Introduction
In this presentation, I aim to focus on identifying some of the more general or theoretical conclusions I have drawn from my research. I hope to demonstrate the effectiveness of theories of relationality and an ethics of care as an analytical framework, a language and as an orienting principle for researching and understanding stories of fathering beyond divorce or separation.

A recurring problem for me is the tendency to try and say too much about too many issues, in a small about of time, so I have tried to select a set of, what I see as, key analytical points I wish to discuss. This presentation will also be the first time I have articulated some of these ideas ‘out loud’ so I welcome any comments or suggestions as I continue with the final stages of writing and organising my PhD thesis.

I will begin with a brief overview of the project, its main theoretical influences and analytical approach, and give an indication of my general findings.

Overview of the project (Slide 2)
My research is a qualitative, interview-based sociological study of fathers’ experiences of fathering after divorce or separation; focusing on fathers who have maintained contact with their children. The project aims to offer insight into fathers’ perceptions of their roles and relationships with their children, and with mothers, and to emphasise post-divorce parenting as a complex moral process which is heavily shaped by gendered patterns of caring for children.

My sample consists of 23 biological fathers of children where the couple relationship with the mother had ended; either through divorce or the ending of a cohabiting partnership (25 cases in total). The minimum length of time that a father needed to have been separated in order to be included in the sample was one year. Of these 23, 11 were recruited via their place of work, 6 from a father’s group, 2 from other family support organisations and 4 from the researcher’s professional/social networks. The sample is drawn from the geographic area of Norfolk and Suffolk and constitutes a heterogeneous group in terms of age, employment, type of contact and form of parental relationship with an ex-wife or partner. It includes fathers who work full time, part time are self employed or unemployed. It also contains a range of both professional and non-professional jobs, and so does offer some insight into the experiences of working class fathers.
Whilst my research population was fathers who had maintained contact with their children, I could not impose a definition of what the nature or frequency of this contact should be. Therefore, fathers who offered to take part had already interpreted the word ‘regular’ (used in the recruitment material) and applied it to themselves, and this produced a sample containing a variety of fathering situations and patterns of contact, including 3 lone fathers (where children had contact with their mother). What all the participants did have in common, is that as part of maintaining contact with their children, they are all engaged in an ongoing co-parental relationships with their ex-wives or partners; with varying levels of communication, co-operation or conflict. They must also be seen as a group of fathers who, by volunteering to give an interview, felt they had a defensible/adequate moral tale to tell.

In terms of contact arrangements, the most common form (16 fathers) was regular (staying-over) weekend contact and periods of school holidays (this includes the 3 main-carer fathers who had weekend contact arrangements for children and their mothers). Other patterns included longer periods of all school holidays, regular weekday contact, shared care arrangements, unstable weekend contact and regular supervised contact. In the majority of cases (14), solicitors had been involved in the making of both contact and financial arrangements for children, but in 8 cases there had been a higher degree of conflict which had involved the family court and social services. In 3 cases all arrangements had been made entirely privately.

**Theoretical orientation (Slides 3, 4 & 5)**

My research is aligned with feminist concerns with pursuing gender equity and challenging deeply embedded cultural and structural norms around gender roles and relations. I am interested in contexts in which both women and men, not necessarily by choice, may find themselves questioning the enduring, gendered model for organising earning and caring. I believe that any feminist analysis of gender inequalities in the conception, valuing and organisation of ‘work’ and ‘care’ cannot focus exclusively on the experiences of women. As my work has developed, I have become particularly engaged with feminist epistemological, moral philosophical and methodological work, in relation to debates around knowledge production, ethics, moral theory, conceptions of care, qualitative research, interviewing and reflexivity (Sevenhuijsen 1998, Ruddick 1989, Tronto 1993, Mason 1996, Ribbens & Edwards 1998, Mauthner & Doucet 2003).

**Analytical approach**

My research has explored fathers’ own accounts of their fathering beyond the ending of a marriage or partnership with their children’s mothers. I have explicitly stated that I have treated the interviews as narratives, and also that the sample consists of fathers who, simply by volunteering to talk to me, felt they had a morally defensible story to tell. Adopting this more narrative approach has enabled me to examine the style or strategies, as well as the content of interviews, and to include consideration of the interview itself (and my part in it) as a particular context for telling stories of post-couple fathering. The interviews focused on fathers’ caring arrangements for children and how these had been
achieved or developed, on how their working lives impacted on caring for children, and on the emotional and practical aspects of their relationships and time spent with children. In almost every case stories of couple and parental lives prior to the divorce/separation were told, along with stories of ‘splitting up’, and these appeared to be often strategically necessary or as important contextualisation, for the narrative of post-couple fathering under construction. A starting point for my analysis were three key ideas, visible in recent research: divorce as a transition in, or continuation of, family relationships, divorce as a catalyst for re-thinking family relationships, and gender as a central influencing factor on parental identity and practice (Smart & Neale 1999, Ribbens McCarthy et al 2003, Doucet 2006). I explored the interview narratives in terms of what they might show about the particular processes involved in such transition or re-thinking, and the ways in which gender might shape fathers’ experiences and perceptions of this. I used an approach based on the ‘Listening Guide’ (Brown & Gilligan 1992, Gilligan et al 2003, Doucet & Mauthner 2008) in order to acknowledge and explore the interviews as narratives and to attend to the multiple ‘voices’ or layers within stories of fathering beyond couplehood. This involved making multiple and reflexive readings of the interviews, exploring ‘plot’, self-presentation, my own responses/participation as the interviewer, and themes related to my research questions.

Summary of general findings (Slides 6 & 7)
Whilst the focus of the interview was on co-parental and father-child relationships, all of the fathers’ narratives presented fathering as taking place within a wider network of care. Fathering took place in connection, though not necessarily collaboration, with ‘others’; most often, or most intensively, mothers.

Across the interviews, there was a theme of continuity in fathering activity, where the idea of ‘doing my bit’ was drawn upon to claim that from the outset fathers had shared in the care of babies and young children, and acting as a means by which to explain and affirm the quality of their relationships with children since being divorced or separated. ‘Doing my bit’ was frequently substantiated by examples such as bathing, dressing, reading stories, doing bottles; routines associated particularly with going to bed or with getting up at night/in the morning, or by references to going out and doing things at weekends. Paid work was presented as important and time-consuming, but something which did not prevent fathers from ‘doing their bit’, contributing to family life and bonding with children.

Fathers held ambivalent or contrapuntal views about gender stereotypical roles and assumptions about both fatherhood and masculinity. Fathers could accept, resist or fall back on ideals of masculine identity and gendered caring roles during the course of their narrative and their engagement with ideas such as ‘breadwinning’ was not straightforward.

The gender and age of children appeared meaningful in terms of both the relational and moral work involved in sustaining father-child relationships, with more fathers referring to the challenges or concerns over fathering, particularly older, girls. The age and gender
of children had a bearing on how time was spent together, and on how fathers accounted for this in moral and relational terms; often linked to perceptions and presentations of childhood, children and their ‘needs’.

All of the fathers agreed with the principle of financial responsibility for children, and that this was a moral, not just material issue. Yet this principle was seen as contextual or negotiable, and as something which applied to mothers as well as fathers. Whilst fathers did feel a moral responsibility to support their children financially, they also did not want their role or involvement to be ‘reduced’ to money, often drawing on an expanded idea of provision to talk about how they supported or were involved in their children’s lives (including practical and emotional support and ‘being there’).

In relation to co-parental relationships with mothers, a common theme/conception was of the ‘working relationship’ defined as: ‘bearable’, offering enough communication to facilitate practical caring arrangements and based on enough mutual trust and respect for both parents to feel acknowledged or not excluded. All the fathers, though they struggled to do it in practice, recognised that their ability to develop a working co-parental relationship relied heavily on their ability to detach this from their feelings about their children’s mother as a partner (emotion management).

Second families also acted as a powerful context and catalyst for relational and moral work, sometimes prompting complex ‘caring dilemmas’ for fathers as they tried to sustain their fathering across more than one household. Fathers talked of having to consider how their financial, practical, emotional and relational resources were shared, and in making such deliberations, fathers frequently drew on ideas of fairness as both a ‘thinking tool’ and a language for their efforts to sustain fathering roles and relationships. The tendency was to prioritise children’s needs and feelings, but fathers also included new partners and ex-partners in their accounts of trying to be fair. Being fair in relationships was understood predominantly in terms of material provision, the allocation of time and attention, and the giving of gifts and treats.

Fathers did not take up an explicitly politicised view around ‘fathers’ rights’ or mothers as ‘obstructive’ and none were politically active. What they did share was ambivalence towards women as mothers, often according them a certain status, and power, in relation to children’s lives, whilst equally expressing a sense that ‘dads have it tough’ and may be undervalued or treated unfairly by wider society.

In general, fathers expressed ambivalence towards ‘other men’, they could be perceived as both a challenge to their masculine identity and fathering role, but equally as ‘relief’ in terms of financial and/or emotional responsibility for mothers.

**Key theoretical points**
As part of my analytical and interpretive process I developed a set of what I saw as significant theoretical points or insights, revealed and illustrated by my research.
At the broadest level I am arguing that the feminist ethics of care is an appropriate theoretical framework, and that specifically the conception of care and caring relations, concept of relationality, model of moral deliberation and ethical principles offer important insights into men’s lives as fathers after divorce or separation.

It is important, in itself, to notice and explore relationality in men’s lives, as it contributes both to an understanding of male caring, and to any critical analysis of the persistently gendered way in which care is conceptualised, experienced, valued and organised.

For the presentation today, I have chosen to focus on three main theoretical claims:

1. That the concept of fairness is in play during the relational and moral work of fathering and co-parenting beyond divorce or separation
2. That a gendered moral space exists in which such processes and renegotiations take place,
3. That gendered patterns of care act as an almost ‘magnetic’ force in process of renegotiating fathering and co-parental roles.

Fathers, mothers, families and fairness (Slide 8)
I have focused on fathers’ relationships with children and mothers, whilst emphasising the point that fathering is seen as a relational exercise; taking place within particular contexts and networks of care and support (Duncan & Edwards 1999, Doucet 2006). The presence and significance of such networks, including paternal relatives, second families, ex-in-laws, friends and work colleagues, formed a consistent backdrop and reference point for fathers’ narratives, often implicated in the processes of both relational work and moral accounting. In turn, fathers’ presentation of and talk about moral issues or dilemmas was not done in a detached, absolutist or rights-based way; in this study there was very little evidence of an ‘ethic of justice’ model of moral reasoning in play. Instead, my analysis revealed that fathers tended to operate with a highly connective and relational form of moral reasoning and that the idea of fairness was used as a working guide for finding bearable solutions to complex moral problems, often involving multiple sets of needs or wishes. It also demonstrated the continual presence and influence of gender as a mediating factor, bringing both particular opportunities and constraints for fathers in both their actions and their accounts of these.

Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003) define fairness in terms of beliefs about what is both ‘just’ and ‘good’ for children in particular; based again on an understanding and prioritising of children’s needs, but also in relation to ideas of inclusion and equality within ‘the family’ as a meaningful collective unit. Importantly, the concept of fairness is linked to and highly compatible with, a relational and contextualised understanding of moral reasoning, as whilst it incorporates moral ‘principles’ it also operates as flexible or responsive, in that, aside from the privileged moral status of children, ‘rights’ or ‘obligations’ appear as ascribed or negotiable rather than static or absolute. I argue that fairness is also concerned with questions of responsibility, or moral accountability, as much as with rights, meaning that it does not appear as ‘binary’ or necessarily
adversarial, and is highly applicable to the complexities of family lives and relationships. Ribbens McCarthy et al highlight the use of fairness as a practical guide for applying moral reasoning; to achieve fairness, or at least a perception of fairness, is a complex moral and relational accomplishment, central to the practices of ‘making families’.

Fathers’ accounts of trying to work at fairness in their family relationships suggest that contextualisation is an important and necessary part of the process of deliberation, implementation, and indeed for the telling of moral tales in an interview. In relation to both children and to mothers, being fair was broadly connected to the allocation of resources: money, time, material resources (including property) attention, and to a lesser extent, consideration of or responsiveness to, feelings. Considerations of fairness were highly contextualised in that both practical and relational factors informed both the process and the outcomes, and whether they did so with more, or less reluctance or difficulty, fathers appeared to be having to pay some level of regard to, the circumstances and feelings of others. What fathers often claimed to have achieved or be working towards, was some kind of ‘bearable’ solution; fathers often described their family situations as ‘the best of a bad job’ or ‘as good as it could be’ and saw their co-parental and fathering relationships as part of an ongoing process, in which time and effort were involved.

At the same time, my analysis and consideration of the gendering of care for children and the interconnection of fathering and mothering, suggests that fathers may have to do less, in terms of both practical and accounting work, to be accepted as moral and fair. Fathers may be able to deploy the relational strategies of ‘keeping the peace’ or of allowing mothers to retain the lion’s share of responsibility as a way of being seen to be fair to them, as mothers. This presentation of fairness through stepping back, or at least not taking on more, caring responsibility, illustrates the moral content or status fathers may seek to give to a comparatively distanced or limited role, and can also be related to other studies which indicate the secondary or facilitated fathering relationship, where mothers may be perceived as ‘gatekeepers’ and fathers ‘wait to be asked’ (Coltrane 1996). Conversely, it may be that, particularly non-resident fathers feel that they have less bargaining power, or may be expected to compromise, or ‘step back’ more, in the face of mothers’ elevated moral status and responsibility. Responsibility contains both obligations and powers, which appear to be revealed and experienced in new ways at the point of divorce or separation, and fairness can be understood as something parents may have to seek, or to bestow. Gabb’s (2008) reference to forms of ‘gift’ exchange in family relationships, drawing on Hochschild’s work on an ‘economy of gratitude’ (2003) also appear relevant here.

Fathering in a gendered moral space (Slide 9)
Through my analysis of moral tales of ‘good fathering’ after divorce or separation, I have been able to explore something of what is moral for men, and of the shifting and complex moral terrain in which men as fathers can operate. I have used the term gendered moral space to describe this terrain, where ‘space’ includes expectations, rewards or sanctions,
limits or boundaries, but also room to manoeuvre. The fathers’ narratives provide insight into not only what fathers may think and feel about what constitutes good enough fathering, but also what they consider ‘tellable’ in the context of an interview. Whilst, again, by virtue of agreeing to be interviewed, all the fathers felt they had a morally viable story to tell, and were morally acceptable as fathers within this, my analysis was still able to capture some of the narrative strategies and devices by which accounts of fathering could be constructed. It is through this kind of attention to the ‘how’ as well as the ‘what’, that the sense of gendered moral space emerged.

I describe this moral space as gendered not just because men as fathers appear to be subject to different evaluative criteria, from both particular and generalised others (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2007) in relation to their roles and responsibilities for children, but also because they involve engagement with particular normative and potent ideas, such as ‘breadwinning’ or ‘providing’. Once again, my data revealed complex and ambivalent responses to ‘masculine’ roles or norms, with fathers apparently aware of, or strategic about, some of the constraints as well as opportunities they offer. Overall, the gendering of moral space does appear to offer fathers room to manoeuvre, in ways that are not so apparent for mothers; claims of an ‘intensification’ of motherhood (Hays 1996) and research on ‘making’ families, such as Smart & Neale (1999) or Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003) which discuss gender differences in moral reasoning and caring practice, bear this out. Whilst fathers made reference to the ‘moral imperative’ of prioritising children’s needs, and drew consistently on ideas of ‘putting children first’, ‘staying’, and ‘providing’, in each case, these ethical principles could be enacted in a variety of ways; fathering roles such as providing or ‘being there’ appeared to be negotiable and broad. In particular, forms of ‘active passivity’ in relation to not acting or intervening in children’s lives, avoiding conflict with mothers, following mothers’ lead (or invitation) in determining their level of involvement, were all presented and accounted for in terms of being morally acceptable, justified and/or fair in the context of post-couple fathering.

What is revealed is that a certain ‘optional’ quality of caring and responsibility remains available to men as fathers, which is also compatible with morally acceptable fathering; put bluntly, it may again be that fathers have to do less than mothers, in both practical and relational terms, to be validated as good or laudable parents. However, this greater, or more elastic moral space does not necessarily or exclusively bring gains to fathers, nor am I saying that fathers do not reflect on the complex moral questions raised by attempting to sustain fathering and co-parental relationships after divorce or separation. My analysis suggests that in the process of such attempts, the constraints and ‘losses’ of a more ‘optional’ or ‘supporting’ parental role are more likely to be felt, which can, potentially, lead to opportunities for fathers and mothers to rethink, or change gendered patterns of parental care.

The ongoing impact of gendered patterns of care for children (Slide 10)
Throughout my analysis I have paid attention to the ways in which an already gendered experience of family life and parental care may influence the challenging process of co-parenting after divorce or separation. The data reveals that, across the interviews, fathers
held ambivalent or contrapuntal views about gendered or stereotypical roles and assumptions about both fatherhood and masculinity; trying at different moments to hold on to, and to shake off ‘old’ ideas in an effort to be both ‘good’ and often ‘different’ kinds of fathers. Such tensions and possibilities are illustrated through the way in which my study presents both the transformative potential of new or changed forms of caring for children, and equally the persistent pull of an established gender order.

The notion of ‘transformed’ fathering involved becoming more focused on, attentive and available to, children; clearly linked to spending (limited) time with them, but was presented much more in terms of the relational and emotional quality of that time, the ‘work’ involved in producing it, and the unexpected consequences of caring, or being solely responsible, for children, outside the context of marriage or partnership. Such changes appeared to have led fathers, in different ways and to different extents, to reconsider or re-evaluate both their pre-divorce fathering and, more broadly, what being a father or a mother meant, in both personal and social terms. It is important to recognise though, that transformed experiences of care did not necessarily equate to greater amounts of time or overall responsibility; the most common form of caring arrangements was that fathers had children to stay for weekends, overnights during the week, and/or periods of the school holidays. So while fathers may feel differently about caring for children and may gain an awareness of the opportunities and rewards it can bring, this is only one step in changing arrangements whereby women as mothers continue to manage the bulk of the material, emotional and relational domestic labour.

I am arguing then, that alongside, or despite, the transformative potential of direct care and caring responsibility, a gendered model of parenting appears, often as a default position. This model, of mothers as ‘primary’ carers and fathers as ‘supportive’ helpers is recognisable in public discourses around, not just parenting but also work-life balance (Gatrell 2005) and is not incompatible with promoting father engagement (Featherstone 2009). Within fathers’ narratives, this model was also often referred to, or accompanied by, ideas of the ‘different but equal’ qualities and contributions of fathers and mothers; here again, equality can be presented in terms of moral worth, rather than a division of labour. My analysis suggests that the tenacity or ready availability of a gendered primary/supporting parent model retains an ‘optional’ yet morally adequate quality to fathering. However, the implications of such gendered caring arrangements following divorce or separation are often unanticipated and can be experienced as a form of ‘inversion’ of the powers associated with caring roles. This point can be illustrated by fathers’ preoccupation with, and often realisations about, the significance of ‘dailiness’ (Apthekar 1989) and routine caring as a source of information about children and their lives, a means to emotional closeness with them, and as an important source of moral legitimacy of authority over them (and in relation to mothers).

My research illustrates how fathers may continue to benefit from the optional aspects of fathering contained within (and validated by) gendered caring arrangements, in that mothers may continue to carry the bulk of care and responsibility for children. However, during the process of separation, fathers (and mothers) may also re-assess what such responsibility carries with it, in terms of opportunities for sustaining relationships and
retaining parental (and co-parental) authority. In this way, I am arguing that gendered patterns of caring for children become fault-lines for the renegotiation of parental roles and responsibilities following divorce or separation. Both fathers and mothers may reconsider or appreciate the ‘power’ that comes with responsibility only at the point of seeking to sustain their caring for children after divorce or separation and both may struggle to acquire and to give up certain gendered aspects of their roles and responsibilities in which there are significant emotional, personal and social investments.

Conclusion
To conclude, my study of fathers’ narratives demonstrates the presence and significance of relationality and moral reasoning in the practice of renegotiating parental roles and responsibilities after divorce or separation. Fathering takes place in connection with others, and is particularly interconnected with mothers and mothering. With more, or less, explicitness, willingness or resistance, all of the fathers were involved in moral accounting, calibrations of fairness and considerations of the gains and losses provided by gendered caring arrangements, and all expressed their attempts to sustain roles and relationships with children and mothers in line with the idea of ‘relational work’. Such moral and relational work, also involves a high level of emotion management, and at the broadest level, the context of parenting beyond couplehood creates both important opportunities for and a need to, explore and question parenting and gender roles. Such a process of rethinking or renegotiation can still result in the adoption of the default position of fathers as ‘supporting’ or secondary carer, but, it does also have the potential to develop relationships or transform experiences of caring for children, which can contribute to wider changes or challenges to the gendered organisation of care in particular family lives and beyond.
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