin (2006, p. 62) refers to the researcher as "entering" into the perceptions, attitudes and values of a community, "becoming persons in the process". Here there is an important distinction to be made which perhaps sets this theoretical perspective apart from others: the researcher is asked to go a step further beyond the meaning that the researcher himself attributes - from his own point of view - to the studied behaviour. He is asked to search also for the meanings held by those being studied. Inevitably, also in the spirit of epistemic social constructionism, the researcher as receiver and writer ends up giving meaning to those meanings (of the participant) in the process of interpretation through the use of language.

Systems theory is another theoretical perspective which contributes to the conceptualisation of the study. Systems theory focuses on the interconnectedness of human relationships and sees behaviour of any one person as having an influence on and being influenced by other people in relationship with the person. It challenges the linear view derived from science that one event causes another. Instead, it proposes the concept of circular causality to stress the interdependence of action in families and other relationships (Dallos & Draper, 2003). Thus, for example, an action of person A could be influenced by an action of person B, but the action of B could also have been influenced by another action of person C and A, and so on. This way of seeing the relatedness in everything around us serves a very useful purpose when doing research

with families, and in this particular study it almost immediately reduces the relevance of quantitative analysis.

This study thus intends to explore the subjective experience, meanings and processes that non-custodial parents construct when faced by the circumstances associated with having contact with their children supervised. Therefore, in the light of symbolic interactionism, it looks at what symbolic meanings and/or actions participants share on the topic at hand. This is then contextualised within a systems theory perspective which looks at the interconnectedness of these processes.

3.2.4 Methodology

Methodology can be regarded as the way analytical tools are applied to arrive at the results. Tools can vary and can be applied differently; just like a questionnaire is a tool used for collecting information, so are the questions applied in that questionnaire important for the collection of data and the methods used to further extract/synthesise that information. But methodology as referred to in psychology is more complicated than this example because it deals with how we interpret data at every stage drawing intrinsically from the paradigms mentioned in the previous sections.

The methodology that will be used for this qualitative research is based on **Constructivist Grounded Theory** (Charmaz, 2001, 2006). Constructivist grounded theory is an adaptation of the original model originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Differently from other methodological approaches, grounded theory methodology emphasises the generation of theory from data in the process of conducting research (Glaser & Strauss, 2009) which is for example "in contrast to the a priori theoretical orientation in sociology" (Creswell, 1998). This methodological approach has proved to be very popular so much so that different versions have developed since its inception. Differences between Glaser and Strauss about methodological procedures, together with paradigmatic developments in social

science research, have led to different versions of grounded theory methodology developing (Charmaz, 2006) . Out of the three most identifiable versions, one is attributed to Glaser, another one to Strauss and Corbin, while constructivist grounded theory is usually associated with Charmaz (2001, 2006).

Differently from the other versions, constructivist grounded theory accentuates on "how data, analysis, and methodological strategies become constructed, and takes into account the research contexts and researchers' positions, perspectives, priorities, and interactions" (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007b, p. 10). Seeing earlier versions of grounded theory in the objectivist tradition, Charmaz (2006) notes that, differently from 'Objectivist Grounded Theory', a 'constructivist' model places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants. The data and its analysis produce social constructions that reflect what their production entailed. Thus, according to the same author researchers using this methodology take a reflexive stance toward the research process and products and consider how their theories evolve. This involves reflecting on the point that both researchers and research participants interpret meanings and actions, and in unique and possibly different ways.

After careful consideration of other methodological approaches, the researcher's decision to use grounded theory as the methodology of choice was based on its aim to generate or discover a theory which is "closely related to the context of the phenomenon being studied", in this case the parent-child relationship in the context of supervised visitation. The generation of a theory was thought to be of benefit to professionals working in this area as it could give them something on which they could compare and contrast their experiences and views on the subject. This could then also be subjected to further empirical scrutiny by other researchers once categories are identified. Constructivist grounded theory was also thought to address the research aims through its emphasis on producing "a conceptual analysis of patterned relationships" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 181) which also fits the researcher's paradigms and theoretical perspectives.

3.3 Research design and methods

This study undertakes a qualitative research approach, as opposed to quantitative approach. Qualitative research implies particular forms of research design and methods. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 10), "the word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency". In this case, the paradigms and theoretical perspectives, together with the design and method used, put an emphasis on the active engagement with the information gathered which also acknowledge a subjective element in the research process whereby the researcher is seen central to the sense that is made (Banister et al., 2002; Willig, 2008).

The adoption of qualitative methods is suggested when doing family research (Liamputtong 2007). By providing people with the opportunity to tell their life stories, qualitative methods allow the researcher to step into the "relatively closed and highly protected boundaries of families' experiences" and thus "to access 'backstage' family meanings (Daly, 1992 as cited in Liamputtong 2007, p. 8). They are also more suited in getting the voice of those who are "silenced, othered and marginalized by the dominant social order" (Liamputtong 2007, p. 7), an experience many participants in this study might relate to.

3.3.1 Research participants and recruitment process

The research participants consisted of nine non-custodial parents whose contact with their children was being supervised by professionals employed by the Foundation for Social Welfare Services in Malta during the study. One difficulty was to find an appropriate sample. It was not possible to find a large sample given the constraints faced due to the small population of possible participants in Malta and the lack of a strong incentive for participants to volunteer. Nonetheless, the author believes that the small sample was sufficiently representative for such an in-depth study and also to

reach theoretical saturation. The following criteria were used to select the participants:

- It was thought best to recruit participants whose access to their children has been through the 'Supervised Access Visits' service for at least the past six months. This time-frame was chosen to ensure that parents would have a better understanding of how the visits were impacting the relationship with their child. Further to this, it was thought that this could spare the parents from any strong emotions they might have in the first few months of the visits.
- Another criterion for recruiting participants was that of choosing parents with children older than five years. It was thought that this would make it easier for the parents to be more aware of the child's influence on the relationship because children at that age usually have a better command of the language and their intentions are usually more visible by parents.
- Voluntary supervised access visits were excluded.
- No other criteria were sought as long as the criteria mentioned above were met.

To recruit the participants, the study utilised purposeful sampling. This sampling method "is essentially strategic and entails an attempt to establish a good correspondence between research questions and sampling" (Bryman, 2008, p. 458). According to Robson (2006), sampling in grounded theory usually adopts purposeful sampling as it can help the gathering of additional information to generate conceptual categories.

First, all eligible participants were handed the *Participant Information Sheets* (refer to Appendix 4) through their supervisors on access visits. These supervisors then passed the contact details of those parents who were willing to participate and appointments were given by the researcher for an initial meeting. The recruiting process was quite challenging especially because many potential participants were not willing to take part in the study. Some of the participants who showed initial interest withdrew prior to this initial meeting.

While collecting data, it was the intention of the author to have a wide range of different cases, representing the type of mix between different genders and types of order as shown in table 1 below. As such, it was not the intention to control for gender or type of order per se in order to find differences between each category because this is a small sample and statistical inferences cannot be made. This mix in the sample was sought so as to ensure that different perspectives are represented in the study and, in the spirit of grounded theory, it would be easier for the author to spot important nuances and reflections between one case and another which would otherwise have been missed or taken for granted. It is also easier to get a better understanding of the whole picture by experiencing the views of people in similar situations but with varying backgrounds.

For this research, theoretical sampling principles were adopted. Theoretical sampling is different from purposeful sampling which is the initial type of sampling used to find participants. It is used in grounded theory research to explicate the categories, sharpen concepts and deepen the analysis (Charmaz, 2001, 2006) until theoretical saturation is reached. Theoretical saturation is the point when the gathering of new data no longer gives new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of the core theoretical categories. In the context of this study, theoretical sampling necessitated searching for participants with particular experiences and demographics, such as a mother whose child was removed through a care order rather than a court order for instance. In keeping with the principles of grounded theory, data collection should have stopped when theoretical saturation was reached (Charmaz, 2006). This was however not possible given the limited number of participants found.

Gender of parent	Care/Court Order	Total Number of children*	Number of children supervised*	Age range of children*	Weekly Supervision time *	Supervised Months*
Mother	Court order	3	2	3 – 16 yrs	2 hours	30 months
Mother	Care order	4	2	8 – 18 yrs	1.5 hours	24 months
Mother	Care order	2	2	5 – 7 yrs	1 hour	12 months
Father	Court order	1	1	4 yrs	1 hour	12 months
Mother	Care and court order	3	2	1 – 5 yrs	1 hour	12 months
Father	Care and court	7	4	2 – 15 yrs	1 – 2 hours	24 months
Mother	Care order	4	4	1 – 6 years	1 hour	8 months
Father	Court order	1	1	15 years	1 hour	12 months
Father	Court order	3	3	11 – 18 years	4 hours	More than 36 months

Table 1: Details of recruited participants in interviewed order

3.3.2 Data gathering – interviews

This study utilised interviews as the research technique of choice to gather the data related to the research aims. There are several considerations that come with interviewing as a research technique. Kahn and Cannell (1957, as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p.149) describe interviewing in qualitative research as "a conversation with a purpose". According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), this kind of interview can be considered as a 'conversation' rather than a formal event with predetermined response categories, for example like in a job interview. They also add that this method is based on an assumption fundamental to qualitative research that the participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it (the emic perspective), rather than as the researcher views it (the etic perspective). While following this trail of thought, the author was mindful that a preset interview structure could be considered as an intrusion to this emic perspective.

---

* An approximate figure is given.

The author in this study sets aside the objectivist assumption that questions and answers can be understood in the same way by the interviewer and the respondent. Instead, the author espouses the symbolic interactionist perspective that:

> ...social actors in any social situation are constantly negotiating a shared definition of the situation; taking one another's viewpoints into account; and interpreting one another's behaviour as they imaginatively construct possible lines of interaction before selecting lines of action for implementation (Foddy, 2001, p. 20).

In line with this, and as suggested in Anderson (2003) and Campbell (2003), the author sees the role of the researcher as that of a conversational artist or a facilitator who creates a space for, and facilitates a dialogical conversation about the research problem in a collaborative partnership with the participant. In this dialogical conversation there is a "mutual search for understanding and exploration through dialogue" (Anderson & Goolishan, 2002, p.29) which is however conditioned by the researcher's expectations. In fact it was not uncommon for the author to find himself leading participants to other areas of exploration when he thought that participants were entering into areas not related to this topic. In doing so, there is always a risk that meaning is lost because the participant might have felt the need to discuss or elaborate on certain issues which have an importance for him.

The interviews were of approximately an hour long and adopted a semi-structured nature. Semi-structured means that, while there is an overall structure of purpose and intended questions, the researcher retains flexibility of the timing, scope of the interview and the questions to be asked. It allows flexibility for the participant to develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised, while at the same time helping the researcher to retain the issues to be addressed and questions to be answered in mind (Denscombe, 2007). This is in line with grounded theory where the researcher has to narrow the range of the interview topics to gather specific data related to the developing theoretical frameworks (Charmaz, 2006).

A semi-structured interview also comes with the awareness that, during data collection, there needs to be a balance between hearing the participant's story and probing to elicit the processes related to the researched area without impacting negatively on the participant's story. The researcher has to avoid forcing data into preconceived categories (Glaser, 1978). This happens when the researcher asks the wrong questions thus failing to elicit the participant's experiences in his or her own language and/or superimposing "the researcher's concepts, concerns, and discourse upon the subject's reality" (Charmaz, 2001, p. 681). Due to the emphasis in grounded theory on analysing and studying interviews prior to returning to the field to gather more data, it is advised that the researcher has to be aware of this from the start as otherwise subsequent analysis suffers. Thus, the researcher has to engage in a process of continuous reflexivity to ensure that this doesn't happen. In this study, the author used to dedicate some time before and after every interview to reflect better on the outcome of previous and subsequent interviews through the use of a personal research journal. In this journal, the researcher tried to reflect about the interplay of his observation emerging from the interviews with experiences which might have shaped the given meanings.

3.3.3 Data gathering – questions

For the researcher, as the interviewer, an interview essentially involves putting the question, listening to the answer, and interpreting the answer to be able to adjust the subsequent questions. The questions asked to the participants were formulated according to constructivist grounded theory principles and inspired by the theoretical perspectives adopted in this study. Thus questions were formulated so as to define and explore patterned relationships (refer to Appendix 6). In keeping with the constructivist and symbolic interactionist philosophical perspectives, an emphasis was put on the participant's definitions of terms, situations and events thus tapping into their assumptions and meanings (Charmaz, 2001, 2006).

Foddy's (2001) 'question-answer behaviour' model based on symbolic interactionist perspectives was thought to be very useful during the interviewing process and while analysing the transcripts (see figure 3). This model shows the process through which the interview unfolds between the interviewer (researcher) and the respondent (participant). According to this model, the questions and answers are encoded and decoded while taking into account own presumptions, presumptions about the other, knowledge about self and knowledge about the other.

Foddy (2001) mentions a number of potential deviations that researchers need to be aware of during the question-answer interaction. One of the most important considerations that he makes is the participant's interpretation of the information being requested from them and also their interpretation of the researcher's interest in asking the questions. Despite the usefulness of this model in establishing a realistic framework, certain items are considered as missing. In this model there is a disconnection, or lack of emphasis, between subsequent interview questions which are influenced by earlier responses. This is important especially in the context of the reflexivity process adopted as part of the research process. The researcher sees this process in a more circular way whereby each and every intervention between the interviewer and respondent, be it spoken or otherwise, shapes the continuity of the interview. Moreover, this diagram focuses only on the interplay between the interviewer and the respondent when the interviewer for example may be adjusting his questions using the knowledge gained from previous interviews with different respondents. The researcher also adds the element of reflexivity between the different interviews.

I Interviewer	II Respondent
Encodes question, taking into account own purposes, and presumptions/ knowledge about the *respondent*, and perceptions of the *respondent's* presumptions/ knowledge about self (i.e. the interviewer)	Decodes question, taking into account own purposes and presumptions/ knowledge about the *interviewer*, and perceptions of the *interviewer's* presumptions/ knowledge about self (i.e. the respondent)
IV Interviewer	III Respondent
Decodes answer, taking into account own presumptions/ knowledge about the *respondent* and perceptions of the *respondent's* presumptions/ knowledge about self (i.e. the interviewer)	Encodes answer, taking into account own presumption/ knowledge about the *interviewer* and perceptions of the *interviewer's* presumptions/ knowledge about self (i.e. the respondent)

Figure 3: A model of the symbolic interactionist view of question-answer behaviour taken from Foddy (2001, p. 22).

3.3.4 Data analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis starts as soon as the researcher enacts in a social interaction with the research participants. Charmaz (2006, p. 10) states that "as we learn how our research participants make sense of their experiences, we begin to make analytic sense of their meanings and actions". According to Burck (2005), the constructivist grounded theory approach has had a huge impact on qualitative research interviewing, with its notion of using the data analysis of the first interview to modify the interview format in order to explore certain concepts in more depth. She adds that this recursive and iterative process, of moving from data collection to emergent theory and back again until theoretical saturation is reached, fits well with systemic theory in which feedback informs and shapes further inquiry.

Coding is the first analytical step towards theoretical development by essentially scanning, highlighting, defining and grouping data into concepts. The process fundamentally involves defining data (from transcribed interviews) by means of short descriptions about what is seen by the researcher. Coding in grounded theory is at least a two way process (see figure 4). In *initial* or *open coding*, the researcher starts making analytic decisions about the data. The most frequently appearing initial codes are then used to sort, synthesise and conceptualise large amounts of data through a process known as *selective* or *focused coding*. These are then grouped together to form concepts. Memo writing is a procedure which runs along the research process and involves the pencilling down and analysis of ideas that emerge. In figure 4, one can see clearly that several references are made to memos along the diagram (represented by circles). Memos can reveal the researcher's interests, assumptions and theoretical perspectives. These can then be used reflexively to help inform the development of more refined and precise concepts - this is usually referred to as *sensitizing concepts* (Charmaz, 2001, 2006).
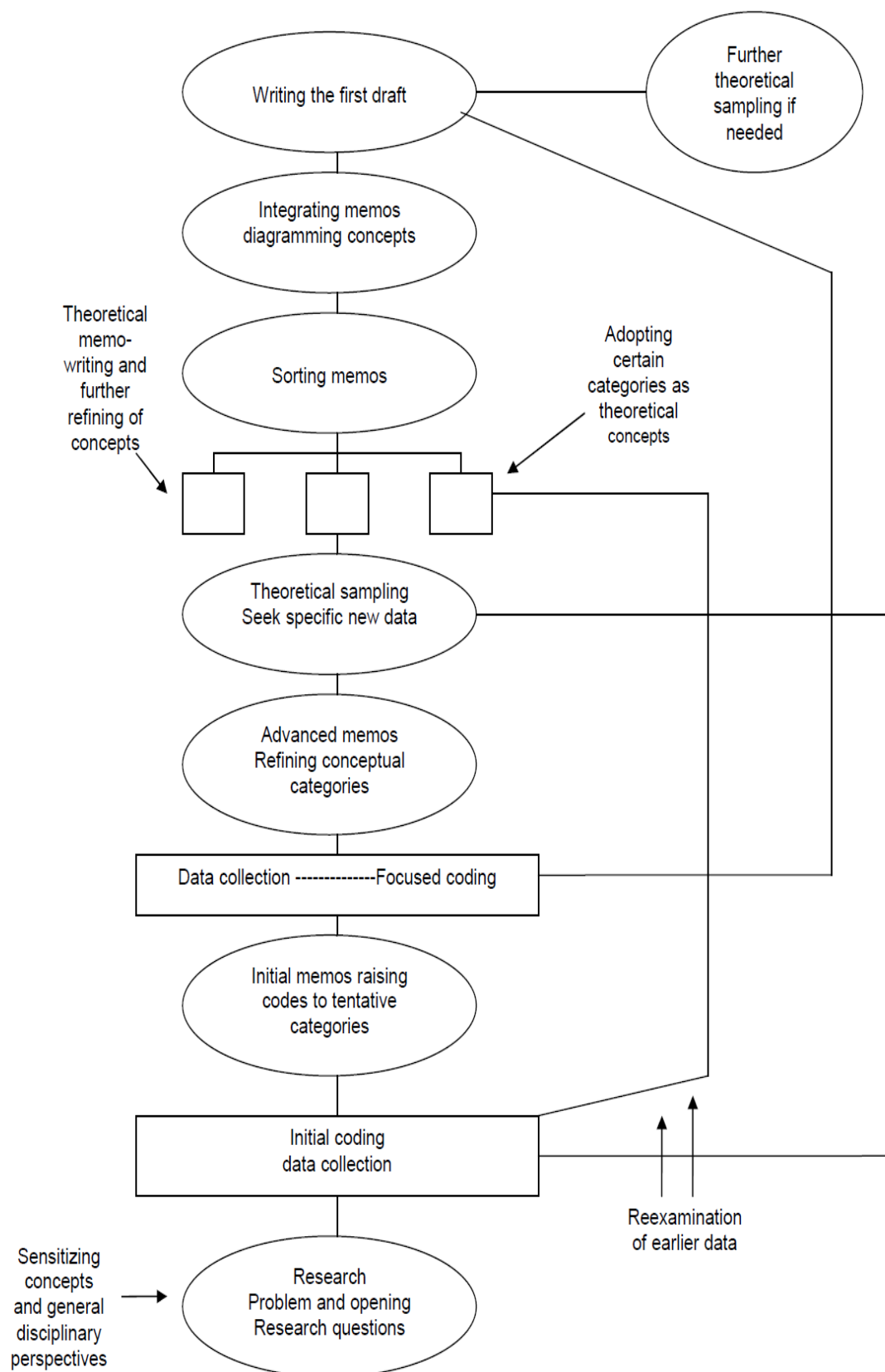
Figure 4: The constructivist grounded theory process (Charmaz, 2006, p. 11)

3.4 Trustworthiness and validity of the research

Trustworthiness is concerned with the criteria used for assessing the value of qualitative research. It relates to the concepts of reliability, validity and objectivity which were originally developed in the natural sciences and thus pertain to very different epistemological positions from those of qualitative research. In fact, it is debatable whether the same concepts carry any value when analysing the quality of qualitative studies (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003). Reliability for instance, which is concerned with replicability of research findings, is seen by the constructionist paradigm as an artificial goal to pursue given the belief in the existence of multiple realities (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Similarly, the notion of objectivity is refuted by most qualitative researchers. Validity is the only concept which is sometimes applied to qualitative research, though in an altered way. This is concerned with determining whether the findings are accurate enough from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant or the readers of an account (Creswell, 2003).

In qualitative research, the 'positivist criteria' of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity are usually replaced by terms such as *transferability, credibility, confirmability, and dependability* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Given and Saumure (2008) define these terms as following:

- Transferability relates to the applicability of the study. While not deemed unworthy if it cannot be applied to other contexts, a study's worth is usually determined by its applicability to alternative contexts.

- Credibility relates to the representation of data in an accurate way through a rich and accurate description of the phenomenon in question.

- Confirmability is achieved when the interpretations and findings match the data collected.

- Dependability refers to the possibility of finding a similar explanation for the phenomenon if the same research conditions are applied.

There are various actions that can be taken to ensure that the research is trustworthy in the sense given above. In fact, various authors have constructed different ways of ensuring that these criteria are observed. The following validity typologies, taken

selectively from the constructivist and the critical paradigm identified in Creswell and Miller (2000) were used for this study:

- *Disconfirming evidence* is the process whereby researchers go back to the data for evidence that is inconsistent with or disconfirms their preliminary categories. This helps the researcher to be more transparent in his/her findings.

- *Thick, rich description* comes about by giving a detailed account of the setting, the participants and the categories that are constructed. A constructivist perspective to contextualise the people studied is used for establishing credibility.

- *Peer debriefing* is the process where someone who is familiar with the research or the phenomenon being studied, reviews the data and research process. Among other things, this peer reviewer provides support, challenges the researcher's assumptions, pushes the researcher to the next step methodologically, and asks hard questions about methods and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Creswell & Miller, 2000).

- *Reflexivity* is the recognition (which is linked to the researcher's epistemological and ontological position) that researchers can never attain the aspiration of neutrality and objectivity fully (Snape & Spencer, 2003). It is a continuous process whereby the researcher is aware what s/he brings to the scene, what s/he sees, and how s/he sees it (Charmaz, 2006). It comes to live in the study through the researcher's self-disclosure of his/her assumptions, beliefs and biases that may shape the inquiry. According to Charmaz (2006), constructivist grounded theory acknowledges that researchers import preconceived ideas into their work when they remain unaware of their starting assumptions.

3.5 Ethical issues and considerations

Researchers need to anticipate the ethical issues that may arise during their studies as this can have an impact on the personal lives of the participants, the researcher and other systems. In line with this, Educational Psychologists practising in the United

Kingdom are duty bound to follow the Code of Ethics and Conduct of the British Psychological Society (2009) and the Health Professions Council (2008). While engaging in the research process, the author was also aware of the code of conduct of the organisation providing participants. Prior to the data collection, a detailed proposal about the research process and the potential ethical issues involved was handed to both the Research Ethics Committee of the *University of East London* and the *Foundation of Social Welfare Services.* Approval was given by both institutions (refer to Appendix 3).

Research ethics is however much more than the regulations and codes of conduct of these professional organisations. It becomes even more sensitive especially when vulnerable people might be involved. An initial question that arises is whether one should carry out investigate/research work with this population of supervised parents especially since one is "mining the minds" of a potentially disempowered population (Russell, 1999, as cited by Liamputtong, 2007, p. 25). Paradis (2000, as cited by Liamputtong, 2007, p. 27) argues that "morally and ethically, researchers must begin with consideration of the personal, interpersonal, community and political ramifications of research on their research participants". The researcher has taken every possible measure to ensure that any possible negative impact on the research participants is reduced. Sensitivity and respect towards the participants and their stories was constant throughout the research process. The researcher was aware that some issues surrounding sensitive research are not always apparent or only become visible through reflexivity. Therefore tutors and supervisors were consulted when dilemmas arose. What follows is an account of the ethical considerations adopted in this study.

3.5.1 Informed consent

Informed consent can be defined as "the provision of information to participants about the purpose of the research, its procedures, potential risks, benefits, and alternatives, so that the individual understands this information and can make a voluntary decision

whether to enrol and continue to participate" (Emanuel, Wendler & Grady, 2000, as cited in Liamputtong, 2007, p.33). According to Hollway and Jefferson (2000), the decision to consent cannot be reduced to a conscious, cognitive process but is a continuing emotional awareness that characterises every interaction. It is thus a continuing dynamic between the researcher and the participant.

Potential research participants were invited to engage in an informed decision about whether or not they should take part in this study (refer to Appendix 4). This was part of a process of respecting participants' autonomy. Participants received this information well before the interview took place. Moreover, prior to the commencement of the interview, participants were also given a consent form to sign (Appendix 5). In this consent form they were informed about their right to withdraw their participation in the study at any time, their right to anonymity and confidentiality and also information about data protection. The *Participants Information Sheet* and the *Informed Consent Form* were also translated to Maltese to make it easier for the participants to access. Moreover it was thought necessary to use clear and simple language so that these participants understand well the information, and their rights. The consent form was read to every participant prior to the recording of the interview.

Even if the intention was to avoid any distress, alternative provisions were taken in the eventuality that participants become distressed. Since the interviews took place in a counselling centre, a therapist was always available in case of distress. Moreover, participants were informed about therapeutic services available if they felt the need for therapy after the interview.

Another dilemma which is very relevant in the Maltese context relates to the privacy of other family members. Prior to conducting the interviews, it was anticipated that parents might reveal the private life of other family members. This can be problematic in a small country like Malta where the coincidence of meeting the participants and their family members outside the context of the interview is very likely. Thus before the interview participants were encouraged to draw their own boundaries of privacy.

3.5.2 Confidentiality

Due to its flexible nature and the promise of confidentiality, qualitative research provides participants the chance to speak about their personal, often secret, affairs which are usually not disclosed with other people outside the research context. As stated by Liamputtong (2007), there is no worse disturbing and unethical harm in research as when the participants are damaged by the disclosure of their private life. The author in this study was committed to ensure that confidentiality, privacy and anonymity is maintained unless an intention to harm self or others is voiced (which did not occur during these interviews).

3.5.3 Issues concerning risk and harm

Some research studies on sensitive topics carry clear risks of eliciting or re-stimulating distress in participants (Coyle & Olsen, 2005). The revelation of personal and intimate details about their lives can make them vulnerable in many ways, such as by causing emotional and psychological distress. Liamputtong (2007, p.39) also suggests that the interview may give rise to "uncalled for self-knowledge with adverse psychological implications". The author was thus committed to ensure that the physical, emotional, and social well-being of the research participants was given a higher priority than that - as Charmaz (2006, p. 30) put it - of obtaining "juicy data".

There are various ways that can minimise participant distress which were also used by the author. The following are some of the measures considered prior to initiating data collection.

- The data collection was planned to follow the framework of a basic counselling interaction, whereby the researcher used his counselling skills to foster the counselling attributes of empathy, genuineness and unconditional positive regard as suggested by Coyle and Olsen (2005). The author also engaged in a process of self-reflexivity from the beginning of the research process to be aware about his contribution to the constructed meaning.

- Prior to starting the interviews, participants were provided with information about where they might turn for help in case they needed therapeutic help after the interview.

- An emergency plan was devised in case participants became distressed during the interview. This included the support from designated professionals on the premises where interviews were taking place. This emergency plan was not used as no participants became distressed during the process.

- The author was also aware that the interview could have a potential negative impact on himself (Coyle & Olsen, 2005). As a precaution, the author had arrangements with his placement supervisor and also with a Counselling Psychologist (who supervises his practice as a counsellor) to provide needed support or supervision in case of distressful events.

3.5.4 Issues related with power

Power is most commonly assessed in terms of structural disparities between members of social groups (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). The author's background in terms of educational status, gender, race and age inevitably differentiated him from the interviewed participants and this may have given rise to scenarios of unequal power. According to Charmaz (2006), the researcher needs to be aware how these might be acted on and played out during the interview. While cognisant about the ethical implications of power, the researcher also considered *poststructuralist* views about power as part of the reflexive process. These reframe the *structuralist* tendency to see power as harmful by seeing it as capable of producing things within a relational perspective. Here the emphasis is on understanding and respect which have the capacity to transcend structural power differences (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 85).

4. Findings

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present the main findings from the interviews within a framework of emerging themes and theories. The format of this chapter follows a series of key quotes of non-custodial parents (taken directly from their interviews), and a short introduction or explanation of their meaning to put them into context. These quotes are grouped into meaningful categories that represent the emerging themes and theories. During the research process, each interview has been analysed repeatedly, both separately and horizontally (across the similar questions and replies in the other interviews) to arrive at a theoretical saturation. In the latter case this was not straightforward since, as explained in the methodology, in the spirit of grounded theory the interview questions, apart from not being fully structured to follow as much as possible the discourse of the interviewee, changed after each interview. This repeated analysis led to the categorisations and representations given in this chapter, also in diagrammatic form.

4.2 Process used to arrive at the main categories

As explained in the methodology chapter, coding of the interviews was used to arrive at the main categories. Following every interview, the audio clips were transcribed. After reading judiciously the transcripts, the analysis was organised around a three columned table (refer to Appendix 8). The transcribed text was put into the first column. The second column was then used to write the initial codes; and later to selectively code again the participants' statements based on these initial codes. The third column was used to write memos which are reflections, thoughts and also other formulations. Memos were written all along the research process in between interviews and not only at one stage. Since memos were sometimes written without

any inhibitions, they were reflected upon in the personal research journal to acknowledge the subjective element within them.

In the initial coding stage, transcripts were coded using line-by-line coding, which is one of the possible techniques that can be used during this initial stage. This consisted of naming each line of the written data (as suggested by Glaser, 1978) even if sentences were divided into different lines or if they didn't appear to be important. The naming of the codes reflected a particular concept or subject of what the participants were talking about and the researcher was very careful to use the same words used by the participants whenever possible. Moreover, words that reflect actions were used as suggested by Charmaz (2006) thus adding '-ing' to the words. Charmaz (2006, p. 51) also identifies a set of questions to help the researcher in this initial coding stage and these were thought to be very useful while doing line-by-line coding. As part of this initial stage of coding, highlighters were also used on the text to accentuate perceived powerful statements by the parents. Different colours were used to reflect the codes.

In the selective coding stage, the researcher went through the line-by-line codes attempting to explain larger segments of data which show an emerging pattern (refer to Charmaz, 2006). Whenever the validity of some line-by-line codes was dubious, these were coloured differently and tackled at a later stage which usually resulted in either removing or merging them with other codes.

From the second interview onwards, another three columned table was used to probe for any emerging categories (refer to Appendix 9). Only the selective codes from the transcript were organised in the first column this time, according to any categories that were seen emerging (which were put in the second column). These categories usually reflected codes which were most occurring in the text or those that were seen to have uncommon themes as perceived by the researcher.

Since the codes from different transcripts were being merged within the same table, the use of the 'constant comparative method' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was possible. This method is usually used to establish analytic distinctions through finding similarities and differences either in the same interview or between different ones.

This also entailed referring back to transcripts and re-reading relevant parts of the transcript to ensure validity.

The change in categories was very noticeable as new data emerged and this informed new questions that were put in the third column to take to the subsequent interviews which is also part of the theoretical sampling approach. Whenever codes were not seen to fit the categories, these were either put at the bottom of the table for future reference or else new categories were constructed depending on their perceived utility to theory construction. Sometimes this process also involved a change in the already established categories. (Refer to figure 5).

This systematic process was done in a way to ensure retrieval of parents' statements in transcripts by using colour coded strategies that were mapped to a key and other organising ways.
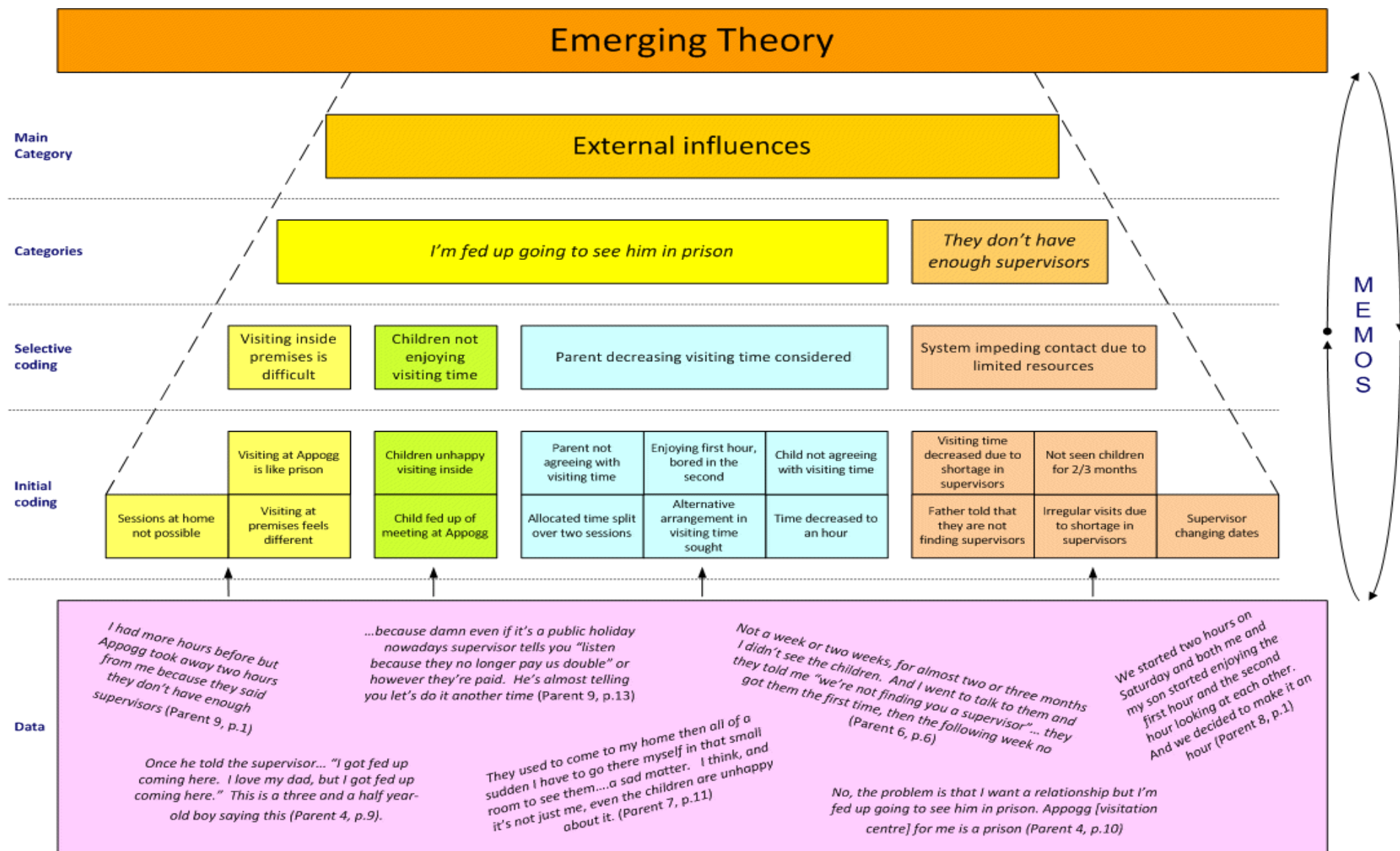
Figure 5: Diagrammatic representation of the process used to arrive at the main categories.

4.3 The main categories

For the sake of clarity, the categories were seen to fall under four main categories entitled 'External influences', 'Being a parent', 'Parent-child relationship' and 'Future relating'. These four themes capture those changes in or influences on non-custodial parents' perceptions and experiences under supervised visits. These could alternatively be considered to be the main blocks capturing how and where perceptions of the non-custodial parents have changed. The 'external influences' relates to participants' views on issues and matters related to supervised contact which are external to them and their relationships with their children. 'Being a parent' refers to the non-custodial parents' thoughts and feelings about themselves as parents and their parenting in the context of supervised arrangements. This is similar to parental representations as discussed in the Literature review (refer to section 2.4). However, this label was thought to be broader in its meaning as it emphasises the state of being a parent as well as the parenting aspect. The 'parent-child relationship' theme describes what parents perceive to be happening in their relationships with their children. These then feed into a theme entitled 'Future relating' which is seen to reflect future concerns as a by-product of the other three (refer to figure 5), but which importantly also informs what happens in the other three themes which reflect the present situation.

All the themes can be seen to be interconnected in that they inform and are informed by each other. One must appreciate that some categories do not fit neatly and can be seen as merging into other ones. This highlights the complex nature of the researched area. Most of the categories were labelled using the direct statements of these parents which is thought to be more genuine yet forceful in bringing out their perceptions and emotions.
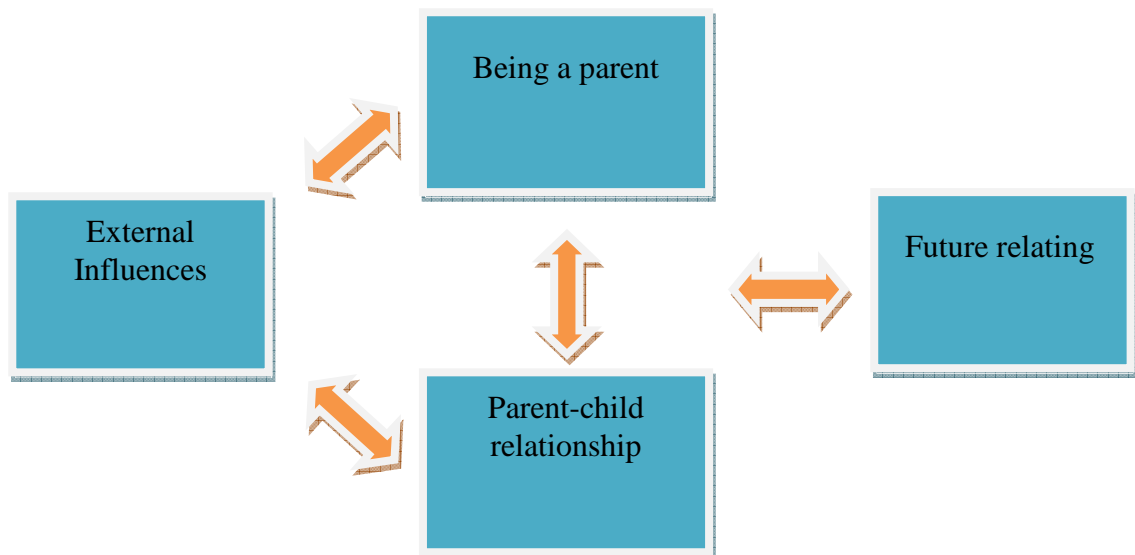
Figure 6: The main emerging categories

4.4 External influences

The categories which have emerged from this main category can be divided into two types. The first one, 'Parental views about the system' relates to interviewed parents' views about how the system functions and their relationship to it. The other one, 'Influences of other relationships' involves the perceived influence of proximal relationships in the NC parents and child's life.

4.4.1 Parental views about the system

One of the issues which was recurrent along most of the themes in this section was related to trust in how the system functions. This was also felt during the process of recruiting participants for this research as most parents were not willing to disclose information about themselves and their relationships with their children, hence not participating.

4.4.1.1 "There's no justice in my case"

All interviewed parents were against having children removed and supervised contact imposed. The decision taken by the system was perceived by the parents to be based on either lack of proper information gathering related to the case or else of an over exageration of matters. Thus, throughout the interviews various parents raised sentiments of not being treated fairly by the system and of justice not being served.

> *There's no justice in my case, where I have what to show and I have evidence. I have proof from Appogg. I never had arguments; always positive.* (Parent 4, p.5)

> *There's the need for the Court to be aware of the whole situation before sending parents to visit their children at Appogg. Not like my case; it was only aware of half the situation. If the Courts were aware of the whole situation, these things wouldn't happen. This damage would certainly decrease.* (Parent 1, p.19)

Some parents compare their situation with those of others whose children haven't been removed and see that their situation as unfair.

> *I was offended because I used to see many people not doing their work (as parent) well. I even saw people beating them and neglecting them. Then I, who neither does drugs, nor drink, nor smoke, a house-wife, always acting correctly then they took them away from me. And I had told them that I am not with the partner I had.* (Parent 2, p.2)

4.4.1.2 "I lost my children and that was it"

Once removal took place, many parents seemed to depict a situation whereby the reversal of such a decision was far away if not imposible. Two of the parents spoke about there not being proper feedback between different levels in the system to ensure that supervised contact is removed. This increased their uncertainty about future access with their children - once removal tool place, there seemed to be no way out.

> *At Appogg I wasn't considered as a human being but as a person whose daughter made a very vulgar statement about her … In the first meeting I had… the woman who spoke to me at Appogg… hurt me a lot… she brought me to nothing, not able to do anything. I lost my children and that was it.* (Parent 1, p.3)

> *At least the Courts should get feedback… say after a year, six months… listen are they doing well… we are under Social Worker X right, she's been telling us over a year and a half… "for us you can visit outside". But still the Court doesn't take action. It gives you the sentence and that's it. It doesn't give a f*** that is. The Court orders Appogg but Appogg has nowhere to report back.* (Parent 8, p.11)

> *Appogg clarified more than once with the Courts that access must change because the way things were moving wasn't in the boy's favour but against him, it's causing the boy damage… the boy is meant to enjoy his father as he should; so on their part they see no risk or need for supervision and so on.* (Parent 4, p.13)

4.4.1.3 "You cannot trust anymore"

Parents' trust towards professionals especially social workers was not very apparent. It seemed to be related mostly to their involvement in removal of children and/or impositions of supervised contact. Some parents felt that they naively and blindly trusted social workers believing they were genuinely interested in helping. Others thought that everything was fine just because they never received feedback from their Social Worker. This then seems to be related to how much they felt comfortable to share and trust supervisors during their visits.

> *I used to speak to a social worker who used to encourage me to phone her if I feel down, and she would come and talk. And that's what she did in fact, she would come and we would talk. I used to tell her about such and such a problem... in Courts, from small problems she magnified them and turned everything against me... I don't trust anyone, none of them, none. I used to trust one person once but then you sort of cannot trust anymore.* (Parent 7, p.15)

> *They used to come, they don't talk, then they invent and do whatever after. When they took the children they started coming up with reasons... Had they told me "listen this is dirty" I wouldn't have left it like that, I would have cleaned it so the children wouldn't have been taken from me. No, they come and do not talk, as soon as they took the children they started spitting everything. This doesn't make sense.* (Parent 5, p.6)

4.4.1.4 "You came and took my children and left me"

Some parents felt that they were given no guidance prior to removal of children. They thought that had they been given guidance based on clear expectations, they would have done their best to change. Expecting change after removal was seen as not

realistic and more difficult by parents especially when parents embark on certain lifestyles.

> *… support should be before. It's easier than taking the children away and then expecting change* (Parent 3, p.12)

> *What I wish is that they look at the case intently, see what there is, what needs changing, to see what they wished I had in my life because there may be things which I have to change in my life… For me I did all I could… Because look, they used to come here from Appogg and never said "listen P, for instance, your floor isn't clean, wash it". No, they'd come and not talk, then they invent and do whatever after. As soon as they took the children they started spitting out everything... Had they told me this was dirty, I would have cleaned it so the children wouldn't be taken away from me.* (Parent 5, p.6)

Support after removal was perceived as lacking for this parent who seemed to be very open for it. However, it could be the case that some parents would perceive support as an intrusion especially in the context of lack of trust.

> *Because you came and took my children and left me, you dispersed the family even more.*(p.2)
> *At least if you took the children, try and help the family. Don't break the family; because that's the way I saw it, that a home was broken. There's no courage where you want something and have to work for it.* (Parent 3, p.4)

4.4.1.5 "Into one ear and out of the other"

Sometimes parents sought contact with their Social Worker for support. The perceived lack of support referred to above could be coming from lack of communication.

> *Because I sort of never saw the other Social Worker. He sent for us once. I told him if you send for us I'll come. I don't miss. Once he sent for me and once he was sick.* (Parent 3, p.17)

> *First of all they ignore what you tell them, it's into one ear and out of the other; you're not taken into account sometimes. They say "yes, yes" or if I call to make an appointment to talk to her… sometimes they say she's working outside or she calls you back after four days… I don't find them helpful at all.* (Parent 7, p.14)

However, not all parents experienced the social worker as distant, unhelpful and uncommunicative. For one parent, support by social workers was seen more in terms of how much they help to make justice to their story:

> *I spoke to a social worker. Naturally then the social worker realised what sort of person I am, then she came on my side and helped me, and she helped me as much as she could.* (Parent 1, p.12)

4.4.1.6 "Supervisors are not aware of the situation"

Supervisors are the ones who make most contact with the visiting parents and are seen as representatives of the system. The relationship between the supervisor and the parents seems to either accentuate or decrease parents' issue, with trust thus impacting on their views about the arrangement and also on what happens during contact.

Parents seemed to want supervisors to know the details about the case prior to their involvement with the parents and children. This has to be seen in the context of a situation whereby parents say that they cannot tell their story in front of their children, so they cannot give their side of the story. An informed supervisor seems to be perceived as more flexible in allowing certain interaction and communication between the non-custodial parents and their children.

> *I don't like the fact that the supervisors are not aware of the situation; that the supervisors are not told anything. They don't know anything. So this supervisor only knew that … the Court took her daughter, so this mother is bad, put her on this side and the daughter on the other side so that she won't cause more damage.* (Parent 1, p.7)

> *If then they come for supervisory access, … they aren't prepared… they have an empty person before them. They cannot read inside him; nothing. All he knows how to do is sit there, their order being not to speak to my daughter about the situation, that's it.* (Parent 1, p.18)

4.4.1.7 "I'm not trusted"

There is a tendency that parents not only find it diffcult to trust the system, but they also feel not trusted by it. Although their trust in the system and their perception of whether they are perceived to be trusted by the system are not necessarily causal or dependent, there seems to be a perceived mutual lack of trust in the system and by the system. More specifically, some interviewed parents felt not trusted with their own children. They had the feeling that 'everything' had to be done and scrutinised by the watchful eyes of the supervisors. This could impart a feeling of being helpless in the view of others.

> *And there's also the fact that I don't seem to be trusted to go to the toilet with my son… they come too and wait outside. As if I'm not trusted... but this is my*

son... am I going to hurt my son? Would I hurt my son? I sort of feel as if they don't trust me; I wouldn't hurt my son. Because that's how I feel about it. Would I hurt him? They're all the time behind you like that. I don't feel comfortable with my son who is my son... no I could never, a mother wouldn't hurt her son surely. (Parent 5, p.10)

And what the children hate most is when I take them out...to take them to the toilet. You should see them all coming behind me to the toilet. I can't stand that thing as if I'm in prison. (Parent 7, p.5)

If we go to the toilet she [supervisor] *comes behind us. I go to buy a bottle of coke and packet of Twistees* [snacks] *from the machine in the same building, she comes behind us. And once told her, " we're not escaping from here ".* (Parent 8, p.12)

And say I'm here in front of the shop, my son is there and I see something and call him or my daughter "come and see how cool this top is". And he [supervisor] *comes in between, like that in the middle, get it, he has no right to come in the middle.* (Parent 9, p.4)

4.4.1.8 "They don't have enough supervisors"

Sometimes access to the children was seen as dependant on the system's resources, especially availability of supervisory staff. This has sometimes impeded visits with the parents from starting immediately. In other cases, parents had their visiting time reduced or visits re-scheduled because of feasts.

Not a week or two weeks, for almost two or three months I didn't see the children. And I went to talk to them and they told me "we're not finding you a supervisor"… they got them the first time, then the following week no (Parent 6, p.6)

I had more hours before but Appogg took away two hours from me because they said they don't have enough supervisors (Parent 9, p.1)

…because damn even if it's a public holiday nowadays supervisor tells you "listen because they no longer pay us double" or however they're paid. He's almost telling you let's do it another time (Parent 9, p.13)

4.4.1.9 "I'm fed up going to see him in prison"

The parents found that carrying out the visit in the supervised visitation centre limited their relationships with their children. This impacted on how much parents and children alike communicated, interacted and enjoyed the sessions.

No, the problem is that I want a relationship but I'm fed up going to see him in prison. Appogg [visitation centre] for me is a prison (Parent 4, p.10)

They used to come to my home then all of a sudden I have to go there myself in that small room to see them….a sad matter. I think, and it's not just me, even the children are unhappy about it. But you can't do anything. It's useless speaking with the social worker telling her for example to see about giving me permission so that I can take the children home with me for that hour (Parent 7, p.11)

The parents were aware that the children were not enjoying their time with them because of the arrangement to visit their children in the premises.

Once he told the supervisor… "I got fed up coming here. I love my dad, but I got fed up coming here." This is a three and a half year-old boy saying this (Parent 4, p.9).

Some parents decreased visiting time because they did not see visiting inside the premises as beneficial to the relationship.

The Courts had granted me four hours a week...I didn't agree nor did the boy agree obviously. Four hours is boring in a room. Then we tried to split them two hours, two hours... two hours during the week and two hours on Saturday...we started two hours on Saturday and both me and my son started enjoying the first hour and the second hour looking at each other. And we decided to make it an hour (Parent 8, p.1)

Other parents also spoke negatively about having supervision inside.

I'm sort of in-between, wishing more time and not. Because even in an hour the children seem to get fed up staying in that room. They seem to want to go out... Once she has spent half an hour, she sort of starts to rebel. She starts to get fed up, whining, crying. She wants me to carry her, she pushes me towards the door, as if to say, 'I don't want to stay here' (Parent 7, p.2)

...if I had to stay inside... we wouldn't last half an hour because I'd leave... because what are you going to do? ... these aren't going to play with toys today... at least you go out we go to play billiards ... and nowadays they wouldn't stay inside I mean... (Parent 9, p.2)

Parents with very young children were very sensitive to the adequateness of the rooms to house children.

Mind you the environment where I go isn't good because he has nothing to play with. All he has is a room, chairs and a table. I mean he could at least have a room with toys so you could play with him that way. I mean a room like that of a school sort of. ... had he a better environment you could play with him and he could learn at the same time, better right, not... an empty room ... to stay there in a room it's better at home because at home he has more comfort, more things then there...to stay in a room, that hour in a room is not good right.(Parent 5, p. 9)

I mean the room is small and ugly... I don't know how they bring children into that room, the wall is coming down with flakes of paint; even the children when they start playing they get white with the wall's... I mean there's nothing good

about the room. …if they had to put some television in the room and put some cartoons… the children would feel a little different (Parent 7, p.17)

Visiting at Appogg premises was also posing a lot of distractions which were not helpful to the parents given the limited time.

Even that, that's bad eh: you're in a room, they come and tell you to go out…"because this is booked"… what disorganisation is this?… They lose ten minutes of your time until you get the food and the toys out of a room, you go into another room… even the children feel uncomfortable. … Then she says sorry. Don't say sorry to me, to the children, because it's them you're annoying. Mind you me too but mostly them (Parent 7, p.18)

I'm sorry to say; in there… sometimes we cannot even communicate; there are so many children, screaming. Little children, I feel sorry for them. But I'm talking to a young man not a baby. We look at each other and laugh. There's nothing to do, we're here (Parent 2, p. 10)

4.4.1.10 "As if there's nothing you can do"

A theme which seemed to run along all the interviews was about parents' feelings of helplessness towards the system. There seemed to be a lot of frustration and anger towards how the system was functioning, however parents felt they could not challenge it's authority. This is epitomised by the following parent:

It's as if there's nothing you can do. You have to obey them.(p.2)
Then I ask her if there's anything I can do. Talking to a lawyer won't help. What to do? Nothing, you can do nothing. (Parent 7, p.14)

4.4.1.11 "She has no children and experience, she can't know what it means"

Parents viewed supervisors who are similarly aged and who are parents themselves as being more able to empathise with their situation and thus more flexible. When supervisors are still young, their advice and intervention is seen as an intrusion and as lack of trust in the parents which is taken as an offence by the parents. However, with regards to supervisors who are perceived as more experienced, their intervention is seen as an attempt to help because they are perceived as more able to empathise.

Once they got me a girl there, not even married, she doesn't even have children, and she said "don't cry". At that moment I told her "I don't cry ?" I told her : "Do you know what it means … that they take your daughter after giving birth to her and caring for her all those years ? You are talking? Not even having children !" She told me : "I studied". But it's not enough you know! (Parent 1, p.5)

She doesn't know us. She's still young. There's no maturity, she has no children and experience, she can't know what it means. She's like a security. Not supervision, security. It doesn't make sense. (Parent 8, p.12)

But if you have someone who acts strictly according to the book... They're trying to behave that way with me because that's how they learnt on the paper that doesn't work. ... studies are good but then each case has it's own merits. (Parent 9, p.4)

The supervisor is an elderly woman I believe older than me. I think she feels because she has children. But many of them are still young and unmarried, without children. So they cannot feel like one who has children. When they're older they feel the pain the mother is going through at that moment... she can even give advice...do this instead of that. Or, talk to the children like this, show the children that. (Parent 3, p.20)

4.4.1.12 "You've been with us so long you're like part of the family"

A good relationship with the supervisor was thought to facilitate the supervised contact and indirectly help the parent-child relationship. For instance, the relationship with the supervisor can help children to disclose personal things with their parents, such as matters related to school. This relationship helps parent and child to feel more comfortable with each other and to show more confidence in relating.

> *The children love him. Yes the children love him very much and even say they have problems at school they tell the supervisor.* (Parent 3, p.16)

> *I tell her, "please let me leave him with you for five minutes so you can understand what is bothering him perhaps he feels better telling a woman once he's used to you and you've been with us so long you're like part of the family".* (Parent 4, p.13)

> *My children … got used to one of the supervisors who seems to be coming often, but the others, now it's this one then it's another, as I told you. They got used to her and the eldest daughter got used to the reason why she's there because I tell her, I tell her she's there as a supervisor doing her work … The others though still don't understand.* (Parent 7, p.5)

Parents' desire for the same supervisor, who is also good in their opinion, testifies to how important it is for them to have a good relationship with their supervisor.

> *I want one who will stay with us and who I can trust. I like to communicate with her. Not just me but even my son. He talks to her more. You end up gaining certain confidence; an hour every week.* (Parent 8, p.13)

> *it affects the children very negatively when they change supervisors. Because they would have got used to one, and gain confidence to talk to her, and when*

they see another it's as if they freeze and keep back a lot… And it irritates me too. Someone comes in, and I say where did she come from? Another comes in, who's this? Like that (Parent 7, p.9)

Yes it's important that he doesn't change… if he changes another character comes… Even I start to keep back a bit because I'm afraid. If I do something for instance he can write something bad about me or stop me from seeing them… and that's why he's there so that in time… he understands them more… they start to love him too. (Parent 6, p.13)

4.4.1.13 "They helped me a lot"

Even if the tone towards supervised contact was generally negative, some parents did highlight some positive aspects of having supervision. Some parents thought that supervision served the purpose of protecting them and supporting them as parents among others.

Through supervisors' modelling of appropriate behaviour, some parents have learnt how to relate with their children as an effective parent:

They helped me a lot… How to correct the children…(Parent 2, p.11)

If she sees you doing something she'll tell you… "not that way with children, show them this way". Or "give them like this. Play with them like this". So there's somebody helping… And then she says "that's right". (Parent 3, p.20)

Supervisors are sometimes encouraging and provide hope to parents.

if I have a problem or something… I mean a problem about the children… I tell her and sometimes she sees me crying she goes "oh no …" If I say for example

"they'll never give them to me never is it" and she says "oh no don't do that, maybe they will you know" (Parent 2, p.10)

Supervisors are witnesses of what happens with the child. This serves as protection in certain cases.

she protects me from her, from his mother, who lies about me. Yes because if she tries to come up with a lie or something, I'm protected… I have a witness and they protect me. (Parent 4, p.13)

Supervisors support parents in certain cases.

if you need something you'd ask them, you'll get advice for sure. Even regarding the children. For example I'd tell her I noticed that my son had a rash when he was at the institute. She writes it and tells me she'll tell them about it… And when she comes back she says listen I told them, I asked them and they said it was because he ate apples say, … they do take steps. (Parent 3, p.17)

Supervisors serving as mediators between parents:

I go five minutes late so the grandmother won't do to him what his mother does, "go", she tells him to go and then keeps his hand at the same time. I come five minutes late exactly. With five minutes purposely, I always take him from the supervisor. (Parent 4, p.12)

4.4.2 Influences of other relationships

Another major theme which emerged was related to the influence of other proximal relationships in the parents' and/or children's life. An external influence impacts on what happens in the parent-child relationship, helps define the relationship and construct boundaries vis-à-vis other relationships.

NC parents felt that they were being alienated by the child's other relationships. Parental alienation was expressed when there was the feeling of being the subject of negative messages against them, when children change their behaviour towards them and also when they feel constrained not to speak out what they feel so as not to compromise their relationship.

4.4.2.1 "His mother sets him against me"

Non-custodial parents are well aware that children might be exposed to negative messages about them, especially when the relationship between the parents breaks down and children end up in the custody of the other parent. Custodial parents are perceived to use children to exert control over them. Non-custodial parents feel they are at a disadvantage because they cannot even out or correct the negative influence. Apart from having limited time with their children, they are not given space to clarify matters and present their views. This is seen as potentially harmful to the relationship with their children.

> *My daughter was living with her dad and grandmother. This girl used to spend twenty-four hours listening to one version and always against her mother. Inside Appogg, I didn't even have the right to talk to my daughter about this clear situation; to explain myself to this girl. This right was taken from me by Appogg. I had no right.* (Parent 1, p.9)

> *… his mother sets him against me… since we started the access visits… and she used to threaten me that she would deport me from Malta. And "Forget the boy, forget everything, you can say goodbye to the boy…" As if I don't exist for my son. I have nothing; I have no right to him.* (Parent 4, p.3)

> *For some time my son's mother spoke against me on and on. But he was always broad-minded, he always asked me certain things … She thinks she's*

putting him against me. I told him once we're out of Appogg, seriously that's what I told him, one to one, I'll explain everything, don't worry. (Parent 8, p.17)

When these two children are with me they chat, joke and so on, we tease each other … Once they are with their mother, they don't even look at you. This happened twice I mean… if they're with their mother they barely look at you… you simply reason out that at home they hear nothing but stuff against their father. (Parent 9, p.5)

Some parents get a first hand experience of parental alienation during the start or end of the session.

"Go to your father. Go to your father". Verbally she tells him to go. But in fact she used to hold him. And she used to press his hand I mean till she left an imprint... a mark on his hand. Besides giving him a side-ways look, an ugly look; the boy gets scared, he turns white, yellow... in a very negative way... (Parent 4, p.5)

4.4.2.2 "She used to come acting very differently my girl"

Parental alienation is mostly felt when children start acting differently towards the non-custodial parent.

and once he was at Appogg we found him crying and he didn't want to stay with me, nor leave. Neither would he stay with me nor want to leave... (Parent 4, p.6)

… she used to come acting very differently my girl… she used to be very angry and she used to come… confused and angry at me. So the relationship between us started to cool off. The young one was different because the young one used

to hear but she used her head and where she understood it was ok, where she felt they weren't saying the right things, she ignored. (Parent 1, p.1)

4.4.2.3 "No matter what she is, she's their mother and I'm their father, what happened was not with them"

While being cognisant about the possible negative influences set against them through parental alienation, most of the interviewed parents emphasised the importance of not speaking negatively about the custodians in front of their children. This was seen as a way avoiding putting indirect stress on the relationship with their child.

I suggest other parents…to remain calm … to vent their love on their child or children, not to say things against the mother: "Your mother's like that, your mother hates you, because your mother's like that,…". To the contrary: " Obey, don't be rude". Encourage him always to obey the mother, no matter how bad she is; she's still his mother. That's all I can say. (Parent 4, p.17)

… she's getting annoyed at the grandmother. She starts arguing with the grandmother … she (child) says she humiliates her in public … she opens up to me about everything. I start to explain to her, to still be patient with her. She brought you up…(Parent 6, p.10)

One of the parents emphasised the importance of distinguishing between matters which belong to the child and those which should only be dealt between the parents.

So as not to feel distanced from the children I never start arguments which are going to put their mother in the middle to set them against her. … when I have an argument with their mother about something I never argue in front of them. I may phone, call her and we'd argue but not in front of them… I never say anything against their mother. No matter what she is, she's their mother and I'm their father, what happened was not with them… just with her (Parent 9, p.8)

4.4.2.4 Negative influences of other relationships

Influences from other relationships in the parents and the child's life were also seen as potentially harmful on the parent-child relationship. These relationships seem to raise questions related to loyalty and trust among others.

> *Obviously then she took it badly when she got to know that I was to have another child, ... there...to the point where she even wanted me to abort... my daughter wanted me to abort... she used to stay away, she was very jealous of him...* (Parent 1, p.2)

> *Another thing was that my eldest never accepted my partner, never... that she reached the point where they made her do what she did, particularly in order to do me wrong...* (Parent 1, p.2)

> *The youngest girl is fostered; on one hand I say she's alright because she's with a family, they'll give her love and so on, but then on the other hand I say better in an orphanage than being fostered...they chose outsiders. That hurts me a lot.* (Parent 5, p.4)

> *… when the girl is young she doesn't understand. She'll recognise that you're her mother but she'll say "someone else brought me up"… how will you explain then* (Parent 7, p.10)

4.4.2.5 Positive influence of other relationships

Apart from negative influences, the presence of other proximal relationships was thought to play an important part in the parent-child relationship and also for the psychological wellbeing of the non-custodial parent. The NC parents find it quite unfair that supervised contact impedes them from having other people witness their relationship especially when these are relatives.

Now coincidentally today I was talking with the social worker … and I told her that my family is coming at the end of the year; they're coming here (Malta). I cannot get them to meet my children. No she said because according to the decree, only the father; which means that if my mother and relatives come, they cannot see my son without her (custodian) permission. She said however she would do her best, to resolve this problem. (Parent 4, p.16)

My sister has her own family, she has children too…. But nobody saw my child; everyone tells me that; I used to show them the photos, but nobody saw her… Well it's a bit saddening, as if nobody knows her. I have a daughter who nobody has seen yet, she doesn't exist… they tell me, "Gosh we really wish to see her …" I tell them we cannot because it's not allowed by Appogg. … When I got home from hospital…neighbours were like "congrats, congrats". "What did you have? Congrats!" What congrats, congrats, can't you see I came alone from hospital? "Where's the girl?" They took her from me in hospital, what do you tell them? I cried a lot (Parent 5, p.5)

4.5 Being a parent

An important aspect which emerged from the interviews was the way parents perceived themselves within this parent-child relationship. Having to visit their children under supervision has changed their perceived way of being parents and they see this as impacting the dynamics between them and their children. This section will look more closely at the perceived challenges brought by this situation on their presence as parents.

4.5.1 "Before we were like one person"

Removal of children is experienced by parents as a loss, not only of their children but also of their parenthood. They found themselves 'fighting' to remain parents in the eyes of their children. This feeling emanates from a perceived lack of control and involvement in the children's life.

Before I was the mother of my children. Now …the children aren't mine. I don't have the right to talk to my daughter as I want to. I have no right to give advice to my daughter as I wish to. I have no right to take care of her. These rights were taken away from me by Appogg. Simply, all Appogg did was "2 hours to play with her"… my daughter ended up like being an object to me. They bring her, like a doll, I play with her and they take her away from me. I cannot do anything for her. (p.4)
Before we were like one person. (p.5)
We wanted that my daughter and I stay in a mother-daughter relationship and they didn't let us, we couldn't. (Parent 1, p.7)

It's as if my daughter is not mine, she's fostered….For me, I can say I have no children (Parent 5, p.4)

Since the day they left till today I feel very sad and I feel different. At one time a mother, with the children always with me, whatever I do they're always around me…(broken voice) wherever I go they were always with me then suddenly nothing. I mean you feel different you know. I feel sort of sad, like empty you understand, without children. You feel like I'm not capable of anything else. (Parent 7, p.9)

I feel, sometimes you have to feel like you're a father right. I'm not there. His dad on SMS, his dad on the telephone, a dad for that hour, but there's no… I'm not his dad; I'm not living with him. I have no say in his life. And neither has he a say in my life. (Parent 8, p.14)

Mind you, the role of a father when it's like that… there isn't much… you don't remain that active in things. Because you have to ask to know certain things…I know certain things because I either see them or I ask them. (Parent 9, p.10)

This feeling of losing parenthood comes through the various limitations parents experience when trying to access their children, as can be seen in other categories.

even in the First Holy Communion [a Catholic ceremony] *... They didn't even let us take them up for First Holy Communion. For mass alright, we could stay on the last bench. But isn't that a heartache? We couldn't even take a photo with the boy doing his First Holy Communion. I didn't like that either.* (Parent 3, p.5)

... they didn't tell me at first that they were giving him pills….they told me after my daughter who likes to talk more than my son told me. But since it was necessary I accpeted it, however I was offended when they didn't tell me certain things. And the children used to tell me many things. (Parent 2, p.3)

4.5.2 "You have to keep back a lot"

Throughout many of the interviews there seemed to be a feeling of disempowerment by many parents when it comes to disciplining their children. Some parents thought that they needed to go against how they believe parents should be with their children in order to avoid relationship breakdown. Others feared that their disciplinary measures would be looked at negatively by the supervisors.

I have a girl aged fifteen I mean I don't even let her go out, except with us. I'm strict. But you sort of see them that hour and you cannot discipline them. You cannot, because then … if you shout at her… this girl is going to dislike you. Because you're going to see her for an hour; you don't have the day with her so when she's good, you tell her "what a good girl, see!" During that hour what

will you manage to do with her? You're going to shout at her, she'll sulk and that's it, time is up. (Parent 3, p.12)

No I don't feel comfortable because I'm afraid… they'll report you; they write all the time. The supervisors write all the time. So I'm afraid that maybe they say because I shout at him…. to correct him you sort of cannot correct him… you have to keep back a lot… the way I think they want me yes, I do that a lot yes it affects me a lot. That's what I'm doing… (Parent 5, p.7)

Because now one of the older ones… I tell them something, they say you have no right over us. They can tell you that… but I'm afraid, afraid of that word… (Parent 6, p.17)

I'm dealing with this girl as a friend not as my daughter… No not as a parent… She opens up with me more… It affects me because if for example she starts wanting to do as she likes then she can say what she likes you understand; she breaks up with you. She can break up with you. (Parent 6, p.19)

Supervisors are sometimes the ones who take the disciplinarian role during the visits. Some parents seem to be willing to let go of it.

Look at the supervisor, if he tells her "no" it's ok. But if we tell her the girl seems to feel it. Yes, yes if he tells her no, I tell her "you see, he told us no". It has to be because if nobody stops her, the children aren't stopped…. But for the parents it's difficult to stop them in this case (Parent 3, p.15)

Well sometimes you know children, sometimes they argue between themselves or the boy sometimes sulks, or when he burps, she tells him: "well, what should you say? … Well no, no it helps me a lot, no, no it helps a lot, it helps. (Parent 2, p.5)

4.5.3 "A message to give to my daughter"

Parents feel the need to pass on their values and beliefs to their children however, supervised contact doesn't facilitate this.

> *I got him used to my system because don't forget, he wasn't brought up with me. He only met me for a year and seven months...* (Parent 4, p.8)

> *My aim was, not to play Ludo, I didn't care about Ludo, I cared nothing about anything. My aim was figuring how to use those two hours so that my daughter when she tries to go out of that door, she'd be going out with a good message in her mind that this girl can grow up with. That's all I was trying to do... A message to give my daughter ...so that even though she doesn't see her mum for five days, however this girl will keep using those values which I taught her before.* (Parent 1, p.14)

> *Do you know what I tell them, I tell them .... "I never showed off" ("Qatt ma tqazzist"). And I tell them that they have to be like that; ...* (Parent 9, p.10)

> *I need to give him a direction: where he needs to go or not, what he needs to do or not; but under supervision these things are bothersome.* (Parent 8, p.2)

> *When they want to play, I play with them but at some point when I tell them enough, it's enough. I teach them when it's time to play, we play when it's time to study, you have to study, and when it's time to sleep, sleep...* (Parent 6, p.4)

From unofficial sources, the researcher was told that it is not an uncommon practice for non-custodial parents whose religious beliefs are different from that of the custodial parents to pray in front of their children as an indirect and acceptable way of passing their religious beliefs to their children.

4.5.4 "I don't know their about upbringing"

Many parents feared that their children's upbringing wasn't an adequate one possibly because it did not have the same values and beliefs of those of the parents.

> *The biggest worry I had first, was that the values, which they had for all those years... now she's going to a bad family and she will lose all those values. Her sister lost them. Unfortunately her sister lost them. Thank God the young one didn't.* (Parent 1, p.12)

> *It affects me that my son is in an orphanage. I see children from orphanages, I'm telling you they all come out misbehaved, they all come out that way... There's not one person who comes out of an orphanage who's a well-behaved child... no they're all unsettled. Because they say, ",my mother left me in an institute, she never took care of me". That's why drugs, that's why for me they fall victim to drugs.* (Parent 5, p.3)

> *I don't know what's happening with them. I don't know what they're doing. I don't know about their upbringing... from what I see of the young ones they have no upbringing whatsoever. Bad language, ... they fight a lot against each other. They have no education whatsoever...* (Parent 6, p.11)

> *... I'll mention my worst nightmare... Her brother used to live with a lesbian and my son was brought up with his mother living with a gay and a lesbian. Well, he's still young... I don't like it. I have no control; no control.* (Parent 8, p.10)

> *And I emphasize it a lot because I'm very afraid of these addictions ... I keep hammering, about this vice of drugs; I put a lot of emphasis. Particularly with my son, I'm obsessed about him if God forbid I ever see a scratch on his leg or something of the sort, I want to know how he got it and why. Because this scares me a lot ...*(Parent 9, p.9)

4.5.5 "I wouldn't have stayed long enough with them"

Parents want more regular contact with their children to maintain continuity and to continue strengthening the relationship. This has to be seen in the context of parents' need to pass their values and beliefs and the fear of an inadequate upbringing.

An hour a week's really long, I mean to see them again… You have to try and enjoy that time with them… (Parent 5, p.10)

Mind you, that hour I have I cannot do many things with them because as soon as I go in … we eat together so that even for them it's not always the same things… every time I go I try to do something different with them, not always the same. For example, we eat, we talk, we play together, things like that (Parent 7, p. 7)

…I wouldn't have stayed long enough with them. An hour passes quickly you know … they start talking to me… What they did, didn't do, and I start settling with them like that. So there wouldn't be enough time but there's nothing to do… (Parent 6, p.17)

In the following extract, one of the parents contextualised her difficulty to relate to her different aged children in a one hour weekly session:

Which means I was trying to give more attention to the youngest because she was a newborn, you know after two boys you're happier sort of… and I couldn't sort of see them both together, in an hour. You have to play with the older boy, he can play, you're sort of going to play with him with toys. The young girl, cries for the bottle, cries all the time…different attention. In an hour you sort of can't find anything to do. So the older boy understands alright, he'll play and tell you "mummy come play with me"…you have to stay with him to play… the newborn child you have to be careful with, you have to burp her, you have to make sure she doesn't choke, she doesn't get nauseated, you have to stay more with her, the newborn. (Parent 5, p.1)

4.6 Parent-child relationship

This section focuses on parents' views about the parent-child relationship in the context of supervised visitations. The parents list many factors which they see as de-stabilising their relationship with their children. At the same time and in the process of coding these messages, there is a strong sense that parents are defining the parent-child relationship and what it really is and what it ought to be without actually being able to be a full player in it. In a way, an experience defined by those who lost the essence of the relationship. They know what it is because they had it and they lost most of it. The process of loss in itself helps to bring out the uniqueness of the parent-child relationship as expressed by these same parents. This section brings out strongly the psychology of what it is about in being a parent to a child.

4.6.1 "The relationship is very big. Very close"

An interesting theme which emerged in all the interviews was the reciprocal, bi-directional nature of the relationship as perceived by the parents. In the participants' conversations about their relationship with the children, parents seemed to perceive children's needs, feelings and intentions as mirroring their own. The parents' love, care and concern was justified because it was perceived to be received, understood and acknowledged by the children mostly through showing similar intentions. Also interesting are the remarks of a few parents about the emotional intensity at the point of meeting and departing.

> *Today she's stronger, as if she knows I did nothing wrong… she used to tell me "mum I love you, I know you didn't do anything. Be brave." That's it. And I'll be honest with you, I got to this point because I plucked up courage.* (Parent 1, p.4)

> *I mean even my daughter sits on me, hugging me kissing me, doing my hair, or playing with my ears and telling me "mummy I'm missing you"… so the children*

feel sad that they're missing me. Then you should see them telling me "mum is it already time?" When they say that I feel even sadder and when I leave them I feel depressed again. (Parent 2, p.4)

The children love us very much, and they wait for us a lot. The children wait for our day a lot. (Parent 3, p.1)

But he's always sad my son (p.11)…. Sometimes when I'm going back home I cry in the car till I get home… (Parent 3, p.19)

The relationship is very big. Very close… he'll be waiting for the time for me to come. When he knows that I'm coming to Appogg, he waits for me anxiously (Parent 4, p.1)

As soon as I get into the car before driving, I always start to cry. … They start " bye daddy" they start hugging me, kissing me and so on…(Parent 6, p.5)

I'm careful, that's the thing, how I talk so that I won't take my son to court. Why? I don't want my son to touch the tresh hold of the Law Courts, I don't want him to. He's old enough and he offered himself; he said "dad I want to go and testify to what she's doing to me and everything". I said "son no offence, that's the last resource…" (Parent 8, p.17)

In one of the cases, the relationship ended when this bi-directionality and reciprocity was perceived to be absent by both the child and the parent.

However, there was so much anger, from my part towards my daughter obviously, and there was so much confusion in her mind about me, that the relationship then ended. So at this point, it's as if she's not my daughter, and I'm not her mother. That's how we ended up. (Parent 1, p.20)

It appears that supervised contact blurs the visibility of these reciprocal messages that parents and children pass to each other. The limitations put because of this extraordinary situation necessitates that parents learn and come up with alternative ways of reaching their children by making these bi-directional and reciprocal messages visible.

4.6.2 "My daughter needs to talk to her mother, to open up"

Visiting parents see communication as an important aspect in the relationship with their children. For some parents, interacting and playing with their children was secondary to communicating with them. However, both parents and children feel they have to hold their communication back sometimes and communicate within limits. Many reasons why they hold back on communication were identified. Among these one finds the issue of trust towards the system and also due to the personal nature of some conversations.

> *... if you're under supervision you have to be careful what to say. I cannot talk directly to my son nor can my son speak directly to me. Sometimes he sends me certain questions, sms's... because he cannot talk, he's afraid, annoyed, whatever, there's something keeping him, get it?* (Parent 8, p.2)

> *My son's growing up... I'm not comfortable asking him under supervision if he has a girlfriend. What's he doing with the girlfriend. I feel I should know, he's my son right. I need to give him a direction. Where he goes, doesn't go, what he does, doesn't do, but under supervision I'm not comfortable with this.* (Parent 8, p.2)

> *... prior to our meetings at Appogg we had a very good relationship, very, very good I mean... when we started meeting at Appogg communication decreased not increased obviously. However now he's going to be fifteen, that time he*

was still going onto eleven… now he'll talk more. My son's mature, he's maturing. (Parent 8, p.1)

…they didn't give me the chance to communicate with her, they didn't give me the chance to love her, this girl… Because by playing with her you're not loving her. My daughter is not in need of that. My daughter needs to talk to her mother, to open up. To say what's hurting her, what's frightening her. (Parent 1, p.9)
… we used to communicate with our eyes and nowadays we learnt how to communicate within limits. (Parent 1, p.11)

We communicate… well, sort of. When you're under supervision, you keep back even about certain matters. You hold back on what to tell him. You sort of hold back on everything. When you're alone you feel more comfortable like you're going to talk to him properly… Alone you're going to have more confidence that he'll tell you what he's going through. In front of them my son cannot tell me anything, he seems to be afraid, so then… he still doesn't tell me anything. He's kind of afraid. (Parent 5, p.2)

4.6.3 "I'm afraid he'll get hurt in that hour when I'm with him there"

Playing and interacting during the session is seen to be another important way of relating to children. Interacting, as compared to verbal communication, is here closely related to aspects of non-verbal communication, motion and proxmity. These are also considered important for the building up of relationships. Similarly to communication, interacting with children was perceived as limited, not only because the setting sometimes doesn't permit it but also because of fear of being judged. This is related to the issue of trust described above.

... with supervision there are certain games you cannot play with them... You become afraid he's going to fall, hit himself somewhere or get hurt, that's

99

always a fear I have. ... then the case will get worse and it will be more difficult for you to take them. This frightens me a lot in fact certain games I don't play because I get scared. I tell him not to jump, "come here"... my son wants to jump and run all the time. I tell him... I'm afraid he'll get hurt in that hour when I'm with him there... I don't feel comfortable. (Parent 5, p.7)

They didn't even let her sit next to me. Sitting in an arm-chair opposite, just like you and I are now; can you imagine... what this girl felt, what she went through this blessed girl. (Parent 1, p.13)

I used to take them out when they were still young. I go for them, take them out and spend an hour or two with them at the swings … as long as they like. … I buy stuff for them do you understand? There's more trust, more freedom … And you get to know what the children like and dislike… Under supervision it's like having a policeman at our head get it? (Parent 6, p.11)

4.6.4 "That was the last time I ate alone with my daughter as mother and daughter"

Most interviewed parents seemed to miss a lot those small everyday unplanned interactions which accentuate and highlight the parents' psychological involvement with their children. During supervised contact, this type of interaction is limited and mostly predictable.

When we went home I made noodles for myself and for her and we ate together. That was the last time I ate alone with my daughter as mother and daughter. But two years have gone by, and I couldn't do that again. (Parent 1, p.5)

A mother is one who sleeps and awakes with her daughter, prepares lunch, helps her at school, is next to her when she cries and hugs her and asks her what the matter is, and tells her I'm here to help. (Parent 1, p.11)

… why shouldn't I take him to prívate lessons myself? Why shouldn't I help in with homework? When I know his mum doesn't help him with homework, get it? …why shouldn't I prepare him decent meals myself… This is rubbish; I'm not there. (Parent 8, p.14)

I think what I miss is when they are at home with me, and I cook for them, sometimes sleep next to me… these things. I miss many things I mean, but I think what I miss most are those. (sounding miserable) *We eat together… but now it's different. It's not the same as when you're at home and they come to table, eating with you and so on.* (Parent 7, p.7)

… if my son or daughter missed the bus ... they call you, dad pick me up. … With supervision they cannot do this... under supervision he won't call you. So if you're not under supervision you'll be much more involved automatically (Parent 9, p.17)

… we would love to meet, get in a kitchen, " let's cook"… well we cannot do it. Appogg doesn't allow you. I would spend a day with him, not four hours which we reduced to one. Two hours wouldn't even be enough to finish; you start cooking, talking, there's communication, you're doing something not just sitting and staring…(Parent 8, p.4)

4.6.5 "You have no more confidence"

Supervised contact was thought to decrease the parents' and children's confidence in relating with each other. This lack of confidence then creates uncertainty about the appropriate way of relating.

Without supervision? Of course it helps you. Even they would be more confident. (Parent 9, p.13)

…it affects in that case; you have no more confidence… you have to be careful how to play with them, you have to take care what to tell them. You have to try and be careful because every sign you do… I'm frightened that they're going to give me a bad report. (Parent 5, p.10)

As I was before for example when they were still young, I used to take them out… There, there's more trust, more freedom... And you would know what the children like and dislike. That's more helpful. With the supervisor around it's like having police at your head. There's an outsider watching over you. When you go out with the children, there's more liberty right. (Parent 6, p.11)

They keep back a little and are not free, and neither am I; the same. (Parent 6, p.11)

4.6.6 "We want to get to know each other"

Parents feel that the supervised contact poses a lot of limits to how much parent and child alike can know each other, especially when considering the short and controlled time that they see each other. This is seen as another potential limitation on the relationship.

…we want to get to know each other. Since adolescence, aged ten up till now, fourteen and a half, I don't know him… I have an indication here and there but that's it….I want to know his reactions. … Neither does he know the way I am. He doesn't remember. We lived together the first ten years but he was still young. Today, the most important time of his life … I wasn't there. (Parent 8, p.8)

Of course you know them less. They keep back a bit and are not free, and neither am I, the same. At the same time you're seeing them seated, you're not seeing them say outside… with other children, seeing how they relate to people, how they should talk with people….Well if you take them out you'll know them better… And at the same time you'd know what they like and dislike… his good points … and his bad points. You would have somewhere to reach him… you'd know how to correct the children. (Parent 6, p.11)

4.6.7 "It took time before he spoke to me, then he spoke to me alright"

After the imposition of supervised contact, some parents saw a change in their children's attitude and behaviour towards them. With all their limitations, parents saw the visits as a way of regaining back the chilren's trust.

… when I went to see him the first time in fact he didn't want to talk to me. He lowers his head, not talking to me. As if in a bad mood, the boy knows, that he sort of left me and is in a home… In fact he wasn't talking to me and it hurt a lot inside… Sort of as if I shut him myself. Now it's not because I wanted it. Because they took him, they issued a care order. Well I started to go in fact it took time before he spoke to me, then he spoke to me alright…(Parent 5, p.4)

But I see that he doesn't take much notice of me when I go next to him calling him, telling him come next to me to play. "No I play alone" he goes. In fact he wants to play alone. Then I hold the younger girl. He talks to me and sometimes comes but he seems to be keeping his distance from me. In fact he keeps away from me. Now before he was always stuck to me. Always with me, in fact, always, the eldest. (Parent 5, p.4)

… the children were a bit hard on their part…Because it would be a long time since they saw you…if they see you every week they begin to know you well, they begin to understand well that daddy loves them… (Parent 6, p.7)

4.6.8 "What would help me most is for me to keep explaining the situation"

Interviewed parents were aware that the extraordinary situation might have brought about certain disengagement from the children towards them. This heightens their awareness about their need to gain back their children's trust. One of the ways they think they could do this is by through giving their version of events to highlight their lack of control over the situation. Parents feel that the children want this reassurance but are not getting it because supervised contact prohibits it.

They start saying because mum, my dad left me…Now he's going to say, "my dad left me, I don't even know who he is, my mum put me in an institute", but it's not because I wanted it. Sure I used to show him, I used to hug him and tell him "I love you, it's not me", then he'd say, "alright mum I know". He sort of breaks my heart with that word, "mum I know it's not you", and he starts being ok with me (Parent 5, p.3)

…my daughter tells me "mum but mothers can… the other children go for the weekend why can't we come with you for the weekend?" And when they say this I have no reply to answer her… Well my daughter sometimes, you know, says "oh come on mum tell me why?". I tell her, "I don't know dear". I tell her "ask the social worker"… but it's not from my part because the social worker already told me that I cannot speak with children about these matters… I feel guilty. Because I usually always tell them the truth and not hide it. (Parent 2, p.8)

...I try to make these two children understand and I explain to them. That's it. But I cannot say certain things. (Parent 2, p.10)

... and in fact she doesn't know the truth. Although I try to explain and tell her, but children put something into their head and say mummy wanted to leave me here (voice breaking again); how am I going to explain to her then. (Parent 7, p.10)

I used to end up trying to see how to give this girl certain messages: about the situation, about how she would understand what did and didn't happened, that I did nothing to her. Things that unfortunately my daughter had to understand alone throughout these years. I couldn't talk to her about these things… Nothing. (Parent 1, p.4)

...There are many things I want to explain to my little girl when she grows up. You know, but I mean she's still young for me to tell her now because she wouldn't understand them yet. (Parent 9, p.6)

… what would help me most is for me to keep explaining the situation …that I could explain to the eldest because the others wouldn't understand me… my daughter asks me a lot. "Still long to wait mum?" I tell her "Still", do you understand? I tell her "still long", I won't tell her soon or no you're coming with me now. I tell her the truth. (Parent 7, p.8)

I always tell my daughter, "not all that glitters is gold". And sometimes I write on the mobile 'not all that glitters is gold'. "Be careful. Figure things". Once I told her a story because sometimes I used this to pass certain messges to my daughter because of the supervisor… I used to send her these types of messages otherwise she wouldn't receive them. I wanted to show her in some way that I did nothing. That this girl must realise that there she's in a bad place. Courts sent this girl to live in a bad place. (Parent 1, p.14)

4.6.9 "You try not to deny him anything"

Parents try to resort to other ways of reaching their children to make their love and affection visible. Usually this is done through granting their wishes such as by providing material goods which are immediate and more effective in the short term.

Particularly cash and, and, and… without limits… that's the only ways and means at the moment that I can reach my son (Parent 8, p.4)

I take them wherever they want… basically whenever they ask me for something I always get it for them; whether it is today or tomorrow I get it (Parent 9, p.7)

You try to give them what they wish for (p.16)
Mind you it's true that you give the children more presents because they're glad to get them but you cannot show them your love with presents only, do you understand? I show them, when I go near them I always tell them that I love them ... I mean they are happy with the presents but that's not all. It's not the presents they want in reality. (Parent 7, p.6)

You try not to deny him anything; clothes…(Parent 4, p.8)

She even wanted the mobile; during that hour I gave it to her even if she broke it and I threw it away. (Parent 3, p.4)

4.6.10 "I take them food"

During their visiting time parents seem to do activities which are usually thought to be done in a family environment at home. They seem to re-create some of the interactions that used to happen between them when there were no restrictions in

place. Taking food to children for instance was mentioned by most interviewed mothers.

> We play, we sing, we draw (T.4.1)

> Well, you play a bit with them because they are still young. We used to show him the homework...that sort of thing. I take them food. (T.3.1)

> Some days we might colour, joke with one another, play together or that sort of thing...I ask them for example, about how they're getting on at school....with the youngest little girl, I try to make her laugh as much as possible (T.7.3)

> I bring them food, we eat together (T.7.7)

4.7 Views on future relating

Relating in the context of supervised visitation is something which challenges parents' usual way of relating especially since it raises a lot of issues for the parents as discussed above. The future holds a lot of uncertainty about their relationship and this could be seen even in their intentions to reach their children, as is highlighted in this section.

4.7.1 "I try to be with the children, I do what I can do"

The imposition of supervised contact often leaves parents needing to to find alternative ways to reach their children as parents. They want to access the child as their parent but the supervised visit doesn't facilitate this.

> *Inside Appogg … it was as if they had a wall between me and my daughter. They only left one hole and this poor girl tried to see me through that hole. Otherwise, to try and pass something to me she tried to jump over this wall and*

she didn't always succeed. Sometimes she succeeded. For instance, we used my mobile, I used to write a message, she reads it and replies, because we couldn't speak. (Parent 1, p.5)

Now mind you… I try to be a father. I try to be with the children, I do what I can do. (Parent 6, p.3)

Some parents found it difficult that they could not relate to the children as parents outside the supervised contact and tried to maintain contact outside supervision time, thus showing their involvement and providing continuity.

… I tell him "do you have two hours' time for an online game together?" I tell him "come online". His mum denies him this; she would know he's going to play with me and she doesn't let him play…that annoys me. (Parent 8, p.1)

That's because he can't phone them… Contact, there's no contact with the children… It helps as well, because you are always talking to your son and daughter (Parent 3, p.9)

… even if they give me the children in my care, and I meet them… well why don't I stop? Just because I … I stopped to talk to them… What's wrong with that? This wasn't a case of child neglect or violence or abuse… nothing this isn't the case. (Parent 3, p.5)

I send to (sms) or even phone one of them sometimes. Not once or twice; I send, if she wants to report me [referring to mother] *… If she phones me herself telling me that he hasn't come home yet, I go to look for him myself alright, so if necessary I send them or phone them. It helps because if you send him, ok, you're telling him look dad cares* (Parent 9, p.18)

Two weeks ago, her brother died; that's their uncle. I went to the funeral mass. I didn't talk to her... I stayed at the back, heard mass and left. But they saw me do you understand? (Parent 9, p.8)

4.7.2 "I don't know what's happening tomorrow"

Most parents expressed uncertainty about their future relationships with their children. Many of them didn't seem to have much hope with the current situation and yet what has emerged here depicts parents willing to fight and work so that their relationships with their children last.

And my fear is that my daughter will forget her mother as happened with her sister. And that the relationship breaks... ends. As it ended between her sister and myself. (Parent 1, p.12)

Believe me I don't know what's happening tomorrow. Nobody knows what's happening tomorrow. I'm doing what I can with them so that when they grow up, they come to stay with me. That's my wish that they come to live with me and I start a family afresh. (Parent 6, p.10)

... they took her from me when she was still learning to see certain things... And at this age when she's living with someone else, she can.. although when she sees me she knows I'm her mother... but at that age, a year and a half when someone else is raising her she would start thinking that they are mum and dad, get it?... I wish to do many things with her but I cannot in the situation in which they brought me. (Parent 7, p.2)

... we don't know each other that much man. So he might meet someone and start to dislike me or who knows? This is a constant fear in me. That's why I text him all the time... I think I actually bug him. "What are you doing?"... even his shower gel I buy for him: "What are you washing with?" I go into that much

detail. "What shower gel are you using. Gosh that's for women" and I buy him shower gel for men. My mind works like that. So I do care, I do care and I'm afraid, yes, afraid. (Parent 8, p.9)

If when they grow up they don't want to talk to me they won't but I have nothing on my conscience. When I go to sleep there's nothing that weighs me down because I never deprived them of anything. Now once they're grown up that's their business, whether they talk to me or not. Then they will make their decision (Parent 9, p.6)

4.8 Conclusion

There are several powerful points which came out of the findings. Parents spoke about how they perceived their experiences of relating with their children as parents within the context of supervised visitation. There were a number of influences external to their relationships with their children which were seen to be playing a part in the outcome of what happened between them. This impacted the way they saw their future relationship which also informed the ways they tried to reach their children. What comes across very clearly is the determination of parents to continue their relationship with their children despite the difficulties in doing so.

The categorisation and representations are considered to be key and novel contributions of the research. These categories are mutually related and cannot be considered as separate concepts or outcomes, also in the spirit of systems and symbolic interactionist theory. The implications and the usefulness of these points will be synthesised in the Discussion chapter.

5. Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will analyse and provide a discussion of the major themes and theories that emerge from the findings. This will then be linked to the literature review covered earlier on. Following this discussion, a critical evaluation of the research follows. Since this research is part of the requirements of the Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology it becomes essential to qualify how this research could be relevant for the profession. Moreover the research has highlighted a number of potential considerations and thus the final part of this chapter focuses on implications for people working and doing research in this area.

5.2 Major themes and emerging theories

As explained in the Findings chapter, four main categories seemed to emerge from parents' discourse about their parent/child relationship in the supervised context: external influences, about being a parent, their parent/child relationship and views about future relating (see Figure 5). These could be considered to be the main blocks capturing how and where perceptions of the non-custodial parent have changed.

5.2.1 Impact of external influences on parents' perceptions of the relationship with their children

First, parents seem to have a heightened awareness about 'external influences' impacting on their relationship. This awareness is then seen as influencing the interplay between the other categories, thus shaping parents' representations, their relationship with the child and also their views about future relating.

These external influences are sometimes thought to be represented and embodied by the supervisor who (depending on the individual case) is seen as:

1. a representative of how the system functions and a reminder of their experiences of it (which are most of the times negative).

2. coming in between the parent/child relationship and other proximal relationships.

   a. The supervisor could thus serve either as a safeguard or otherwise as a potential indirect reinforcing agent of negative influences brought about by other proximal relationships. An example of the former would be when supervisors serve as witnesses to what happens during supervised visitation and therefore his positive assessment of the relationship could help improve the situation. An example of the latter is when parents feel constrained in giving their version of events to their child who would otherwise be exposed to negative messages from the custodial parents (mostly in court order cases).

   b. Moreover, the supervisor was also thought to be a gate keeper, blocking or imposing limits on who could enter the session. On certain occasions non-custodial parents consider it to be a positive and necessary boundary.

Consequently, the dynamic of the parent-child relationship seems to be somehow altered as it cannot be isolated from the context in which it is taking place. This otherwise dual relationship seems to transform itself into a triadic relationship such that what happens between the parent and the child is very much influenced by the relationship with the supervisor (see Figure 6).
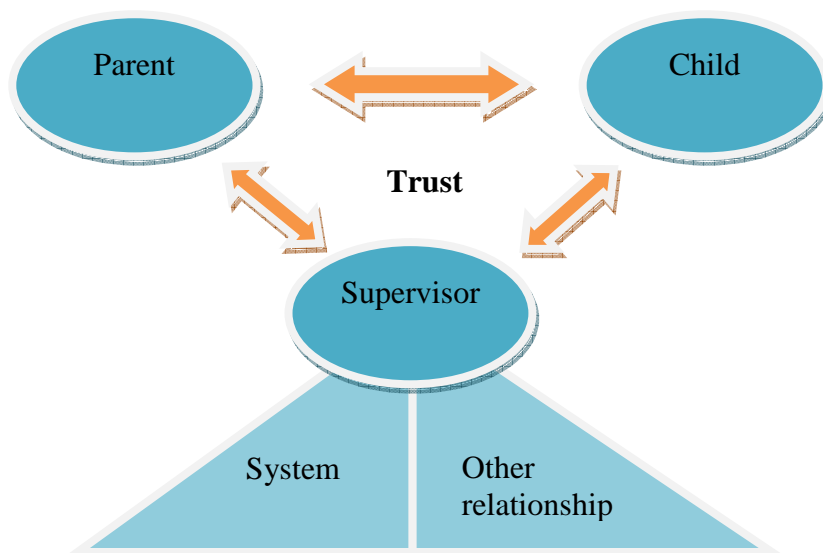
Figure 7: The triadic relationship in supervised visitation contexts

Trust seems to be a distinguishing and mediating factor in the parent-supervisor relationship. This trust is linked with the parents' views about the system, which is reciprocated by the presence of the supervisor who is (consciously) there to evaluate parents' actions and behaviours with their children. There is thus a negative perception bias towards the supervisor since he embodies the system which in the first place broke the relationship. If the parents do not trust the system or have strong emotions against the situation, it becomes challenging for the supervisor to regain at least trust in her/him as an individual. This conflict in perception then spills over on the parent-child relationship as parents' actions and behaviour are informed by how trusting they are of the supervisor who is representing these external influences.

The trust between parents and supervisors naturally changes according to the development of the relationship between them. Some of the factors which mediate this developing relationship relates to parents' perception about supervisors' understanding and empathy towards their situation, and the bonding between the supervisor and the child. It thus seems imperative for the supervisor to work along these lines while keeping an element of required distance to maintain his professional independence. Whenever supervisors change, this complex cycle of building trust is shattered and parents would need to start afresh searching for new messages which indicate how trusting they can be towards the new supervisor. This might be the

reason why parents feel strongly against the change in supervisors, unless the previous supervisor did not have their trust.

5.2.2 Perceptions of being a parent

Supervised visitation mystifies the meaning and visibility of parenthood for these parents. The role as a parent is defined not only by the presence of the child but also by the nature of access to him/her. Access becomes broken and subject to rules. This strongly affects the nature of being a parent when the bond is broken. The perceptions of these parents about actually being a parent are profound as they bring out what they miss now after having passed through the state of parenthood but lost the experience of their child. In a sense, they define what it is most important about being a parent.

There is a strongly felt sense that parents miss the continuous access to their child. They miss the everyday things and contacts happening in a natural family setting not in a 'contractual' type of relationship where relationships have to follow certain expected or accepted rules of behaviour. Convivial things like eating together or sharing the same bed which in their simplicity and impromptu nature, or perhaps through small sacrifices, bring parent and child closely together. Parents frequently talk about these 'symbols' which represent parenthood. The power of these everyday encounters may be easily overlooked, but are clearly a factor which is missed by most supervised parents in this research. One could link this to the attachment theory and the internal working models of caregivers discussed in the literature review (refer to section 2.3). Caregivers accept that the child is attached to them and that they have to provide for the child. Suddenly taking this responsibility away could be hard for parents.

Apart from real restrictions, such as parental rights, the controlled and limited nature of supervised visitation harbours negative feelings related with being a parent in this new context. For instance, interviewed parents spoke about their feelings of disempowerment in relation to their children and their inability to relate to their

children according to their beliefs about being a parent. It appears that they cannot transmit properly their actions or beliefs or wishes about the future of the child. They lose that control of the child who follows their image or footsteps as they want her/him to be. Their actions and behaviour have to be informed not only by their perceptions of the system but also by their children's perceptions of them as parents. This then impacts on much of what happens in the parent/child relationship (refer to section 4.4).

Related also to the negative feelings, the point of every departure can be a continuous trigger for sad feelings like a recurrent theme which they cannot escape from and which they have to continue witnessing. It is as if these parents have to make an appointment with a sad reality every week but which they nonethelss have to face for the benefit of the child and their relationship with him/her (refer to section 4.6). It could be reinforcing those feelings which make the parents sad and in the process could stop them from recovering positively mentally and getting on in life. The consequences of this negative reinforcement is an area which cannot be explored in this study but is something where more research could be conducted.

As a result of this situation, parents find themselves renegotiating their views of being a parent and also re-defining themselves as parents in this new context. For instance, parents sometimes resorted to different ways of showing their love and affection to their children such as by being more willing to grant their wishes or by trying to maintain indirect contact outside supervised sessions. The nature of communication between parent and child changes.

While having to re-negotiate their views about being a parent, interviewed parents still want to pass on some of their values and beliefs to their children. Most parents are concerned about the child's upbringing especially when this is not seen to reflect their same values and beliefs. Therefore, sometimes non-custodial parents pass their values and beliefs more strongly to counteract other influences which they think might not be similar to theirs.

Non-custodial parents' views and feelings related with being a parent in this new context seem to be very much influenced by time. The need for more and frequent visiting time could be arising from the feeling that the relationship is not being actualised. The nature of contact is sliced and there is no continuum necessary to build strong relationships. Still, the qualitative nature of the experience during this time is thought to be equally if not more important. In fact, having more time (in one session) was sometimes felt to work against the parent/child relationship if the time was not of a good qualitative nature, as was the case with some of the parents carrying out their visits at the supervised visitation premises. The nature and the environment of the contact could add to more frustration, suffocation and stress rather than helping in developing the relationship.

5.2.3 Parents' perceptions of the changing relationship

It is not just the nature and sentiments of being a parent which change, but also the nature of the relationship with the child once this is hampered and subject to supervised contacts. An important element in the relationship that emerged from the interviews is the presence of reciprocal, bi-directional messages between parent and child. Parents were able to recognise the presence of a relationship whenever they thought that (depending on developmental age):

1. children's needs, feelings and intentions were congruent and mirroring their own

2. children were perceived as being able to receive, acknowledge and/or understand parents' love, care and/or concern.

These messages would otherwise be assumed to be present, perhaps taken for granted, during most of the simple and impromptu daily interactions between parent and child in a natural family setting (refer to section 4.6.4). However this is clearly not the case in supervised contact. The reciprocity of the meaning of the messages becomes ambiguous and thus there appears to be an effort by these parents to

116

recognise these fundamental aspects in their relationship. Do we share the same love? Is my child able to understand me again?

Parents are aware that the situation might have brought some disengagement from children towards them and this heightens their need to make their psychological involvement evident to them in order to compensate. Their need to make these messages visible motivates much of parents' way of relating and comes across through various ways. For instance, they are very willing to please their children through granting their wishes (refer to section 4.6.9).

This need to highlight their psychological involvement with their children is however tainted by supervised contact due to the limitations it imposes. For instance, parents feel the need to give their version of events to their children to reassure them that the situation was beyond their control, however they feel constrained by the limits imposed from the system of what they can talk about (refer to section 4.6.2).

The perceived limitations put forward by supervised contact together with their need to highlight their psychological involvement with their children create an 'artificial' environment in which the relationship occurs. This makes parents feel less confident due to uncertainty about the appropriate way of relating given the limited knowledge they have about their children outside this supervised environment (refer to section 4.6.5).

5.2.4 Continuity of the relationship in the future

While most parents could identify the basis and presence of a relationship with their children, they have a lot of uncertainty about their future relationship and this influences their current experience as well. What happens in the relationship is dependent on various factors brought about mainly by supervised contact and the system thus creating a fluid situation whereby parents feel they have little control on the unfolding of events which impact on the relationship. In this sense they feel

powerless to determine the future relationship since many things are beyond their control. Continuity of the relationship was thought to depend on external influences as much as on their involvement with their children.

Depending on the developmental age of the child, communication was seen by parents as an important aspect of the relationship. Though limited, parents want to maintain a level of openness in their communication with their children. Some parents also try to use their time to re-create the same atmosphere on which the relationship was based on by doing the same activities they used to do prior to the imposition of supervised contact such as eating, playing and doing homework together. They also try to engage the child's interest by making the session different and interesting however difficult this is given the context (refer to section 4.6.10).

Albeit all the difficulties they face in relating with their children, interviewed parents seemed to show resilience and a willingness to maintain a relationship while hoping that this situation would not last long. Some parents were aware that this hope may not be immediate but may come about when the children have reached an age where they can take decisions by themselves and understand better (refer to section 4.7.2).

5.2.5 Summary of emerging theory

A fundamental outcome of this research is that studies focusing on the relationship between parent and child under supervision cannot be seen in isolation outside the context in which it takes place. The parent-child relationship as perceived by the parents themselves does not stand alone, one to one, but is considered to be part of a wider context within which it continues to be experienced. The supervisor carries several associations as perceived by the parents and therefore his/her presence plays an important role in the continuation of this relationship. The triadic relationship that is formed informs what happens between the parties involved with trust shaping the development of this relationship. As in line with systems theory (Dallos & Draper, 2003) it is thought that a change in one person in the system (comprised of parent,

child and supervisor) influences all the other parties. The supervisor can improve or worsen the perception of and the actual relationship between parent and child, perhaps more than any other proximal relationships. This calls for more attention on the sensitivity of the role of the supervisor.

The dimensions of space (or environment) and time also influence the dynamics in this triadic relationship (see fig. 7). The dimension of space refers broadly to where the supervised contact takes place, whether in a confined space identified by the agency (Appogg) or other possible arrangements. These parents are usually confined within a space which is not theirs or of their own making. Feelings of frustration, suffocation and stress because of the place may complicate matters. On the other hand, the dimension of time not only refers to the available time during which parents can make contact with their children, but also to the availability of time together in the future (hence Time 1, Time 2, Time 3 in diagram). This then links to their views on future relating. Most of the parents interviewed seem to put a genuine investment in the possibility of eventually developing a better relationship with their child in the future. This sense of hope may lead to favourable outcomes or incentives both to stimulate change in the character of the parent but also to encourage the relationship with the child to keep on developing given the circumstances. The visibilities or interference of these dimensions depend on how restricting they are perceived by the parents. Together with the presence of the supervisor, these environmental stimuli strongly define supervised contact for the parents.
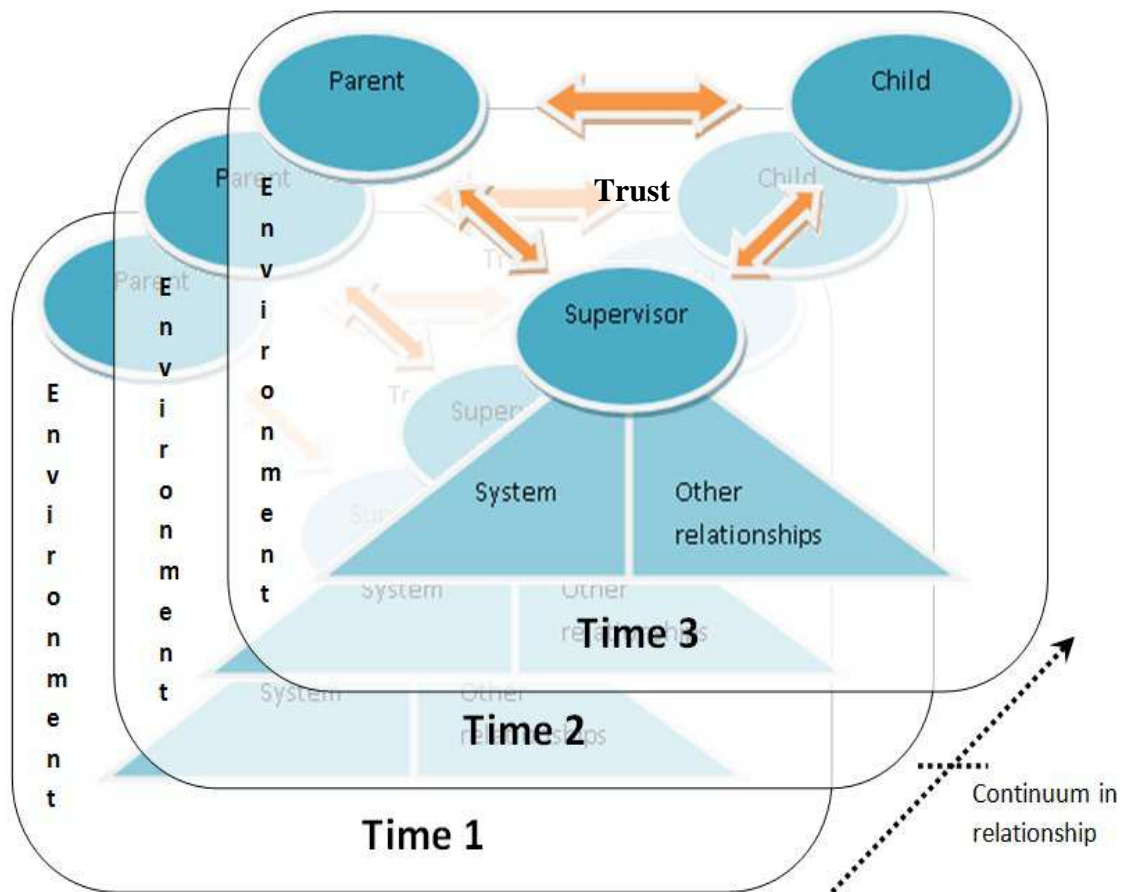
Figure 8: The parent-child relationship in the context of supervised visitation

The supervised contact challenges parents' perceptions and beliefs about themselves as parents. It necessitates identification of new ways of being with their children and being a parent which sometimes means letting go of known or wanted patterns of relating. This is brought about not only because of the supervision that is in place but also because parents want to make their psychological involvement with their children evident in such limited dimensions. Supervised visitation masks parents' psychological involvement which would otherwise be present in the reciprocal messages that take place in everyday interactions. Certain actions or thoughts of these parents become more forceful to compensate for the lack of interaction and the effects of those actions or feelings, which otherwise would have been possible through everyday interactions.

The supervised parent therefore has to be aware of several things happening around him/her and with him/her when trying to relate to his/her child. This is a case of multi-tasking and is much more complex than a normal parent-child relationship where

certain things are assumed or taken for granted. Even if the future seems quite uncertain for these parents, such awareness is an example of their determination in continuing the relationship.

5.3 The findings in relation to the literature

The findings of this research corroborate the literature in a number of ways. The sections below show where this is especially the case by making reference to the appropriate references. The following section then builds upon this part to arrive at what the author thinks are the main contributions of this research to the field.

5.3.1 The parents' awareness of influencing factors

As emphasised by Bronfenbrenner (1999), the parent/child relationship cannot be seen in isolation but as part of multiple contexts with wider influences impacting on the relationship. This is close to the findings and has been expanded upon in the emerging theory which has shown that supervised parents have a heightened awareness of immediate external influences impacting on the parent/child relationship, especially since the relationship takes place in an almost 'contracted' way, within an established time frame and having a supervisor to monitor and facilitate the session. The most immediate external influences perceived by parents are those brought through the system and other significant relationships.

Parents' experiences with supervised visitation often make them critical of the system and dissatisfied by many aspects of supervision. Pearson and Thoennes (2000) elaborate that this can include the way the system functions, such as the perceived link between the supervised visitation service and the court, and also restrictions brought about by this situation, such as when they are confined and restricted to a particular site (see for example Jenkins, Park, Peterson-Badali, 1997). Their experiences might

create a myriad of negative feelings such as anger at having supervision required (James and Gibson, 1991). This might be due to the uncertainty that the situation creates for these parents. In fact, Pearson and Thoennes (2000) have shown that parents who receive helpful feedback during the visitation programme are more likely to be satisfied maybe because they know better where they stand with the system which would then create more trust and leave space for the triadic relationship to flourish.

Supervised parents are also very aware of the impact of other relationships on their parent-child relationship. These can be far reaching especially in custody dispute cases. Many studies comment on the influence that custodial parents sometimes have on children's behaviour and consequently on the parent-child relationship during supervised contact (Jenkins et al., 1997; Seagull & Seagull, 1997; Sciberras, 1998; Pearson & Thoennes, 2000; Trinder, 2008). Supervisors are sometimes not spared from this influence and can also get caught between the dynamics of the fighting parents thus making their position and ability to maintain neutrality difficult (Forsberg and Pösö, 2008). This could then influence the relationship between the supervisor and the parent to the detriment of the parent-child relationship.

5.3.2 The relationship with the supervisor

The supervisor plays an important part in the developing relationship between the parent and the child during the supervised visit and cannot be seen separate from the context of the parent-child relationship. Parents are usually not neutral to the presence of the supervisor and this impacts on how much parents are able to relax and enjoy the time with their children (Pearson and Thoennes, 2000). For instance, in this study some parents reported not feeling confident and comfortable during the supervised visit especially when they felt not trusted by their supervisor. However at the same time, positive aspects are sometimes attributed to the supervisor's presence especially when a relationship is established. James and Gibson (1991) also state that it

is not uncommon for supervised parents to experience different feelings about supervisors.

An important characteristic as perceived by parents relates to the supervisor's ability to empathise with their situation. Burgheim and Dalmar (2002) emphasise that this a basic need for anyone grieving loss and this is not less so for parents having supervised visitations with their children. Supervised parents thought that certain supervisor qualities and characteristics were more conducive to them being understanding and empathic with their experiences. For instance, parents seemed to show a preference for supervisors who were more similar to them in terms of age and parental status. Experience was also thought to be very important. Moreover supervisors' actions during supervised visitation were also an affirmation to how trustworthy and understanding the supervisor is. For instance, some studies report that parents consider the supervisor's neutrality in custody dispute cases as very important (Jenkins et al., 1997; Park et al., 1997).

The parent-supervisor relationship is not spared from external influences and cannot be seen separately from the context it is part of. For instance, according to Forsberg and Pösö (2008) the relationship between the supervised and custodial parent in custody dispute cases can impact this parent-supervisor relationship. Supervisors themselves report their difficulty in behaving neutrally in certain cases especially when they are uncertain about the best way to tackle the situation (Park et al. 1997). One must therefore appreciate the complex nature of this relationship which depends on various factors thus making it very fluid. Supervised parents' plea to have the same supervisor for their visits appears to be very reasonable.

5.3.3 Perceptions of being a parent in the context of supervised visitation

It has been reported that parents want to have more involvement and also a better decision making role in their children's life (Buttigieg, 2005; Snyder, Carlo and Mullins,

2001). Supervised visitation is seen as the only way they have to retain the ties with their children (Buttigieg, 2005) which is however limited by time. This restriction doesn't give them a good representation of what the child is really like (Dunn et al., 2004) and the parent might only get a real understanding of what their child is like when s/he becomes more at ease with the parent in the supervised context (Forsberg and Pösö, 2008). Parents want to have more time with their children so that they can get to know them better thus possibly ensuring future contact (Snyder et al., 2001).

In their study, Snyder et al. (2001) remark that when communicating with their children, incarcerated mothers spoke about everyday things which are usually shared and experienced together in the process of living. The significance of everyday things as mentioned by the non-custodial parents was also discussed in the findings chapter (refer to section 4.6.10). One could also link these feelings about missing everyday things to the attachment theory and the internal working models of caregivers. Caregivers accept that the child is attached to them and that they have to provide to the child. Suddenly taking this responsibility away could be hard for parents.

The remarks of parents about the emotional intensity at the point of meeting and departing was also noted by other researchers (Seagull & Seagull, 1977; Parkinson, 1987; Sciberras, 1998; Poehlmann, 2005b). Seagull and Seagull (1977), and Parkinson (1987) go on to stress that children are not spared from such feelings. Poehlmann (2005a) further adds that they may have different mechanisms to deal with such situations.

Children can react in various ways during supervised visitations, as is also reported in research (Forsberg & Pösö, 2008; Johnston and Straus, 1999), which can possibly be different from the way their parents know them prior to the imposition of supervised contact. Children can lack understanding about the situation which can result in dissatisfaction (Jenkins et al., 1997), fear and confusion (Forsberg and Pösö, 2008), and also insecurity (Johnston and Straus, 1999). This change in behaviour makes parents sensitive to the possible disengagement that the situation might have brought. This

possibly motivates their need to speak to their children about the situation especially since many of them have fear and concern about their future relationship with their child (Snyder et al., 2001)

Finally, the nature of supervised visitation creates a lot of challenges to supervised parents' way of relating. Parents might feel disempowered and find it difficult to relate to their children according to their parental beliefs. Ansay and Perkins (2001) state that the experience can negatively influence the parents' self-efficacy, while James and Gibson (1991) find that it creates a lot of associated negative feelings. The attachment and caregiving behavioural patterns between the child and the parent (discussed also in the literature review, section 2.3), which in most cases would have been established prior to the imposition of supervised visitation, are thus seriously challenged if not changed completely. This change can then shape their internal working models as discussed (see Mayseless, 2006; Kraus & Pope, 2009).

5.4 Main contributions of the study to the researched field

After reviewing the literature and associating similar findings, the author considers the following to be the main new concepts and outcomes emerging from this research.

The conceptual framework developed which is built around four main recurrent themes: external influences, on being a parent, the parent-child relationship and future relating. These could be considered to be the main categories capturing how and where perceptions of the non-custodial parent have changed with supervised visitation. These themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews with the parents through the methodological approach chosen. These perceptions may not necessarily corroborate with those held by supervisors for instance but, for these parents, they represent their 'perceived reality' and may inform much of what is constructed with the child.

This research also exemplifies how, within each of these four main categories, perceptions have changed. For instance, the 'being a parent' theme explored the nature of the parents' views and representations about the loss of their children and how this impacted on and shaped their feelings and thoughts about parenting. The category on the 'parent-child relationship' then focused on how parents viewed themselves in relation to their children, and the things they do (or rather want to do) together with their children – thus on a more concrete level. This process of exemplifying was useful to discern and select among those feelings and experiences which matter most for these parents. Working on these perceptions and emotions could indeed be relevant to supervisors and other professionals directly working with these parents, and also to the institutions that run the supervised visitation service.

Through the presentation of the emerging theory, a holistic and systematic view of the context and nature of supervised visitation has been outlined. Here the main points focus on the importance of the triadic relationship where it becomes clear how critical the role of the supervisor becomes for the parent-child relationship. The broken and sliced nature of contact has its implications, especially when strong emotions are triggered recurrently with every session. Likewise the need to compensate, perhaps strongly, for those actions which otherwise would have been provided on a daily basis becomes clearly evident. These are key informants to parents' perceptions about their future relationship with their child which in turn strongly influence the present relationship.

The explorative value added of the findings clearly hint to possible considerations to be taken when working with such a client population especially in the local context where little research is available. They also point to new areas of research within this field.

Finally, this study provides a major contribution to the local context where lack of research is evident and where such cases have increased strongly in a few years. This study increases the understanding of the situation surrounding these parents and implications for their children.

5.5 Critical evaluation of the research

5.5.1 Critical review of data gathering and analysis process

Recruiting participants proved to be more difficult than initially thought. The uncertainty of whether enough participants will be found for this study persisted throughout the process of data collection. Some participants withdrew prior to the interview taking place even if they showed initial interest by giving their name and contact number. Anecdotal evidence leads the researcher to think that parents were not very trusting of the reason behind this research. This could have been brought about by the fact that participants were informed about the research mostly through the supervisors. This could have led to a potential bias in the resultant interviews.

The research aim and the way it was presented might have also made it uncomfortable for some parents to take part in. It could have been the case whereby supervised parents who were experiencing difficulties in their relationship with their children could have felt uncomfortable participating, thus potentially missing an important aspect of what it means for parents to access their children during supervised contact. It could also be the case that parents who accepted to take part in this study had a motivation which was different from that of other eligible participants. For instance, the findings could be showing only the perspective of parents who were willing to voice their strong opinions about the impact of the system on the relationship with their children. Another potential intention could have been to stress that they are capable of taking care of their child and thus exploit another arena to voice their feelings.

The difficulty in engaging participants goes against some of the principles of grounded theory whereby theoretical saturation is not conditioned by the number of participants available but rather by the development of the theory. There were some potential categories which could not be claimed to have satisfied the theoretical saturation point because they could not be checked against more interviews and thus they could

not be explored further. However, the diversity of the cases covers a wide range of experiences which enriched the findings of this research from different viewpoints.

Another potential critique relates to the one-shot interviewing method used. Charmaz (2001) distinguishes between one-shot interviewing and multiple sequential interviewing. Multiple sequential interviewing involves carrying out multiple interviews at different times with the same participant in order to gain a deeper understanding of the social process. For this study, it was considered not feasible to pursue multiple interviews with the same participants given that many potential participants were unwilling to take part in this study and those who accepted had genuine time constraints. Charmaz (2001) criticises one-shot interviews on the basis that it leaves the researcher outside the phenomenon being researched. She warns that in such cases, there is the possibility that the research ends up being more similar to the objectivist way of doing grounded theory. While agreeing that this could be possible, the author thinks that, to a varying extent, this could be avoided through reflexivity both before and during the interview. Another mitigation strategy was to prepare in advance by simulating the situation again after each interview and reflecting about what more could have been extracted, but instead using this gap to inform and prepare for the subsequent interview. The researcher followed Charmaz's (2001) advice to mitigate the problem of one-shot interviews; that of ensuring that later interviews covered probing questions that addressed theoretical issues explicitly. Despite the potential pitfalls of one-shot interviews, the author thinks that, in this study, there are important benefits of a one-shot interview. A one-shot interview may be more efficient and focused and avoids potential disadvantages of having multiple interviews. With multiple interviews, participants may miss, forget or re-interpret the context in the subsequent interview. Most likely, participants will think on what they have said previously and in the process of reflection may want to correct it subsequently but not always in a genuine manner, and this may leave the researcher confounded on the correct meaning. Thus the duration between one interview and another may create barriers and thus the communication risks losing its spontaneity.

Given the difficulty of finding participants and the uncertainty of whether enough participants would be found, the researcher embarked upon any new possibility of an interview immediately. Sometimes this meant that there was only a short time between one interview and the other, and therefore there was scope for the analysis prior to further data collection to be more rigorous. Otherwise, the transcripts were analysed according to the procedure mentioned above to help the formulation of new questions, and as such any potential impact due to this restricted timing is thought not to be too significant for the emergent theories.

The order of the questions, including any new ones, were usually planned to follow a perceived logical unfolding of the conversation. However, on many occasions, the order of the questions had to be changed according to the conversations that were unfolding in line with semi-structured interviewing. There were occasions when the researcher found himself leading participants to other areas of exploration, especially when participants were entering into areas not related to this researched topic. In doing so, the researcher was always careful not to derail participants so as not to miss meaningful thoughts.

All the participants taking part in this study were Maltese speaking. A lot of thought and consideration had to be taken to the fact that the interviews had to fit to a research written in the English language. The researcher was well aware that the translation of text from Maltese to English could have lost much of its relevance and impact on the study and thus a systematic procedure was needed. So as not to lose the essence of what parents were saying, the analysis was done in the Maltese language and while codes and categories were written in English, the statements to back the emergence of these were left in Maltese. The translation was done at a later stage when all the categories were seen to have emerged and the findings chapter was drafted. This could have possibly led to new meanings attributed to the translated words. Giving the translation to a trustworthy translator (see Appendix 7) and then analysing the translated statements in the light of the categories they formed part of has helped the researcher to detach himself from the categories and to check whether

these categories still represented the translated parents' statements. The categories were thought to still hold following translation and no changes were needed.

5.5.2 Trustworthiness

The accurateness of the findings could be prejudiced in various ways especially in qualitative research where the researcher has a lot of input in the research process. For instance, during the analysis phase while working on the categories, participants' statements could have been classified in a different manner potentially leading to different categories. For example, the coding could have focused on whether they followed a rational or an emotional response, or according to whether participants' views were positive or negative. Thus, different yardsticks could have been used to come up with the categories. The author was very aware that apart from being conditioned by his perceptions, there could be other conditioning brought about through more immediate contextual factors such as the literature review which was being written at the same time the interviews were being carried out.

As also identified in the Methodology chapter (refer to section 3.4), various strategies have been adopted to ensure trustworthiness of the findings in the research process. The researcher checked the categories well and also sought any "disconfirming evidence". Moreover, a "thick, rich description" was provided in the Findings chapter to contextualise the descriptions. Other more elaborate strategies were used to ensure validity including the use of "peer debriefing" and "reflexivity".

A close colleague at work helped in the 'peer debriefing' process. Albeit having extensive experience in the educational psychology profession, this person did not have any experience in working with the participant population that formed part of this research. This was thought to be important if this 'critical friend' was to challenge any preconceived perceptions. Apart from providing support, her role involved discussing codes and categories with reference to transcripts. Sometimes transcripts were provided beforehand so that codes and emerging categories could be discussed

in detail. Apart from the 'critical friend', a trustworthy 'supervisor on access visits' was given the Findings chapter for feedback and comments prior to finalising it. Although playing a minor role, critical analytical insights were received during the process of research and report - which also helped to challenge and refine concepts - from a social scientist having international analytical experience.

The researcher was also committed to be reflexive throughout the research process through the use of a research diary. Apart from documenting reflections and observation, the research diary also incorporated an element of self-reflection that linked with these observations. This research diary came very useful during the analysis phase as the unfolding of reflections served as a good thinking source from where preconceptions could be challenged. This together with the use of the critical friend helped the researcher to identify his position during the research process.

5.5.3 Reflexivity

In qualitative research, the researcher is central to the sense that is made from the data. This is especially so in psychology which is a discipline where the investigator and the investigated coincide (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 2002). Therefore reflexivity is considered to be an important aspect of the research process.

The researcher's motivation to carry out this study arose from his experience as a 'Supervisor on Access Visits' spanning over around four years. This necessitated that the researcher reflects about his past role to see what emotions or thoughts it triggers which could influence the data gathering and analysis. Moreover, the author's background - especially his unmarried status and without dependents, his strong family background, age and education - inevitably differentiated him from the interviewed participants. This necessitated that the researcher challenges his conceptions about family and relationships.

The researcher approached each and every encounter with the participants and their accounts with a realisation that working and researching this population necessitates

continuous reflexivity to ensure that personal judgement and preconceptions are worked on as they arise for the sake of ethical and moral correctness and also research trustworthiness. All the reflections were logged into the research journal from the beginning of the research process and any data was seen against this background. The 'critical friend' was also made aware of these thoughts and feelings so that she could challenge the researcher during the 'peer debriefing' process.

5.5.4 Ethical considerations

Various ethical considerations were accounted for prior to initiating contact with participants (refer to Methodology chapter, section 3.5). However new ones emerged and became visible during the research process which merited consideration.

One of the issues which kept recurring was that of confidentiality. Since the distribution of the *Participant Information Sheet* was given to the supervisors, and given that sometimes the contact numbers of potential participants were handed by supervisors themselves, the researcher became very aware of the possible identification of participants in the research write-up. However, the number of parents who had shown initial interest to participate in this research was far larger than those that actually participated thus somehow camouflaging those that did participate.

While the reader may find the need to have a better understanding of why these cases that led to supervised visits happened, the researcher was careful not to go into the details of each case. Therefore background information about the cases was kept limited to respect privacy. This limits the value of the findings to an extent because there is no attribution to who said what, but, given the small population in the local context, privacy and ethical issues had to prevail. Moreover, in reporting his findings the author adopted different ways to protect the true identity of the participants without introducing an unacceptably large measure of distortion into the data. For instance, when presenting the participants' verbatim explanations, good care was taken to ensure that they were not identified.

Another ethical consideration related to participants' experience of the interview. It was difficult to inform participants in advance, in ways that would have been meaningful, about their expected experience of the interviews. The author therefore took measures to ensure that participants did not feel coerced to participate or to continue with the interview if it was felt that the conversation was making them feel uneasy. These measures included, checking with the participants whether they wanted to go ahead with the interview and preparing them for the eventuality that they might need to stop the interview.

5.6 Relevance and implications to educational and child psychologists

The relevance and implications to Educational and Child Psychologists (ECPs), among other professionals, could be wide and varying depending of course on the personal disposition of the professional to work with this client population (i.e. supervised parents and children) and also in the flexibility of their role. Such cases, which are usually due to family disputes, appear to be on the rise in Malta, and possibly abroad, and thus it is very likely that ECPs will be working with children experiencing supervised contact with their parents. It was not the aim of this study to research the impact of supervised access on children, however it is very important to stress that understanding these parents provide a link to their children's behaviour. As discussed above, the children are a mirror of their parents' behaviour and feelings, and thus it would be difficult to understand these children, the complete picture, without the full appreciation of this background.

By working with and supporting these children, ECPs could be helping the parent-child relationship to ensure future contact and continuity. As also identified in the literature, the needs of these children might come out in various ways especially in a school setting, from problems in behaviour to difficulty in schooling. As specialists in child development and attachment, psychologists could give a very valid contribution in schools to sensitise them about the particular needs of these children whose contact with their parents is supervised. They could give a voice to this otherwise potentially

disempowered group of children who could otherwise become invisible in the education system especially if they are hyper-vigilant and distrusting of others as identified in the findings by Johnston and Straus (1999).

Apart from schools, ECPs could also help in training professionals working with supervised parents and children, such as supervisors and social workers. This training could serve to increase their awareness on particular developmental needs of children in the light of supervised contact. ECPs involvement in training with these professionals could also serve the purpose of bridging the link between social welfare agencies and schools thus improving integrated working.

Moreover, this research could serve as background reading to professionals carrying out work with parents (such as parenting skills interventions) to help them understand better the meaning of parenthood that is ascribed to by parents wanting to relate with their children under 'imposed' restrictions.

5.7 Implications for further research and other recommendations

While not claiming to be presenting a complete theory adaptable for different contexts, the author thinks that the findings present a comprehensive analysis of the multiple complexities that supervised parents pass through when relating to their children. It is hoped that these finding are taken further by other researchers in the field to ensure that the necessary support is given to children, young people and their relatives, particularly in the local context. At the same time, the scope for further research in this area is abundant. What follow are a number of key ideas for further research and general recommendations that emerge from the study but also from an overview of the literature. Naturally, there might be many more considerations than those mentioned here especially if the context of the reader is different from that of the researcher. Here, the suggestions are inspired from the perspective of this study, that is, after researching the perceptions and experiences of parents who have supervised contact with their children.

One strand of research which would strongly complement this study is that on children's perceptions and experiences of supervised access visits. Such research is intimately linked and would complement that on the parent. As explained above, the context is much determined by the relationship between the three players, that is including the supervisor, who mutually affect each other. Therefore, helping towards forming a more comprehensive understanding of the triadic relationship is further research also on the supervisors' perceptions of the situation.

This study looked at the perceptions of non-custodial parents and brought a lot of new insights especially on those preoccupations which hurt them most. Building on this, further research could focus on improving the well-being of these parents, by for example devising specific support programmes to help these parents deal with such situations.

This study made an emphasis on the important role that the supervisor plays. There is a tendency that the supervisor is a priori seen from a negative light given that he is associated with negative circumstances. There seems to be an appreciation by parents of supervisors who are married with children and who show traits of empathy and understanding. This calls for further research on how supervisors can be better trained to improve the situation and feelings of both the affected parents and the children. This would also look at the required skills that supervisors should use with these parents and children.

While recognising the need for further research, it is also important to highlight aspects which could improve best practices of people or centres working with these parents.

Since parents are very aware of the external influences around them, changes can disrupt the usual functioning of the session. Minimising certain changes is thus important. Among others, this can be done by keeping the same individuals who supervise a given family from week to week as much as possible and only replacing the supervisor where necessary. This could also be a way of responding to these children's distrust by increasing their sense of predictability and control with respect to the visitation experience (Johnston and Straus, 1999). It is also important to prepare the

child prior to each and every session, and also preparing the parent and the child a few minutes before the termination of the session to help them come to terms with leaving and imparting important concluding messages.

The lack of information about their situation clearly upsets both parent and child. Supporting the child's ability to appraise reality by providing a truthful explanation of the reasons for supervised contact using appropriate language and concepts reflecting the child's developmental age is important for children (Johnston and Straus, 1999). It is also important for parents to talk to their children about the evolvement of the situation. This need might be arising from the uncertainty about what the child's understanding of the reasons that brought this situation about might be. It is very difficult and potentially controversial to decide on whether certain information should be given. Yet, it would be helpful if prior to the start of supervised visitations, a discussion is held with the parents about possible and safe ways that such conversations could take place. It eliminates the need for supervisor intervention which might appear as a form of policing on the parent in front of the child. Since some parents also showed willingness for the supervisor to know details of their case, the supervisor could be part of this discussion.

It has emerged quite clearly in this research that the supervisor can play an important part in the continuity of the parent-child relationship. Supervisors working with parents should ensure that their involvement does not negatively impact the parent-child relationship. Indeed there could be times when the supervisor recognises signals which show that the child's coping resources are overwhelmed and this might require them to intervene (Johnston and Straus, 1999). This however necessitates a high degree of sensitivity towards the visiting parent. It needs to start from a process whereby the supervisor is aware and reflexive of his/her involvement, and needs to be facilitated through the provision of regular supervision and training to supervisors. Institutions working in this field should if necessary put more focus on better selection and training of supervisors whose capacity to empathise and understand is crucial.

Supervisors should also be equipped with enough knowledge to be able to support parents and children during their time together, like for example on how to utilise their time together more satisfactorily. Training should include a focus of the particular needs of children from a developmental perspective. Moreover, in this training there should be identification of services in the community that parents and children might benefit from (as suggested by Park, Peterson-Badali, and Jenkins, 1997) so as to develop a network of support especially if this support is not provided by the supervised visitation centre.

Supervised parents have shown that they are very aware of the environment around them during their contact with their children. They want supervised visitation centres to be equipped with appropriate toys and other facilities to help them relate to their children in an appropriate environment. Premises should be adequately prepared to house children with minor disruptions and well equipped to house children. Parents should have all the necessary tools available to help them relate with their children and also to provide children with an enjoyable experience with their parent.

5.8 Overall summary

Through a constructivist grounded theory methodology, this explorative study focused on the parents' perceptions of the parent and child relationship when contact with their child is supervised. It explored the subjective experience, meanings and processes that non-custodial parents construct when faced with these circumstances. In the light of symbolic interactionism, it looked at what symbolic meanings participants share in order to try and reconstruct aspects of their reality. This was then contextualised within a systems theory perspective, which looks at how these symbolic meanings form part of a wider process which is shared between the people involved in the triadic relationship that develops.

Four main categories have emerged from these parents' discourse which capture how and where perceptions of the non-custodial parent have changed. These relate to

external influences, on being a parent, the parent/child relationship and views about future relating.

The key issues that have emerged have shown that supervised parents are very sensitive to external influences around them. These are often embodied in the presence of the supervisor who thus becomes part of a triadic relationship. Much of what happens between the parent and child are informed by this triadic relationship with trust being a key determinant of how this relationship develops. This triadic relationship is also influenced by the environmental and time dimensions.

Indirectly, supervised parents provide a unique and profound definition of what being a parent is all about for them. They speak about certain things and their meaning which are usually taken for granted but often remain obscure due to their regular occurrence. For instance they speak about small everyday things through which most of the relationship is seen to develop and become actualised. These become visible and are appreciated once they are missing.

This research provides a lot of hope to professionals working with this client population as it shows the underlying motivation of most of these parents, sometimes tainted by their past behaviour. It also raises questions on the outcomes of supervised visitation for future relating which thus necessitates serious considerations about the factors through which parents and children can relate to during the supervised session.

References

Addelson, K. (1994). *Moral Passages: Towards a collectivist moral theory*. New York: Routledge.

Ainsworth, M. D. S., & Bell, S. M. (1970). Attachment, exploration, and separation: Illustrated by the behavior of one-year-olds in a strange situation. *Child Development*, 41, 49-67.

Anderson, H. (2003). A postmodern collaborative approach to therapy: Broadening the possibilities of clients and therapists. In Y. Bates & R. House (Eds.), *In Ethically Challenged Professions: Enabling Innovation and Diversity in Psychotherapy and Counselling* (pp. 203-209). Herefordshire: PCCS Books.

Andersson, G., & Arvidsson, M. (2008). Contact person as a court-ordered solution in child visitation disputes in Sweden. *Child and Family Social Work*, *13*(2), 197-206.

Anderson, H., & Goolishian, H.S. (2002). The client is the expert: a not-knowing approach to therapy. In M. Mcnamee, & K.J Gergen (Eds.), *Therapy as social construction* (pp. 25-39). London: Sage.

Ansay, S. J., & Perkins, D.F. (2001). Integrating family visitation and risk evaluation: A practical bonding model for decision makers. *Family Relations*, *50*(3), 220-229.

Appogg (n.d.). *Court services: Supervised access visits* [Electronic version]. Retrieved September, 1, 2010 from http://www.appogg.gov.mt/childrenservices_courtservices_supervisedaccess.asp

Banister, P., Burman, E., Parker, I., Taylor, M. & Tindall, C. (2002). *Qualitative methods in psychology: A research guide*. London: Open University Press

Benedict, M. I., & White, R. B. (1991). Factors associated with foster care length of stay. *Child welfare, 70*(1), 4558.

Berg, B.L. (2001). Qualitative research methods for the social sciences. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Berk, L. E. (2006). *Child development* (7th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.

Birnbaum, R., & Alaggia, R. (2006). Supervised visitation: A call for a second generation of research. *Family Court Review*, *44*(1), 119-134.

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspectives and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Bornstein, M.H., & Cheah, C.S.L. (2006). The place of "culture and parenting" in the ecological contextual perspective on developmental science. In K.H. Rubin & O.B. Chung (Eds.), *Parenting Beliefs, behaviors, and parent-child relations: A cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 3 – 34).

Bowlby, J. (1969/1982). *Attachment and loss. Vol. 1: Attachment.* New York: Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and Loss: Volume 2. Separation*. NewYork: Basic Books.

Brant, E. B. (2007). Concerns at the margins of supervised access to children. *Journal of Law & Family Studies*, *9*(2), 201–456.

Bretherton, I., Biringen, Z., Ridgeway, D., Maslin- Cole, C., & Sherman, M. (1989). Attachment: The parental perspective. *Infant Mental Health Journal, 10*, 203–221.

British Psychological Society (2009). *Code of Ethics and Conduct: Guidance published by the ethics committee of the British Psychological Society* [Electronic version]. Retrieved August, 26, 2011 from www.bps.org.uk/system/files/documents/code_of_ethics_and_conduct.pdf

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1999). Environments in developmental perspective: Theoretical and operational models. In S. L. Friedman & T. D. Wachs (Eds.), *Measuring environment across the lifespan: Emerging methods and concepts* (pp. 3–28). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Bruno, D. (2006). *Every mother matters: The role of the social worker with birth mothers experiencing mental health difficulties and/or difficulties in relation to drug and alcohol problems, which problems result in children entering foster care* (Unpublished undergraduate dissertation). University of Malta, Msida.

Bryant, A. & Charmaz, K. (2007). Editors' introduction: Grounded theory research methods and practices. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of grounded theory* (pp.1-28). London: Sage.

Bryman, A. (2008). *Social research methods* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Burck, C. (2005). Comparing qualitative research methodologies for systemic research: The use of grounded theory, discourse analysis and narrative analysis. *Journal of Family Therapy*, *27*(3), 237-262.

Burgheim, T., & Dalmar, W. (2002). *The grief of birth parents whose children have been removed: implications for practice in out of home care* [Electronic version]. Retrieved October, 11, 2010 from http://www.acwa.asn.au/Conf2002/Conf_proceedings/09 Burgheim.doc

Buttigieg, M. (2005). *Out of sight, out of mind? The experience of fostering from the perspective of natural parents.* (Unpublished undergraduate dissertation). University of Malta, Msida.

Campbell, D. (2003). The mutiny and the bounty: The place of Milan ideas today. *A.N.Z. Journal of Family Therapy*, Educational Update, *24*, 15-25.

Cantos, A. L., Gries, L. T., & Slis, V. (1997). Behavioral correlates of parental visiting during family foster care. *Child Welfare*, *76*(2), 309–330.

Cashmore, J., Parkinson, P. & Taylor, A. (2008). Overnight stays and children's relationships with resident and non-resident parents after divorce. *Journal of Family Issues*, *29*, 707-733.

Charmaz, K. (2001). Qualitative interviewing and grounded theory analysis. In J.F. Gubrium & J.A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and method* (pp. 675 – 694). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage Publications Ltd

Clement, D. A. (1998). A compelling need for mandated use of supervised visitation programs. *Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, *36*, 294–316.

Coyle, A., & Olsen, C. (2005). Research in therapeutic practice settings: ethical considerations. In, R. Tribe & J. Morrissey (Eds.), *Handbook of professional and ethical practice for psychologists, counsellors and psychotherapists* (p. 249-262). Hove: Brunner-Routledge.

Creswell, J.W., (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. London: Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Creswell, J., & Miller, D. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into Practice*, *39* (3), 124.

Crotty, M. (2005). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Dallos, R., & Draper, R. (2003). *An introduction to family therapy: Systemic theory and practice*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Daly, K. (1992). The Fit between Qualitative Research and Characteristics of Families. In J.F. Gilgun, K. Daly & G. Handel, *Qualitative Methods in Family Research* (pp. 3-11). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Dayton, C., Levendosky, A. A., Davidson, W. S., & Bogat, G. (2010). The child as held in the mind of the mother: The influence of prenatal maternal representations on parenting behaviors. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, *31*(2), 220-241.

Denscombe, M. (2007). *The good research guide for a small-scale social research projects* (3rd ed.). Berkshire: Open University Press.

Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S. (2005). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 1-31). London: Sage Publications, Inc.

Dunn, J. H., Flory, B. E., & Berg-Weger, M. (2004). An exploratory study of supervised access and custody exchange services: The children's experience. *Family Court Review*, *42*(1), 60-73.

Edley, N. (2001). Unravelling Social Constructionism. *Theory & Psychology*, *11*(3), 433.

Emanuel, E.J., Wendler, D. & Grady, C. (2000). What Makes Clinical Research Ethical? *Journal of the American Medical Association, 283*(20), 2701–11.

Emery, R.E. (1988). *Marriage, divorce, and children's adjustment*. London: Sage Publications.

Fanshel, D., & Shinn, E. B. (1978). *Children in foster care: A longitudinal investigation*. New York: Columbia University Press

Fave-Viziello, G. F., Antonioli, M. E., Cocci, V., & Invernizzi, R. (1993). From pregnancy to motherhood: The structure of representative and narrative change. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, *14*, 4–16.

Flory, B. E., Dunn, J., Berg-Weger, M., & Milstead, M. (2001). An exploratory study of supervised access and custody exchange services. *Family Court Review*, *39*, 469–486.

Foddy, W. (2001). *Constructing questions for interviews and questionnaires: Theory and practice in social research*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

Fonagy, P., & Target, M. (2003). Bowlby's attachment theory model. In P. Fonagy & M. Target (Eds.), *Psychoanalytic theories: Perspectives from developmental psychopathology (pp. 230-254)*. England: Athenaeum Press.

Forsberg, H., & Pösö, T. (2008). Ambiguous position of the child in supervised meetings. *Child & Family Social Work*, *13*(1), 52-60.

Foundation for Social Welfare Services (2011). *Report 2007-2009* [Electronic Version]. Retrieved September, 15, 2011 from https://secure2.gov.mt/socialpolicy/download.aspx?id=1526

Gergen, K.J., & Gergen, M. M. (2008). Social Constructionism. In L.M. Given (Ed.), *The Sage encyclopaedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 816-820). London: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Given, L.M., & Saumure, K. (2008). Trustworthiness. In L.M. Given (Ed.), *The Sage encyclopaedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 895-896). London: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Aldine.

Glaser, B.G. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (2009). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research* (4th ed.). Chicago: Aldine.

Griffin, E. (2006). *A first look at communication theory* (6th ed.). Boston: McGraw Hill.

Grigsby, R. K. (1994). Maintaining attachment relationships among children in foster care. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, *75*, 269-276.

Health Professions Council (2008). *Standards of conduct, performance and ethics* [Electronic version]. Retrieved August, 26, 2011 from http://www.hpc-uk.org/assets/documents/10002367FINALcopyofSCPEJuly2008.pdf

Hess, P. (1982). Parent-child attachment concept: Crucial for permanency planning. *Social Casework*, *63*, 46-53.

Hirschi, T. (1969). *Causes of delinquency*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hock, E., & Lutz, W.J. (1998). Psychological meaning of separation anxiety in mothers and fathers. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *12* (1), 41-55.

Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing qualitative research differently*. London: Sage Publications.

James, B., & Gibson, C. (1991). Supervising visits between parent and child. *Family and conciliation Courts Review*, *29* (1), 73-84.

Jenkins, J. M., Park, N. W., & Peterson-Badali, M. (1997). An evaluation of supervised access II: Perspectives of parents and children. *Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, *35* (1), 51–65.

Johnston, J. R., & Straus, R. B. (1999). Traumatized children in supervised visitation: What do they need? *Family and Conciliation Court Review*, *37*(2), 135–158.

Kahn, R., & Cannell, C. (1957). *The dynamics of interviewing*. New York: John Wiley.

Kelly, J., & Wallerstein, J. (1977). Part-time parent, part-time child: visiting after divorce. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, *6* (2), 51-54.

Kraus, L. & Pope, K. (2009). The importance of attachment in custody evaluations: Towards the best interest of the child. In R.M. Galatzer-Levy, L. Kraus, J. Galatzer-Levy (Eds.), *The scientific basis of child custody decisions* (2nd ed., pp. 165-186).

Kraus, L., Shapiro, R., Galatzer-Levy, R.M. (2009). Divorce, custody, and visitation in middle childhood. In R.M. Galatzer-Levy, L. Kraus, J. Galatzer-Levy (Eds.), *The scientific basis of child custody decisions* (2nd ed., pp. 215-240).

Law, J. (2004). *After method: Mess in social science research*. London: Routledge.

Laws of Malta (1870). *Chapter 16: Civil code* [Electronic Version]. Retrieved October, 20, 2010 from http://justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=8580&l=1

Laws of Malta (1980). *Chapter 285: Children and young persons (care order) act* [Electronic Version]. Retrieved October, 20, 2010 from http://justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=8773&l=1

Learner, E. (2004). *Developing supervised contact facilities in Coventry: A report* [Electronic Version]. UK: Practice Improvement Network. Retrieved from http://www.twotone.co.uk/upload/docs/622/1710child_contact_project.pdf

Leathers, S. (2002). Parental visiting and family reunification: Could inclusive practice make a difference? *Child Welfare*, *81*(4), 595–616.

Leathers, S. J. (2003). Parental visiting, conflicting allegiances, and emotional and behavioral problems among foster children. *Family Relations*, *52*(1), 53.

Lewis, J., and Ritchie, J. (2003). Generalising from qualitative research. In J. Ritchie, & J. Lewis (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (pp. 263 - 286). London: sage publications.

Liamputtong, P. (2007). *Researching the vulnerable: A guide to sensitive research methods*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Lund, M. (1995). A therapist's view of parental alienation syndrome. *Family and conciliation Courts Review*, *33* (3), 308-316.

Manning, W.D., Stewart, S.D., & Smock, P.J. (2003). The complexity of fathers' parenting responsibilities and involvement with nonresident children. *Journal of Family Issues*, *24*, 645-667.

Marshall, C., and Rossman, G.B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research* (4th ed.). London: Sage Publications.

Mayseless, O. (2006). Studying parenting representations as a window to parents' internal working model of caregiving. In O. Mayseless (Ed.), *Parenting representations: Theory, research and clinical implications* (pp. 3-40). Cambridge: Camridge University Press.

McWey, L. M., & Mullis, A. K. (2004). Improving the lives of children in foster care: The impact of supervised visitation. *Family Relations*, *53*(3), 293-300.

Mertens, D.M. (2005). *Research and evaluation is education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications.

Milner, J. (1987). An ecological perspective on duration of foster care. *Child Welfare*, *66*, 113-123.

Mullis, F., & Otwell, P. (1998). Who gets the kids? Consulting with parents about child custody decisions. *Professional School Counseling*, *2* (2), 103-109.

Okagaki, L., & Bingham, G.E. (2005). Parents' social cognitions and their parenting behaviors. In T. Luster & L. Okagaki (Eds.), *Parenting: An ecological perspective* (2nd ed.) (Pp. 3-34). London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Oyserman, D., & Benbenishty, R. (1992). Keeping in touch: Ecological factors related to foster care visitation. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *9*, 541-554.

Paradigm. 2011. In *Merriam-Webster.com*. Retrieved January 15, 2011, from http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paradigm

Paradis, E.K. (2000). Feminist and community psychology ethics in research with homeless women. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 28*(6), 839–858.

Park, N., Peterson-Badali, M., & Jenkins, J. M. (1997). An evaluation of supervised access I: Organizational issues*. Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, *35*, 33-45.

Pearson, J., & Thoennes, N. (2000). Supervised visitation: The families and their experiences. *Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, *38* (1), 123–142.

Peterson-Badali, M., Maresca, J., Park, N.W., & Jenkins, J.M. (1997). An evaluation of supervised access III: Perspectives from the legal system. *Family Court Review*, *35* (1), 66–78.

Perkins, D. F., & Ansay, S. J. (1998). The Effectiveness of a visitation program in fostering visits with noncustodial parents. *Family Relations*, *47*(3), 253-258.

Pinnegar, S., & Hamilton, M.L. (2009). *Self-study of practice as a genre of qualitative research: Theory, methodology, and practice*. London: Springer.

Poehlmann, J. (2005a). Representations of attachment relationships in children of incarcerated mothers. *Child Development*, *76*, 679–696.

Poehlmann, J. (2005b). Incarcerated mothers' contact with children, perceived family relationships, and depressive symptoms. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *19*, 350–357.

Pridham, K. A., Lutz, K. F., Anderson, L. S., Riesch, S. K., & Becker, P. T. (2010). Furthering the understanding of parent–child relationships: A nursing scholarship review series. Part 3: Interaction and the parent–child relationship—Assessment and intervention studies. *Journal for Specialists in Pediatric Nursing*, *15*(1), 33-61.

Robson, C. (2006). *Real world research: A resource for social scientists and practitioner-researchers* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Rosen, R. (1977). Children of divorce: What they feel about access and other aspects of the divorce experience. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, *6* (2), 24-27.

Saini, M., Van Wert, M., & Gofman, J. (2012). Parent–child supervised visitation within child welfare and custody dispute contexts: An exploratory comparison of two distinct models of practice. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *34*, 163–168.

Salzberger-Wittenberg, I., Williams, G., & Osborne, E. (1999). *The emotional experience of learning and teaching*. London: Karnac Books.

Schepard, A. I. (2004). *Children, courts, and custody: Interdisciplinary models for divorcing families*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sciberras, R.R. (1998). *The introduction of Supervised Access Visits in cases of marital separation on the local scene* (Diploma dissertation). University of Malta, Msida.

Sciberras, R. (2006). Services reports, 2000-2005: Children's services. In R. Vella Piscopo (Ed.), *Appogg biennial report 2004 – 2005* (pp. 28-44). Malta: Foundation for Social Welfare Services.

Scott, J. (2011). The impact of disrupted attachment on the emotional and interpersonal development of looked after children. *Educational & Child Psychology*, *28*(3), 31-43.

Seagull, A., & Seagull, E. (1977). The non-custodial father's relationship to his child: Conflicts and solutions. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, *6* (2), 11-15.

Shlafer, R. J., & Poehlmann, J. (2010). Attachment and caregiving relationships in families affected by parental incarceration. *Attachment & Human Development*, *12*(4), 395-415.

Simms, M. D., & Bolden, B. J. (1991). The Family Reunification Project: Facilitating regular contact among foster children, biological families, and foster families. *Child Welfare: Journal of Policy, Practice, And Program*, *70*(6), 679-690.

Slade, A., Aber, J.L., Belsky, J., & Phelps, J.L. (1999). Mothers' representations of their relationships with their toddlers: Links to adult attachment and observed mothering. *Developmental Psychology*, *35*, 611–619.

Snape, D. and Spencer, L. (2003). The foundations of qualitative research. In J. Ritchie, & J. Lewis (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (p. 1 - 23). London: sage publications.

Snyder, Z. K., Carlo, T. A., & Mullins, M. M. C. (2001). Parenting from prison: An examination of a children's visitation program at a women's correctional facility. *Marriage & Family Review*, *32*, 33–61.

Sokolowski, M., Hans, S. L., Bernstein, V. J., & Cox, S. M. (2007). Mothers' representations of their infants and parenting behavior: Associations with personal and social-contextual variables in a high-risk sample. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, *28*(3), 344-365.

Sroufe, L. (1996). *Emotional development: The organization of emotional life in the early years*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sroufe, L., & Fleeson, J. (1986). Attachment and the construction of relationships. In W. Hartup & Z. Rubin (Eds.), *Relationships and development* (pp. 51–71). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Stahl, P.M. (1990). *Children on consignment: A handbook for parenting foster children and their special needs*. US: Lexington Books.

Stebbins, R.A. (2001). *Exploratory research in the social sciences*. Sage University Papers Series on Qualitative Research Methods, Vol. 48. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Steinberg, D.R., & Pianta, R.C. (2006). Maternal representations of relationships: Assessing multiple parenting dimensions. In O. Mayseless (Ed.), *Parenting representations: Theory, research and clinical implications* (pp. 41-78). Cambridge: Camridge University Press.

Stone, L. (2008). Epistemology. In L.M. Given (Ed.), *The Sage encyclopaedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 264-268). London: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Trinder, L. (2008). Maternal gate closing and gate opening in postdivorce families. *Journal of Family Issues*, *29*, 1298-1324.

Trinder, L. (2009). What might children mean by a 'meaningful relationship'? *Journal of Family Studies*, *15* (1), 20-35.

Trommsdorff, G. (2006). Parent–child relations over the lifespan: A cross-cultural perspective. In K.H. Rubin & O.B. Chung (Eds.), *Parenting beliefs, behaviors, and parent-child relations: A cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 143-184). New York: Taylor and Francis Group.

Tuerk, E.H., & Loper, A.B. (2006). Contact between incarcerated mothers and their children: Assessing parenting stress. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, *43* (1), 23-43.

United Nations General Assembly (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child, Treaty Series, 1577*. New York: United Nations.

Van Ijzendoorn, M.H., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M.J. & Sagi-Schwartz, A. (2006). Attachment across diverse sociocultural contexts: The limits of universality. In K.H. Rubin & O.B. Chung (Eds.), *Parenting beliefs, behaviors, and parent-child relations: A cross-cultural perspective* (p. 107-142). New York: Taylor and Francis Group.

Vetere, A., & Dallos, R. (2008). Systemic therapy and attachment narratives. *Journal of Family Therapy*, *30*(4), 374-385.

Willig, C. (2008). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology: Adventures in theory and method*. UK: Open University Press.

Woods, P. (1992). Symbolic interactionism: Theory and method. In J.P. Goetz (Ed.), *The handbook of qualitative research in Education* (pp. 44-63). London: Sage.

Context and background of study

Care, Custody and the principle of the 'child's best interest'

The value of maintaining the parent–child relationship is well recognised so much so that the child's contact with his or her parents is recognised as a right by different international legal instruments such as:

- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 9 (United Nations General Assembly, 1989)
- The European Courts for Human Rights (ECHR), Article 8

However, it is also the case that this right is limited whenever it is deemed to be in the best interest of the child to be separated from his parents and put under custody. 'Custody' is defined as the legal right or duty of care to a child (Mullis & Otwell, 1998). Due to developmental reasons, the child is seen as lacking independent rights and therefore, the concept of custody is seen as a legal right to control the child's upbringing and to provide him/her with the basic right of having someone take care of him/her (Schepard, 2004).

The principle of the "best interest of the child" is used as a standard in adjudicating custody of children. This principle also informs decisions related to mandating supervised visitations between parent and child when unsupervised contact is thought not to be in the best interests of the child. The arguments brought forward to substantiate this principle in particular cases can be highly contentious, with differing views even between different professionals, such as those working in welfare agencies and the court (Andersson and Arvidsson, 2008).

Rosen (1977) explains how granting the right of access and the right/duty of custody present the judges with some of the most difficult challenges encountered in the family law field. This is because there are many factors which need to be taken into

account when setting up custody arrangements in order to meet the child's needs such as the child's current level of functioning and development, the child's attachment to the visiting parent, protective factors and risk factors and how custody may facilitate future development into adolescence and adulthood (Kraus, Shapiro & Galatzer-Levy, 2009).

When parents physically separate, issues related with the children's physical and legal custody usually arises. When parents cannot agree, this decision is normally handed to the courts to decide for them. While sole custody can be awarded to one of the parents, the other parent usually gets 'visitation' rights which amount to temporary physical custody of the child for a limited time. It is only when the parent is considered as posing a threat to the child's wellbeing that visitation rights are removed or supervision by third parties is required (Schepard, 2004).

According to the Laws of Malta (dating from 1870), the court can, through a **court order**, remove the care and custody of the child from one or both parents for the child's wellbeing. For example, in cases of marital separation, while the custodial parent gets the right to make decisions and the duty to care for the child, the non-custodial parent usually does not have physical and/or legal custody of the child. In other cases, the child may be entrusted either to foster parents (private home of a state certified caregiver) or else to a children's residential home. The removal of the child from his natural family may only be done under limited but serious circumstances such as abuse, neglect and violence.

In Malta, another route through which children may be removed from their parents is through a **'care order'** as established by the Children and Young Persons' Care Order Act (Laws of Malta, 1980). When a care order is issued, it is often the case that the care and custody is placed on the Ministry for Education, Employment and the Family. The child is usually placed either in a residential setting or taken into foster care. This

process is coordinated by the Foundation for Social Welfare Services which falls under the jurisdiction of this Ministry.

Depending on the outcome of the care order or court order, visitation rights (also referred to as 'access arrangements' or 'contact') are established. A '**contact order**' is a decision delineating the type of contact to be kept between a child and his/her caregivers (usually parents). A child in respect of whom a contact order may be made is identified as a person under the age of 18, which is the age of full legal capacity in all member States of the Council of Europe including Malta. This decision is taken by a judicial authority or a public authority. A contact order may also include an order prohibiting contact ('non-contact orders') to safeguard the child's wellbeing.

The 'Convention of Contact concerning Children' by the Council of Europe ( ) identifies three different levels of contact:

- The first level covers direct contact which is face-to-face contact between the child and his or her parents or other persons having family ties with the child. Direct contact usually implies an absence of the child from the place where he or she usually lives and staying for a limited period of time with the parent/s.

- The second level covers forms of contact other than direct contact, for instance by telephone, letters, faxes, e-mail, etc. This type of contact can be used in addition to direct contact or even instead of direct contact in specific circumstances when direct contact is not possible (e.g. not in the best interests of the child).

- The third level of contact covers the provision of information about the child (e.g. through photographs, school reports, medical reports etc.) or to the child about persons requesting this contact.

Supervised visitations are a supervised form of direct contact and can vary considerably from supervised transfers from one parent to the other, to visitation in

the continuous presence of a professionally engaged supervisor. The latter is the focus of this research.

Supervised Visitation and the international context

Supervised visitation (also referred to as supervised contact or supervised access) aims to provide the child and the non-custodial parent with supervised contact in a neutral and safe setting for visitation. There are various reasons to why supervised visitation might be needed. Pearson and Thoennes (2000) compiled a comprehensive list of primary reasons for referrals to such programmes:

- Physical child abuse

- Child sexual abuse

- Child neglect

- Emotional abuse of child

- Violence by visiting parent toward custodial parent

- Visiting parent lacking parenting skills

- Mental illness of visiting parent

- Substance abuse by visiting parent

- Lack of recent contact between visiting parent and child

- Criminal behaviour by visiting parent

- Risk of abduction by visiting parent

- Custodial parent denies access

- Generally high parental conflict

Various services fall under this umbrella of supervised visitation, which can create difficulties when interpreting the literature in this area. Saini, Van Wert and Gofman (2012, p. 166) state that "there is considerable confusion in the legislation and social science literature in terms of priorities, purposes, goals, functions, and outcomes of supervised visitation services" possibly due to the "little standardization in the service

delivery of supervised visitation, both within child welfare and custody dispute contexts and between these contexts".

Traditionally, supervised visitation services were associated with child welfare agencies in cases of neglect and/or abuse where children needed a safe environment to visit their parents. Nowadays this service is also provided in cases of dispute between the parents where concerns over the child's safety with the other parent are raised and which are usually characterised by high conflict. These allegations are usually related to domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse and mental health concerns (Birnbaum, & Alaggia, 2006).

Different types of visitation programmes are usually offered in different countries depending on the legislations and the cultural context of the place. Pearson and Thoennes (2000) identify different types of supervised visitation programmes offered by different centres in the United States (see Table 1). There are also different locations were supervised contact can take place depending on the particular case and also the set-up of the service. Some of the locations could be: on-site at the supervision centre; in a neutral community site; at the supervised parent's home or a relative's home; and possibly at a therapist's office (Pearson and Thoennes, 2000).

Types of supervised visitation	
Therapeutic supervised visits	Supervised visitation complimented by therapeutic interventions.
Group visits	Supervised visit within a group comprising of different supervised parents where children can play and interact with other children during their supervised contact time.
One-on-one (supervisor continuously present)	A supervisor is present at all times during contact between non-custodial parent and child.
One-on-one (supervisor intermittently present)	Supervisor is not present at all times but visits occasionally during contact time to ensure that all is going well.

Supervised exchange services	Supervision only for the handing over of children from one parent to the other. This happens in high conflict cases.
Other	Other types of arrangements.

Table 2: List of services related with supervised visitation as identified by Pearson and Thoennes (2000).

Due to the sensitive nature of the cases, supervised visitation services usually face many challenges. Schepard (2004) and Learner (2004) include the following:

- The need to cater for and respond to deeply wounded and vulnerable children

- Possible child protection issues during contact (Learner, 2004).

- The need for trained and skilled supervisors to contribute to a pre-service risk assessment as well as on-going assessment for safety and therapeutic considerations (Learner, 2004).

- Children may not always benefit from contact especially if there is a history of domestic violence (Learner, 2004).

- Difficulties in contact with parents having mental health difficulties (Learner, 2004).

- Cases where custodial parents and their children do not want any contact with the other parent and are dissatisfied with supervised contact (Schepard, 2004).

- Possible risks if supervised visitation is terminated too early or if it goes on for too long when it was thought of as a temporary solution (Schepard, 2004).

Supervised Visitation in the local context

In Malta, 'supervised access visits' is a service provided by 'Agenzija Appogg' which is one of the three agencies making up the Foundation for Social Welfare Services currently under the responsibility of the Ministry for Education, Employment and the Family. 'Agenzija Appogg' offers social services to children, families, vulnerable adults and the community (FSWS, 2011).

The so-called 'supervised access visits' (SAVs) service is provided in cases where there are care proceedings or serious breakdown in parents' relationships (Appogg, n.d.). It is the aim of the service to support and provide children with a safe, beneficial, child-focused supervised contact with the non-custodial parent/s, and other family members. The non-custodial parents could be both parents - in cases of children in foster or residential care - or otherwise it could be one of the parents in cases of serious marital breakdown. It is important to note that this is the only service of its kind in Malta and mostly involves one-on-one visits with a supervisor continuously present.

Since its inception, the supervised access visits service has experienced a sharp increase in referrals. In 2009, Agenzija Appogg had 108 open cases, 36 of which were opened during the same year. According to FSWS (2011), cases are opened depending on the available resources.

In the past clients could buy more supervision time however this was stopped as it was thought to give negative publicity to the service. Hence as stipulated in the policy of the services, visiting parents can only avail themselves of a maximum of four hours of contact time per week. The Children and Young Persons' Advisory Board can however recommend and pay for hours exceeding those stipulated by the policy when it feels strongly that children would benefit from more contact.

A voluntary service is also provided prior to the issuing of a care order in cases where there are allegations and when parents feel the need for someone to witness their interactions with their children usually in custody dispute cases. The service also caters for parents who need to meet in a safe and neutral place hence permitting the session to be monitored from time to time but not continuously. This is usually needed in cases of parental disputes. Moreover, this voluntary service is also offered to parents who have not seen their children for a while and fear their children's reactions. These

voluntary cases however have been excluded from the focus of this research and only those cases where there was concern about the child's welfare were studied.

Sessions are usually scheduled on a fixed day and time and are not necessarily confined to Appogg premises. Replacements are usually given for cancelled sessions whenever possible. Sessions are coordinated by the Social Worker on the case. Following every supervised access visit a report has to be filled by the supervisor and forwarded to the professionals taking care of the service. The format of the report is standard and mainly requires an assessment about the transition, and about how parents and children relate during this time.

In the latest publicly accessible Operations Report of the Foundation for Social Welfare Services (2011), a number of shortcomings were highlighted:

- The number of 'supervisors on access visits' employed by the Agency changes quite often. There was a decrease in supervisors in 2009 with only 38 supervisors offering their service. The service finds it difficult to retain supervisors. Most of the employed supervisors were University students, while the others are employed on a contractual or self-employed basis. According to the report, supervisors often feel the need to find better jobs after a few years working with the service. This creates difficulty in the service as experienced supervisors are lost.

- Service users (namely non-custodial parents) often complain about the frequent change in supervisors.

- Due to financial restrictions, by 2006 there was a waiting list of cases requiring the service. The waiting list was eventually abolished in 2009 however this was because the Family Court was only referring cases requiring immediate intervention.

- Scarcity in resources is impacting on the smooth operation of the service. Among these one can find the need for supervisors to use their own cars in cases where transportation of children is needed. There is also a lack of

specialised training given to supervisors and also a lack of care for their welfare. Group and individual supervision is limited. Supervisors are otherwise monitored by the Service Area Leader (overall manager), a full-time social worker and four part-time social workers.

- The service provided has been criticised by various service users and even by the Court about the adequateness of the premises to meet children's and parents' needs. Since the visits take place in the Agency's counselling rooms, they are not purposely set out to welcome parents and children for contact visits. It is also reported that toys are limited and supervisors frequently end up bringing toys themselves to make the setting more welcoming. Moreover the report mentions cases where lawyers confronted staff because of lack of accessibility with issues such as a lack of nappy changing facilities, bottle warmers and baby cots.

- Social workers have a huge caseload, approximately 40 cases at any one time, which is high when compared to the caseload of social workers in other European countries such as the United Kingdom where the caseload would usually total around 15 cases.

Overview of relevant research for this study related with supervised visitation: A summary of major studies

Authors	Focus of research	Research design	Findings	Comments	Peer reviewed	Search terms and database used
Saini, Van Wert and Gofman (2012). Canada	To clarify differences in assumptions and goals of supervised visitation services in child welfare and custody dispute cases.	A review of social science literature together with legal analysis is presented focusing specifically on the parent-child in supervised visitation.	The authors outline a framework for understanding better supervised visitation services They highlight the need for more research on outcomes of supervised visitation. Cautions and considerations for policy and practice are highlighted for supervised visitation in different types of cases (child welfare, custody dispute or both fields).	This paper gives a wide overview of literature available on the topic. It very usefully distinguishes between literature focusing on supervised visitation in child welfare cases and those on custody disputes in family law contexts.	Yes	'Supervised visitation' on EBSCOhost (PsycINFO)

Andersson & Arvidsson (2008). Sweden	To determine the utility of the contact person (supervisor) in child visitation disputes	Three small scale studies which included group interviews with family law social workers (Study 1 N=18), case reviews of situations in which a contact person was appointed by the court (Study 2 N=27) and one to one interviews with contact persons (Study 3 N=13)	One main shortcoming of supervision as identified by the social workers was the difficulty to find supervisors who could be available on every weekend and for a long period of time. The lack of communication between the social services and the district courts was another identified deficiency of the system. Conflict between parents was identified as one of the main reasons for the use of contact persons. Supervisors were also perceived as sources of protection for the children.	Findings were not validated by experiences of service users (parents and children).	Yes	'Supervised visitation' on EBSCOhost (Academic Search Complete)
Forsberg & Pösö (2007).	To present different child positions (ways of	Four focus group interviews with supervisors (who	The findings show five different child perspectives of supervised	This research presents an otherwise unexplored subject. Through its	Yes	'Supervised meeting' on EBSCOhost

Finland	behaving) during supervised meetings as seen from the perspective of supervisors.	were also qualified as social workers; N=17).	contact as perceived by supervisors working with these children. These are labelled as the fearful, confused, manipulated, responsible and happy child.	presentation of supervisor's perspectives of children tells us much about the formulations that supervisors build around the cases. However, the aims of the research are not always clear and some key terms are not defined properly. The interviewed supervisors were all qualified social workers. This decreases the richness that could have emerged if other supervisors were considered.		(Academic Search Complete)
Birnbaum & Alaggia (2006). United States	To highlight the need for more literature on outcomes of	A review of research studies related to supervised	The authors highlight the critical need for further research in this area especially due to "a	A very relevant piece of work as it brings together the most relevant research studies	Yes	Supervised visitation on EBSCOhost (Academic

	supervised visitation focusing especially on the relationship between children and their parents.	visitation.	paucity of literature demonstrating a relationship between supervised visitation programmes and child/parent relationship outcomes" (p. 119)	conducted on the subject in the last 15 years. Most papers reviewed focus mostly on the set-up of supervised visitation centres.		Search Complete)
Dunn, Flory, and Berg-Weger (2004). United States	To explore the influence on child wellbeing when parents participate in supervised visitation programmes (which includes custody exchange services).	A two-phase quantitative study in which participants were given a questionnaire before (N=45) and after (N=28) a 6 month period in which they received the services of a centre providing supervision and custody exchange	According to the findings, parents reported that they were less likely to use corporal punishment on their children after using the supervised access service. The discrepant views of custodial and non-custodial parents regarding children's adjustment after a 6 month period decreased with both parents showing more congruent views.	The fact that 17 participants dropped out during this longitudinal study might put into question the validity of the outcomes. Children's behaviour pre and post measurement was not validated by a neutral assessor. The findings might not be generalizable as the centre used for this research was especially recognised for its good practice.	Yes	Supervised access on EBSCOhost (PsycINFO)

		services.				
McWey & Mullis (2004). United States	To Examine the quality level of attachment and its relationship with indicators of adjustment in fostered children who have visitation with their biological parents.	Observational assessment (AQS) on 123 children in foster care who undergo visitation with their biological parents	In families were reunification is a goal, consistent and frequent contact of young children with their biological parents leads to better adjustment and more secure attachment. Higher levels of attachment resulted in a decrease in new foster placements. Hence, when a positive relationship between the child and the biological parent is maintained after removal from home, the child is more likely to adapt to his or her current situation.	The tool used for observational assessment could only be used with children under the age of 5 years and thus could not be utilised with older children under foster care. Broader inclusion criteria would have increased the usefulness of the study. Moreover, the sample was also taken from one county in one state.	Yes	Supervised visitation on EBSCOhost (PsycINFO)
Leathers (2003).	To determine whether frequent	Telephone interviews with	Frequent maternal visiting was associated with	The main limitation of this study was that the	Yes	Parental visitation on

United States	parental visiting can be associated with children's allegiance conflict between biological and foster parents	foster parents and caseworkers of 199 children who were under foster care for a minimum period of 1 year up to a maximum period of 8 years.	stronger maternal allegiance which in turn was found to be strongly associated with greater loyalty conflict. Some children in foster care had difficulties with adjustment and exhibited externalising behaviours in relation to visitation.	interviews were conducted with foster parents and caseworkers only. Thus foster children and the biological parents were not involved in the data collection.		EBSCOhost (PsycINFO)
Ansay & Perkins (2001). United States	To demonstrate the potential use of a conceptual model on the parent-child bond developed for its use during supervised visitation as a risk evaluation tool. (The conceptual model is	A preliminary test on the conceptual model was carried out using the specifically designed 'Family Visitation Observation Forms' of 43 families supplied by the visitation centre. These	Through the consideration of the various factors outlined in the model, the results showed that two parent families were more likely to be re-united than single parent families. Child abuse cases had the highest reunification percentage, with fathers as perpetrators being more likely than mothers	As stated by the authors, the model "ignores the question of whether bondedness is an observable phenomenon" (p. 226). One major limitation during this preliminary test was that the inter-rater reliability was not taken into account. Moreover, continuous	Yes	'Parental visitation' on EBSCOhost (Family Studies Abstracts)

	presented in Literature Review Chapter of this thesis).	visitation forms were analysed using statistical analysis to demonstrate their compatibility with the conceptual model.	to be reunited with their children.	observation reports over a longer period of visitations with a larger sample size would have strengthened the validity study. There seems to be no clear explanation to how the results of the preliminary test support the conceptual model.		
Flory, Dunn, Berg-Weger and Milstead (2001). United States	To determine whether supervised access and custody exchange centres can function as a safe visitation mechanism.	A longitudinal study involving structured interviews before and after a 6 month programme in a custody exchange centre. 45 participants took part in the first interview. 31 of	Inter-parental conflict reduced significantly during the programme participation. Moreover non-custodial parents showed more frequent and consistent patterns of visiting.	The fact that almost a third of the participants dropped out of the study during the 6 month period weakens the findings. Generalisations are also difficult to make as the study was limited to just one custody exchange centre.	Yes	Supervised access on EBSCOhost (PsycINFO)

		them completed the second interview 6 months later.				
Pearson and Thoennes (2000). United States	To examine the profiles of families using supervised visitation centres by looking into the experience of both custodial and visiting parents after finishing the supervised visitation programme.	Review of 676 case files and interviews with custodial (N=114) and visiting parents (N=87), programme administrators and legal personnel (N=not specified) from four supervised visitation centres situated in the United States.	Most interviewed parents rated favourably the programme especially those receiving helpful feedback during visitation. However, many of the visiting parents expressed the wish that these programmes provide a more active role in their court cases. They also wished for the possibility of having more contact time. Visiting parents were generally happy with the supervisors with some seeing them as not being	The descriptive nature of this study makes the findings difficult to interpret and generalize.	Yes	Supervised visitation on EBSCOhost (Family Studies Abstracts)

			neutral. After finishing the programme visiting parents reported a perceived improvement in parenting skills.			
Johnston and Straus (1999). United States	To review the range of trauma experienced by children in supervised visitation services and to find common themes in the development of their personalities.	Clinical observations and standardised (Rorschach personality) testing was carried out with two different sub-sample of children. One sub-sample consisted of 48 children, aged 7 to 13 years. The other sub-sample was a comparison	Traumatised children tend to show distrust and poor reality appraisal thus showing difficulty in analysing social reality. Consequently, these children often have difficulties to assert their own needs and wishes. Moreover, they show a preoccupation with control and safety. The authors emphasise the need for policies and practice which cater for the needs of children in	The children taking part in this study have passed through severely traumatising experiences and therefore may not be representative of other children who use supervised visitation services. Moreover a larger sample would have helped to make the study more generalizable.	Yes	Supervised access on EBSCOhost (PsycINFO)

		group of 63 children aged 7 to 17 years who experienced a range of traumas. It is understood that the children in the comparison group had no experience of supervised visitation.	supervised visitation, especially those showing trauma.			
Perkins & Ansay (1998). United States	To investigate the effectiveness of supervised visitation programmes in maintaining the relationship between parents and their children.	Review of 83 case files taken from a south-eastern district in the state of Florida of families having their children in foster care.	Children and families using Supervised visitation services were more likely to be vulnerable. Families participating more actively in the supervised visitation programme were more likely to have their case closed. The outcome of	Difficult to make any generalizations as the sample size was small and also because participants were not randomly chosen. The findings could have been clearer if the distinguishing factors between participating and	Yes	Supervised visitation on EBSCOhost (Academic Search Complete)

			closure however did not necessarily mean re-unification as this also included adoption and custody given to a relative among others.	non-participating families were explained.		
Park, Peterson-Badali & Jenkins (1997). Canada	To evaluate the Supervised Access Pilot Project implemented in 14 locations in Ontario, Canada.	Review of monthly statistical reports from each supervised access programme as well as interviews with staff from the project (supervisors, coordinators, etc.) and from supportive organisations in the community (such as parent	Participants stated that supervised visits provide a safe environment for the child to meet the non-custodial parent. They also reported that parents' satisfaction with the supervised programme was related to supervisor's neutrality. However, it was acknowledged that maintaining neutrality was not always easy. Staff from the supervised access project also reported needing more	This paper forms part of three other papers focusing on a particular supervised visitation project from different perspectives. This paper looked at supervised visitation from the perspective of staff within these projects and in the context of the wider community. It would have been very useful if the authors distinguished better between views pertaining to staff working	Yes	Supervised access on EBSCOhost (Index to Legal Periodicals & Books Full Text [H.W. Wilson])

		organisations).	training	in the supervised visitation projects and those belonging to community representatives.		
Jenkins, Park, Peterson-Badali (1997). Canada	To examine reactions of family members to supervised access services.	Convenience sample of 121 parents and 29 children making use of supervised access services were interviewed. In study 1, both custodial and non-custodial (visiting) parents were interviewed about family relationship and children's well-being at 'Time 1'	Large majority of parents were satisfied with the services provided. However there was some discrepancy between custodial and non-custodial parents on their satisfaction, with non-custodial parents being less satisfied due to restrictions imposed. There was also no decrease in parental hostility after 5 months of supervised visitation. Moreover, some children exhibited emotional	This paper forms part of three other papers focusing on a particular supervised visitation project from different perspectives. This one focuses on the perspectives of parents (and children. Over sampling of custodial parents might bias the results.	Yes	Supervised access on EBSCOhost (PsycINFO)

		and 5 months later. In study 2, children (N=29) using supervised access services were interviewed on their experiences.	difficulties. The interviews with the children have shown that they had limited understanding of the reasons behind supervised access and its function. Some children were also dissatisfied with the restrictions in place and also because age appropriate toys were not available.			
Peterson-Badali, Maresca, Park & Jenkins (1997). Canada	To evaluate the perceptions behind supervised access of the legal community and the courts.	Semi-structured telephone interviews with judges (N=13) and lawyers (N=14).	Both judges and lawyers expressed high levels of satisfaction with supervised access. They thought that the hostility between parties decreased through use of the supervised access programme. Both lawyers	This paper forms part of three other papers focusing on a particular supervised visitation project from different perspectives. This paper considers the perspectives of legal professionals. Judges and lawyers were	Yes	Supervised access on EBSCOhost (Index to Legal Periodicals & Books Full Text [H.W. Wilson])

			and judges suggested more support to be put in place for parents, mentioning among others counselling, mediation and parenting skills training. Interestingly, judges were less knowledgeable about centre functioning than lawyers.	chosen by the staff working at the centres. This might have led to bias. The sample size was also too small.		

APPOGG

il-Tfal, Familja, u l-Komunita

Foundation for Social Welfare Services
2, Braille Street,
Santa Venera,
SVR 1690

16th December 2011

Daniel Borg
Block A3, Flat 1,
Triq il-Watar
Ta' Xbiex

Ref no: 200/1

To whom it concern,

Daniel Borg's request to conduct research within the services of the Foundation for Social Welfare Services has been reviewed. The research aims to look into "Non-custodial parents and the continuity of parent-child relationship: their perceptions in cases where access to their children is supervised".

After reviewing this request, the Research Office has given approval for the researcher to conduct interviews.

Although the Research Office has approved the research, the service providers and participants still retain the right to refuse any research request.

Regards,

Ronald Balzan

Ronald Balzan

Executive (II) - Research

INCORPORATING:

Agenzija APPOGG	Tel: 2295 9000 Fax: 21 225354 URL: www.appogg.gov.mt
Agenzija SEDQA	Tel: 23885110 Fax: 21 441029 URL: www.sedqa.gov.mt
Agenzija SAPPORT	Tel: 21 451868 Fax: 21 453164 URL: www.sapport.gov.mt

Section to be completed by FSWS Research Review Board ONLY

We have examined the above proposal and advise

(Approval)   **Conditional Acceptance**   **Refusal**

For the following reason/s if any:
FSWS is giving the approval for interviews to be given with Supervised Access Visits supervisors. Please note however that the supervisors retain the right to participate in the study. Thus, you are requested to prepare a recruitment letter which will then be distributed to supervisors asking them whether they would want to participate or otherwise.

Ronald Balzan

Signature   Date: 16/12/11

Note: If conditionally accepted, the recommended changes must be confirmed with the Research Office before the research can proceed.

Section to be completed by the Research Office for Conditionally Accepted Research ONLY.

The recommended changes stipulated by the Conditional Acceptance have not been implemented and these changes have not been confirmed by the Research Office. As a result of these changes the research is now **Refused. .** ☐

The recommended changes stipulated by the Conditional Acceptance have been implemented and these changes have been confirmed by the Research Office. As a result of these changes the research is now **Approved. .** ☐

Signature   Date

If Accepted/Conditionally Accepted to whom the study will be directed:	
The Unit/s: Supervised Access Visits – APPOGG	
The person/s referred Ms. Daniela Darmanin – Service Area Leader	Contact details 22959000

Foundation for Social Welfare Services
3, Braille Street, Sta. Venera, HMR 11, MALTA
Tel: 2388 5110 Fax: 2144 1029

<u>UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON</u>

APPLICATION FOR THE APPROVAL OF A RESEARCH PROGRAMME INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS

<u>Please read the Notes for Guidance before completing this form.</u> If necessary, please continue your answers on a separate sheet of paper: indicate clearly which question the continuation sheet relates to and ensure that it is securely fastened to the report form.

---

1. **Title of the programme:** *Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology*

    Title of research project (if different from above): *Non-Custodial Parents and the continuity of Parent-Child Relationship where access to their children is supervised.*

    Name of researcher (s) (including title): *Mr. Daniel Borg*

    Nature of researcher (delete as appropriate): *Student*

    If "others" please give full details:

    Student number: *u0912218*

    Email: *u0912218@uel.ac.uk*

---

2. **Name of person responsible for the programme (Principal Investigator):** *Dr. Mark Fox*

    Status: *Programme Director*

    Name of supervisor (if different from above): *Dr. Mary Robinson*

    Status: *Assistant Programme Director*

---

3. **School:** *Psychology*   **Department/Unit:** *Educational and Child Psychology*

---

4. **Level of the programme (delete as Appropriate):** *Postgraduate (research or Professional Doctorate)*

---

5. **Number of:**

    (a) researchers (approximately): *One*

    (b) participants (approximately): *Ten*

---

6. Nature of participants (general characteristics, e.g University students, primary school children, etc):

The participants should be non custodial parents whose access to their child/ children has been through Supervised Access Visits for the last six months and whose child/ children are five years or older.

7. Probable duration of the research:

from (starting date):   *January 2011*   to (finishing date): *May 2011*

---

8. Aims of the research including any hypothesis to be tested:

This qualitative research aims to explore the perceptions of non-custodial parents on their relationship with their children whose contact with them is through supervised access visits. More specifically it aims to look into the views of non-custodial parents on any perceived changes in the relationship, the continuity of the relationship with their child, and their role as parents. Moreover, it will look at what the participants think would help them maintain a positive relationship with their children.

The intention of this research is to shed more light on the non custodial parents' perspectives so that professionals could better support and understand the non-custodial parents and their children. This could then help them facilitate the relationship between the non custodial parent and the child.

9. Description of the procedures to be used (give sufficient detail for the Committee to be clear about what is involved in the research). Please append to the application form copies of any instructional leaflets, letters, questionnaires, forms or other documents which will be issued to participants:

The participants will be sent an Information Sheet which is intended to introduce them to the research project. Ideally these sheets will be handed to the Looked After Children (LAC) team (at the organisation which will give me access to the research participants) and these can then hand them to the participants through the 'Supervisors on Access Visits' working with these clients. The supervisors can then inform the researcher whether their clients are interested in taking part in the study.

Interested participants will be given an appointment.

Prior to the commencement of the interview, the researcher will clarify any questions the participants might have. The Informed Consent letter needs to be signed and collected before the interview starts.

The semi-structured interviews will last for approximately an hour and will be recorded using a digital recorder.

10.	**Are there potential hazards to the participant(s) in these procedures?**	*NO*
	If yes: **(a) what is the nature of the hazard(s)?**	
	(b) what precautions will be taken?	

11.	**Is medical care or after care necessary?**	**NO**
	If yes, what provision has been made for this?	

12.	**May these procedures cause discomfort or distress?**	**YES**
	If yes, give details including likely duration:	

There is the possibility that the interview might raise issues which can upset the participants. However, the researcher, who is trained in Applied Systemic Theory (Family Therapy) and who has experience in counselling adults, will use his skills to try to contain any negative feelings that might come up.

Participants will be informed about the Family Therapy Service at Agenzija Appogg and those of Non Governmental Organisations (such as Caritas) which offer psychotherapeutic help before the interview starts. The interviews will be stopped if the participants become upset.

13.	**(a)**	**Will there be administration of drugs (including alcohol)?**	**NO**
		If yes, give details:	
	(b)	**Where the procedures involve potential hazards and/or discomfort or distress, please state what previous experience you have had in conducting this type of research:**	

14.	**(a)**	**How will the participants' consent be obtained?**

A 'Participant Information Sheet' will be sent to inform the clients about the study. If the participants wish to participate, they will be asked to sign an 'Informed Consent Sheet' prior to the interview.

	(b)	**What will the participants be told as to the nature of the research?**

The researcher does not intend to withhold any information about the research from the participants. They will be invited to ask as many questions as they wish on the study.

15.	(a)	Will the participants be paid?	NO
	(b)	If yes, please give the amount:	£
	(c)	If yes, please give full details of the reason for the payment and how the amount given in 16 (b) above has been calculated (i.e. what expenses and time lost is it intended to cover):	

| 16. | Are the services of the University Health Service likely to be required during or after the research? | NO |
| | If yes, give details: | |

17. **(a)** **Where will the research take place?**

The research will take place at the premises of a non-governmental agency providing psycho-social services to individuals, families and the community. The interviews will take place in counselling rooms.

(b) **What equipment (if any) will be used?**

The sessions will be recorded using a digital recorder. The interview questions will be used as a guide.

(c) **If equipment is being used is there any risk of accident or injury?** **NO**

If yes, what precautions are being taken to ensure that should any untoward event happen adequate aid can be given:

18. **Are personal data to be obtained from any of the participants?** **YES/NO**

If yes, (a) **give details:**

The personal data that will be asked is the age, gender and number of children. However they can refrain from disclosing such details.

(b) **state what steps will be taken to protect the confidentiality of the data?**

The sessions will be audio recorded using a digital recorder which the participant will be aware of prior to the interview. This recording will be downloaded on the computer and consequently erased from the recorder after the interview session. Access to the recording will be password protected, which means that only I can have access to it. This recording will be deleted after the thesis has been passed and the Doctorate has been awarded.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with the participant will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Aspects from the interview will only be disclosed if the participant says something which means that s/he or someone else can get hurt. Otherwise the conversation will be kept confidential.

Please refer to the 'Participants Information Sheet' and the 'Informed Consent Letter'.

	(c)	state what will happen to the data once the research has been completed and the results written-up. If the data is to be destroyed how will this be done? How will you ensure that the data will be disposed of in such a way that there is no risk of its confidentiality being compromised?

19.	Will any part of the research take place in premises outside the University?	**YES**
	Will any members of the research team be external to the University?	**NO**

If yes, to either of the questions above please give full details of the extent to which the participating institution will indemnify the researchers against the consequences of any untoward event:

I am a student on a Professional Doctorate programme. For part of this programme I am working with the Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family in Malta as a trainee Educational Psychologist.

The research will be carried out with an organisation which falls under the responsibility of the same Ministry. For this research to be carried out with this organisation, an ethics form has already been submitted in order to be approved by the Ethics Board of this organisation (Please find it attached).

20.	Are there any other matters or details which you consider relevant to the consideration of this proposal? If so, please elaborate below:

The focus of the interview will be of a sensitive nature. This is due to the fact that participants might be passing from a difficult time due to their experience of having access to their children only through supervision. The conversation might raise issues which are not helpful to the participant. Therefore this necessitates a very mature and professional way of asking questions and facilitating the session.

It is possible that some participants would need to be referred for psychotherapeutic help. Since such professional help would benefit every participant, this will be suggested before the interview starts. In exceptional cases, after consulting with the participants themselves, it might be probable that they would need to be referred for professional help. In this case I will refer them to the Family Therapy Service at the same organisation which will give me access to the participants or other psychotherapeutic services provided by Non Governmental Organisations such as Caritas Malta.

Another ethical concern relates to the researcher's four year experience as a Supervisor on Access Visits. In view of the fact that more than two years have passed since the termination of this role, there is a smaller possibility that participants will be known. However in the eventuality of a familiar case, the researcher would avoid recruiting the person as a participant. Therefore this necessitates that the name of the participants be known before they are sent the Participant Information Sheet.

21. If your programme involves contact with children or vulnerable adults, either direct or indirect (including observational), please confirm that you have the relevant clearance from the Criminal Records Bureau prior to the commencement of the study.

   YES
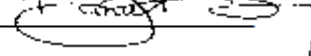
22. **DECLARATION**

   I undertake to abide by accepted ethical principles and appropriate code(s) of practice in carrying out this programme.

   Personal data will be treated in the strictest confidence and not passed on to others without the written consent of the subject.

   The nature of the investigation and any possible risks will be fully explained to intending participants, and they will be informed that:

   (a) they are in no way obliged to volunteer if there is any personal reason (which they are under no obligation to divulge) why they should not participate in the programme; and

   (b) they may withdraw from the programme at any time, without disadvantage to themselves and without being obliged to give any reason.

   NAME OF APPLICANT: Signed: _____
   (Person responsible)

   _____   Date: _____

   NAME OF DEAN OF SCHOOL: Signed: _____

   _____   Date: _____

ethics.app
[March 2010]

179

Karta ta' informazzjoni għal-parteċipanti

Għażiż/a _____

Biex nintroduċi lili innifsi, jien Daniel Borg, student li qed nistudja biex nsir Psikologu li nispeċjalizza fl-Edukazzjoni u t-Tfal.

Għal dan l-istudju, qiegħed nfittex ġenituri li għandhom aċċess għat-tfal tagħhom bis-Supervised Access Visits provduti mill-aġenzija Appoġġ biex nesplora il-mod ta' kif jaraw ir-relazzjoni li għandhom mat-tfal tagħhom.

1. Skop ta' l-istudju

L-iskop ta' dan l-istudju huwa li jifhem il-perspettiva tal-ġenituri li għandhom aċċess għat-tfal tagħhom fil-preżenza ta professjonist mill-aġenzija Appoġġ. Dan l-istudju jipprova janalizza il-veduti tal-ġenituri dwar ir-relazzjoni mat-tfal tagħhom fid-dawl ta' dan l-arranġament. Dan għandu jwassal sabiex joħloq aktar għarfien fost il-professjonisti li jaħdmu ma' ġenituri f'sitwazzjonijiet bħal tiegħek.

2. Proċedura

Jekk taċċeta li tieħu sehem f'dan l-istudju, is-Supervisor ser jieħu d-dettalji tiegħek. Ir-riċerkatur imbad ser jikkuntatjak u jinvitak biex tattendi intervista li tieħu madwar siegħa. Din l-intervista ser issir fiċ-ċentru tal-Moviment ta' Kana fil-Furjana skond il-flessibilita. Waqt din l-intervista ser tiġi mistoqsi dwar l-esperjenzi u l-perspettivi tiegħek dwar is-suġġett.

Din is-sessjoni ser tiġi irrekordjata permezz ta' recorder diġitali. Qabel ma tibda din l-intervista ser tigi magħraf dwar id-drittijiet tiegħek bħala parteċipant u ser tiġi mitlub biex tiffirma ittra li fiha tagħti il-kunsens tiegħek biex issir din l-intervista u tiddikjara li taf x'inhuma id-drittijiet tiegħek u li fhimtom sew.

3. Id-drittijiet tiegħek bħala parteċipant

- Il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek f'dan l-istudju hi volontarja, li jfisser li inti tista' tagħżel li ma tippparteċipax u li inti liberu/a li twaqqaf l-intervista f'kull moment mingħajr ma tagħti raġunijiet. Waqt l-intervista inti tista tirrifjuti milli tirrispondi mistoqsijiet li ma tridx tirrispondi.

- Is-sessjoni ser tkun rekordjata b'recorder diġitali. Int ser tkun infurmat/a b'dan ir-recorder qabel ma jibda l-intervista. Dan ir-recording ser ikun imniżżel fuq kompjuter u sussegwentament jitħassar mir-recorder wara l-intervista. L-aċċess għal dan ir-recording ser ikun protett minn password li jfisser li r-riċerkatur biss ser ikollu aċċess għalih. Dan ir-recording ser jinżamm għal ftit xhur wara li t-teżi tkun lesta u wara tiġi mħassra.

- Kull informazzjoni li inkisbet in konessjoni ma dan l-istudju, u li tista tidentifikak ser tibqa kunfidenzjali u tiġi żvelata biss bil-permess tiegħek jew kif inhu mitlub bil-liġi. Aspetti mill-intervista ser jiġu żvelati biss jekk int tgħid xi ħaġa li turi li int jew persuna oħra tistghu tweġġgħu. Apparti dan, il-konversazzjoni ser tibqa' kunfidenzjali.

- Jekk ir-riċerka tkun ta' interess jew ta' għajnuna għal ħaddieħor, ir-riċerkatur ser jipprova jippublika din ir-riċerka f'ġurnal jew publikazzjoni akkademika.

4. X'nagħmel jekk għandi iktar mistoqsijiet?

Jekk għandek iktar mistoqsijiet u tixtieq tiddiskutijhom aktar fil-fond, ikkuntatja lil Mr. Daniel Borg fuq dan l-indirizz elettroniku: daniel.borg@gov.mt jew inkella saqsi għal Jekk għandek xi mistoqsijiet oħra relatati mal-etika u l-korretezza ta' din ir-riċerka, jekk jogħġbok ikkuntatja:

- lid-dipartiment tar-Riċerka tal-Fondazzjoni għal-Servizzi Soċjali fuq 2388 5119.

- lis-segretarja tal-Kumitat Universitarju dwar l-Etika fir-Riċerka, Ms Debbie Dada, Admissions and Ethics Officer, Graduate School, University of East London, Docklands Campus, London E16 2RD (Tel 020 8223 2976, Email: d.dada@uel.ac.uk)

Grazzi tal-ħin li ħadt biex tikkonsidra dan l-istudju.

Participant Information Sheet

Dear _____

To introduce myself, I am Daniel Borg, a student who is currently training to become an Educational Psychologist.

For this study, I am searching for parents whose contact with their children is through Supervised Access Visits provided by Agenzija Appogg to explore their perception of the relationship with their children.

1. Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to understand the views of parents whose current access to their children is done under the supervision of a professional employed by Agenzija Appogg. The study intends to look at how these parents view their relationship with their child/children in the light of this new arrangement. This will hopefully lead to more awareness and knowledge among professionals working with parents like yourself.

2. Procedure

If you accept to take part in this study you will be invited to attend an interview which will be approximately one hour long. These will be held at Agenzija Appogg depending on your availability. During this interview you will be asked to share your experiences and views on the topic.

The sessions will be audio recorded using a digital recorder. Prior to the commencement of the interview you will be briefed about your rights as a participant and asked to sign an Informed Consent letter which shows that you are aware of your rights and that you have understood them well.

3. Your rights as a Participant

- Your participation in this study is voluntary, which means that you can choose not to participate, and that you are free to withdraw from this research at any time without giving reasons. During the interview, you may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

- The sessions will be audio recorded using a grey digital recorder which you will be aware of prior to the interview. This recording will be downloaded on the computer and consequently erased from the recorder after the interview session. Access to the recording will be password protected, which means that only I can have access to it. This recording will be kept until a few months after submission of the thesis and will be erased accordingly.

- Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Aspects from the interview will only be disclosed if you say something which means that you or someone else can get hurt. Otherwise the conversation will be kept confidential.

- I will try to have my research published in a journal or any other academic publication if it may be interesting and of help to other people.

4. What if I have more questions?

If you have any questions or you want to discuss this further, please contact Daniel Borg on the following email address: daniel.borg@gov.mt or else refer to Mr/Ms_____ at Appogg on _____.

If you have any queries regarding the conduct of this research, please contact the Secretary of the University Research Ethics Committee, Ms Debbie Dada, Admissions and Ethics Officer, Graduate School, University of East London, Docklands Campus, London E16 2RD (Tel 020 8223 2976, Email: d.dada@uel.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking time to consider this study.

Appendix 5

Informed Consent form

Please fill in the following consent form if you want to take part in this research project.

	Place your Initials in each box
1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving reasons. I am also aware that I can stop talking about something if I want to.	
3. I agree to the interview being audio recorded.	
4. I understand that what I say will be kept private and only shared after it has had my name or any other details that could identify me taken out. The only time that Daniel can tell anybody else my name or any details, is if I say something which means that me or someone else can get hurt.	
5. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in the write ups.	
6. I understand that there is a possibility that this research will be published in a journal or any other academic publication if it may be interesting and of help to other people.	
7. I have been provided with a copy of this form.	
8. I agree to take part in the above study.	

_____
Printed Name of Participant

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent   Date

Appendix 6

Initial interview questions

- How would you describe your relationship with your child?

- What change/s, if any, have there been in the way you interact/communicate with the children and in the way the children interact/communicate since these Supervised Access Visits started? What contributed to this change?

- What change/s, if any, have there been in the way you show your love and affection towards your child/children?

- What difficulties, if any, do you face to maintain the same relationship with your child as it was before?

- What could help you to continue developing your relationship with your child?

- Do you see a difference in your child's needs as a result of this new arrangement?

- Do you see any changes in your role as a parent with this new arrangement?

- Tell me how your views about parenting changed as a result of this experience?

- Are there any aspects of the supervised access visits which help you strengthen your relationship with the child?

- What can professionals do to help non-custodial parents maintain a good relationship with their children?

- After having this experience, what advice would you give to other non-custodial parents to help them maintain a good relationship with their child/children?

Confidentiality Agreement

It is hereby understood and agreed that the below identified discloser of confidential information (Daniel Borg) may provide certain information that is and must be kept confidential. In order to ensure the protection of such information, and to preserve any confidentiality necessary to protect the interest of the individuals involved in this research it is agreed that:

1. The Confidential Information to be disclosed can be described as and includes:
    Audio clips containing interviews done with research participants as part of the Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology being followed at the University of East London.

2. The Recipient (Glorianne Pace) agrees not to disclose the confidential information obtained from the discloser to anyone under any circumstances.

3. This Agreement states the entire agreement between the parties concerning the disclosure of Confidential Information. Any addition or modification to this Agreement must be made in writing and signed by the parties.

WHEREFORE the parties acknowledge that they have read and understood this Agreement and voluntarily accept the duties and obligations set forth herein.
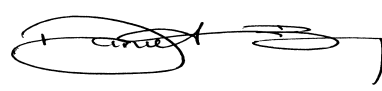
Recipient of Confidential Information:

GLORIANNE PACE   Signature 152071 (m)   10/12/2011   Date

Discloser of Confidential Information:

DANIEL BORG   Signature   Date

Transcript 1 (extract from pages 5 and 6)	Coding	Memo
Nista' najdlek li hi baqghet ghaddejja u kwazi ghada l-ewwel sena din l-istorja. Biex spiccajna jiena u t-tifla nikkomunikaw bl-ghajnejn. Konna naghmlu certu hin inharsu lejn xulxin, iffissati lejn xulxin nikkomunikaw bl-ghajnejn. Xi kultant kienet tigi tbusni. Kull ma kienet tajdli go widnejja it-tifla biex ma jisimawhiex is-supervisor, kienet tghidli "ma, jiena nhobbok, jiena naf li m'ghamilt xejn. Ghamel kuragg." Daqshekk. U ha nkun onesta mieghek, wasalt sal-gurnata tal-lum daqs kemm ghamilt kuragg jien.	Communicating non-verbally. Parent's +ve perception of child's understanding.	
P: Jista' jkun li kien hemm mument fejn it-tifla riedet titkellem ferm fuqha qatt qabel?		Mother reflecting on reciprocity. She likened child to a doll meaning that the interaction between them was poor.
R: Ehe. Kien hemm hafna mumenti fejn it-tifla tkun trid tiftah qalbha. Ma kontx inwaqqafha jien imma jwaqqfuha huma. Kienu jghidulha ma tistax * mal-mama'. Kien hemm anke supervisor fejn qaltilha * hekk. Kien hemm supervisor fejn gieli qaltli lili li jekk tibki, it-tifla ma tarahhiex izjed. Jekk tibki, lit-tifla * ha nibghatha id-dar. Dawn huma affarijiet li jweggaw u trid tkun fis-sitwazzjoni biex thosshom, illi din is-supervisor, li darba gabuli wahda mieghi hemmhekk tifla, l-anqas biss hija mizzewwga, l-anqas biss ghandha tfal, u * tibkix, dak il-hin eddilha (told her) "Jien ma nibkix? Ghadtilha: Taf xi tfisser li fis-* il-sena jehdulek it-tifla tieghek wara li kont wellidha u rabbejtha ghal dawk is-snin kollha? Int qed titkellem, lanqas biss andek tfal? Qaltli: Jiena studjajt. But it's not enough ta! Meta trid tkun taf x'jigifieri thoss qalbek ghat-tfal. Ghaddilha: kif nara lil din it-tifla tigi hawn ghal saghtejn u titlaq lura wara saghtejn, kemm ituha cans tannaqni wahda qabel titlaq, dik taqsamli qalbi. Kif nista' ma nibkix?	Supressing feelings. Controlling supervisors. Mother's reaction to supervisors.	Unsure of what outcome of supervision will be – uncertainty.
P: Qisu umbad, l-ewwel kienu naqra bdew joqoghdu attenti ghalik, umbad qisu * down, jigifieri *.		
R: Ovvjament		Need to discuss these things.
P: Kif affettwak umbad * ir-relazzjoni ta' bejnietkom, qisu ma baqax, daqshekk? (continue from15.47)		
R: Ghal-ewwel, qabel ma grat din il-fazi li affettwat bejni u bejn it-tifla, bejn iz-zghira, rabja kbira; rabja fis-sens, ohtha, kellha rabja kbira, iz-zghira rabja kbira ma' ohtha sal-gurnata tal-lum illi il-qorti, hemmhekk * li hija * ghax meta is-social workers * maz-zghira, iz-zghira qaltilhom li mhux vera. Qaltilhom li qed tigdeb qisha * lin-nanna. Jigifieri dan hu ghamlet rabja kbira * "nikber Ma". * lili. Ghal bidu hekk gara sfortunatament pero umbad, wara li ghadda z-zmien, veru, din iz-zghira giet immuta u	Anger from child and mother due to situation and court proceedings. Child wanting to grow up.	The parent's belief that the

kulhadd jaf li l-kbira kibret. Ovvjament, ghadna ghaddejjin * b'din il-procedura. Ressaqna diversi rikorsi u diversi * biex iz-zghira tigi lura mieghi ghax ma tixtiqx toqghod hemmhekk. (continue from 16.47) P: Kif affettwak dawn is-supervisors li sibt? il-fatt li kellek tara tifla f'supervision, kif affettwak il-mod kif tagixxi u tintergixxi mieghek? qabel ma grat din il-bicca xoghol u wara? Kif tiddetikahom il-komunikazzjoni taghkhom flimkien? (17.09 if you want)	Battles to gain back child.	child is understanding her helps relationship.
R: Qabel konna qisna bhal persuna wahda, li nista najdlek, li dik li haduha konna qeghdin id-dar tieghi nirrangaw l-ahhar affarijiet sakemm immorru fid-dar il-gdida, kellna ingibu il-* , kien hemm bicca hobz wahda, ghidtilha "Chris, kulha int", qaltli "le ma, int gdimt izjed minni u allura jien izjed. Qaltli "issa kif immur id-dar nissaporti u naghmel noodles". Ghamlitha il-hobza hi li kien hemm fil-fridge, tatha lili, nikolha kollha. Meta morna d-dar ghamlitli n-noodles ghalija u ghaliha u kilna flimkien. Din kienet l-ahhar darba li jiena kilt wahdi mat-tifla tieghi bhala omm u tifla. Izda ghaddew sentejn, u dik ma stajtx naghmilha izjed. Gewwa l-appogg, it-tifla kienet qishom kellhom hajt bejni u bejn it-tifla. Kullma hallew toqba wahda, din il-povra tifla tipprova tarani minn dik it-toqba. Inkella, biex tipprova tghaddili xi haga tipprova taqbez dan il-hajt u mhux dejjem kien jirnexxielha. Gieli kien jirnexxielha. Per ezempju, konna naqbdu il-mobile tieghi, kont niktbilha messagg, hi taqrah u tirrispondini lura, ghax ma stajniex nitkellmu. (continue from 18.26) P: All right. Fuq x'xiex kien ikun?	Perceiving closeness. Last moments prior to removal. Not being able to enjoy this closeness. Bringing a simile to how interaction in relationship was reduced.	Crying as a way of communicating pain and hurt and love.
R: Il-messagg kien ikun per ezempju, Chris ghamel kuragg, taqtax qalbek, uza mohhok, taghmilx bhal ohtok, ghax bit-tajjeb u bil-hazin. Dawn it-tip ta' messaggi. It-tifla gharfet x'inhu l-hazin, gharfet x'inhu it-tajjeb. Ghada sal-lum il-gurnata tghid li ma tridx toqghod izjed ma' missierha, trid toghqod mieghi u ma' huha, hi ohtha ma tridx. Jigifieri, tghallmet, kibret. U meta marret quddiem l-imhallef, it-tifla, u xeghdet, qaltilha il-verita', qaltilha kemm inti matura, anzi din it-tifla qalet "x'ridduni naghmel? Hadduli l-mama fi ftit sieghat, kif ha nikkopja? Tihtaf qalbi mieghi ma setghetx din it-tifla. (continue from 19.13)	Alternative ways of communicating. Mother perceiving child as grasping truth/Loyalty. Child needing to move on and grow up without mum.	Did this anger impact on relationship and focus on child

Din immaginha tifla, ta' disa' snin. Haduha minn mieghi fi ftit sighat. Ma setghetx tarani, ma setghetx tkellimni, ma setghetx tiftah qalbi mieghi, ma setghetx titkellem ghand missierha din it-tifla. Taf x'kienet tghidli? Kienet tghidli "ma, qisni qieghed go gagga tal-iljuni". "Kif niftah halqi, jaqbzu fuqi kollha kemm huma". Dak kien fl-ewwel zmien. Illum il-gurnata t-tifla kibret, ghandha certu sahha, saret tirrispondi. Jekk jghidu xi haga tirrispondihom lura. Ma kinux jaghmlu li jridu. Qaltilhom "jien irrid immur mal-mama", u l-missier jaf din kif inhi. "Jien hemmhekk mhux se noqghod". Riedet tahrab. Darba minnhom qaltli, "ma, kieku ridt kont lest biex nahrab. Ghidtilha "Chris, taghmilx hekk ghax inkella tigi fit-trouble". Qaltli "ma nridx noqghod izjed hemmhekk". It's not fair li noqghod hemmhekk". Jekk ohti trid toqghod taghmel hi imma jien ma nridx noqghod izjed hemm. Jigifieri kelli rabja ta' vizzju. Iz-zghira trabbilha certu kunfidenza issa. Ghamlet izjed gharja. Fejn qabel kienet qisha taht il-mama, f'daqqa wahda din it-tifla at one point spiccat wahedha. M'ghandha lil hadd. Trid taqdef ghal rasha. Fl-iskola, kont naghmel	Perceiving child as also facing hardship. Seeing child as developing as a person albeit the absence of mother. Growing together in relationship.	or of child with parent?

Codes	Emerging Categories	Emerging Questions
Supressing feelings - controlling supervisors.	External influence on relationship/Impact of supervised sessions	How is it difficult to relate?
Mother's reaction to supervisors.	External influence on relationship/Impact of supervised sessions	
Anger from child and mother due to situation and court proceedings; Child wanting to grow up; Battles to gain back child.	Reciprocity/bi-directional messages	
Child wanting to be close. Last moments prior to removal.	Loss of child, loss of parenthood	
Not being able to enjoy this closeness. Bringing a simile to how interaction in relationship was reduced.	Impact of supervised sessions/Relationship	
Alternative ways of communicating. Mother perceiving child as grasping truth/Loyalty; Child needing to move on and grow up without mum.	Finding new ways of reaching. Child's understanding of situation	
Perceiving child as also facing hardship. Seeing child as developing as a person albeit the absence of mother. Growing together in relationship.	Relationship Reciprocity	