Experiences of Adolescents in Families with a 
Father Employed Abroad

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abstract
The economic recession faced by Ireland in recent times has compelled some parents to look at employment options overseas. The present study aimed to gain an insight into the experiences of families with a father employed abroad due to the current economic climate. The experiences of adolescents were explored through an inductive qualitative approach. Seven adolescents (5 female, 2 male), ranging in age from 14 to 18 years, participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was carried out on transcribed interviews with the themes identified leading to a depiction of these adolescents’ experiences. Respondents described changes in the roles and relationships within their family, and an increase in their concern for other family members. Negative emotions associated with having a father employed abroad were also highlighted, though ultimately, respondents described becoming accustomed to their modified family arrangement. The adoption of coping strategies was conveyed, with respondents asserting that ‘life goes on’ despite the intermittent absences of their father. The findings of this study suggest recommendations to help alleviate the impact of intermittent father absence, and provide a foundation from which to explore methods to support families confronted with such situations..

Introduction

The economic recession faced by Ireland in recent times has placed increased financial strain on many families (Watson, Maître, and Whelan, 2012). A UNICEF Ireland (2011) report indicated an overwhelming majority of Irish young people identified direct effects in their home life as a consequence of the recession, with 25% of 16 to 20 year olds declaring a family member as ‘recently unemployed’.
Current employment difficulties in Ireland have compelled some fathers to look at employment options overseas, often leaving their families at home in Ireland. During times of economic recession, having a reduction in disposable income can constitute a time of increased financial pressure, and negative changes in parental mental health, marital discord, and parenting quality (Solantas, Leinonen, & Punamaki, 2004). Employment-related father absence may bring economic benefits to the family, and thus, alleviate financial pressure and some of these consequential negative outcomes. However, it remains uncertain whether the financial positives associated with being employed abroad, outweigh any negatives relating to having a father intermittently absent from the household.

Father absence may be attributed to many factors, and some fathers may be absent from intact families for intermittent or temporary time periods (East, Jackson, & O’Brien, 2006). Employment-related conditions are commonly associated with this form of temporary father absence. Fathers in a range of occupations such as the military, offshore oil and fishery workers, miners, and workers in the transportation industry may find themselves geographically separated from their families (Forsyth & Gramling, 1990; Riggs, 1990; Tanaka & Nakazawa, 2005). Western psychological research on the effects of father absence has primarily concerned itself with parental turmoil and death, circumstances that can have diverse outcomes on children and adolescents (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2003; Lamb, 1997). It has been suggested that the favourable interactions that a father engages in with their family have a greater association with children and adolescents’ positive development than the actual amount of time fathers spend with their children (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2007; Patterson, 2006). Father absence alone due to employment-related circumstances may have a limited negative effect on children and adolescents. However, the frequent partings, separations, and reunions associated with families who have a father intermittently absent, may elicit a number of changes in family life and impact on family members’ wellbeing (Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009; Jensen, Grogan, Xenakis, & Bain, 1989).

Maternal wellbeing may be influential in predicting children’s adaptation to their father’s intermittent absences (Andres, & Moelker, 2011; Palmer, 2008). Emotional and psychological effects, such as increased anxiety and loneliness, as well as difficulties and stressors related to child rearing, have been self-identified by spouses during their husbands’ temporary absences (Blount et al., 1992; Diamond, Hicks & Otter-Henderson, 2008; Eaton et al., 2008). Wheeler and Torres Stone (2010) found that mothers with spouses working abroad in the military described
their household as resembling that of a one-parent family. Military mothers additionally reported an increased domestic role overload and difficulty involving their spouse in events they missed during the time they were overseas (Wheeler & Torres Stone, 2010). However, the resilience of mothers was portrayed by the successful development of coping strategies during these times, such as increased self-sufficiency and confidence in their abilities to run a single-parent household (Wheeler & Torres Stone, 2010). Mothers with intermittently absent husbands working in the mining industry reported significantly increased stress levels and disruptions to family routine (Kaczmarek & Sibbel, 2008). However, no difference was found on measures of their children’s psychosocial wellbeing when compared to military and control families, and all children were considered to be functioning at healthy levels (Kaczmarek & Sibbel, 2008). Researchers speculated that at-home mothers had developed protective mechanisms by experiencing the intermittent father absence lifestyle, and were able to promote equilibrium and stability in the family system, thereby supporting the wellbeing of their children (Kaczmarek & Sibbel, 2008).

The role of employment-related father absence as a specific factor affecting family cohesion and children and adolescents’ wellbeing has been researched in Japan. These studies have involved investigating ‘Tanshinfunin’, a Japanese concept describing temporary father absence due to job relocation without their families. Comparison studies have examined ‘taidofunin’, where families relocate with their father as a unit (Bassani, 2007; Tanaka and Nakazawa, 2005). In comparison to ‘taidofunin’ families, children experiencing temporary father absence depicted a more negative and lonely atmosphere in their home, and exhibited an increased allowance for deviation of social norms and early delinquent behaviours (Nakazawa, Tanaka, & Nakazawa, 1998). ‘Tanshinfunin’ children also recounted positive coping behaviours through establishing a strengthened relationship with their mother, and by playing a greater role in the running of the household. Conclusions from data collected on ‘tanshinfunin’ job transfers indicated that the physical absence of fathers alone does not have a direct negative effect on parent-child relations, families’ overall wellbeing, or children’s socio-emotional development. However, physical absence in addition to functional absence, characterised by a poor performance in a father and husband role, may lead to an increase in children’s problem behaviours and increased anxiety and stress in mothers at home (Nakazawa, Tanaka, & Nakazawa, 1998; Tanaka & Nakazawa, 2005). Western research has also suggested that father absence may only be harmful when certain aspects of the father’s role remains unfulfilled or inadequate, specifically factors that are crucial to family functioning such...

Empirical research has shown that temporary father absence may indeed elicit positive changes in adolescents such as increasing maturity and self-sufficiency, and resulting in more cooperative and responsible attitudes at home (Huebner & Mancini, 2005). Many children were seen to recognize the positive aspects of having their father employed abroad, particularly the fact that their fathers spent an increased amount of time with them when they were home (Houghton, 1993; Parkes, Carnell, & Farmer, 2005). Although most adolescents reported feeling the strains of having their father intermittently absent, many believed that there was no irreparable damage to their family ties and functioning, and were quick to defend their transnational family unit (Parrenas, 2008). The majority of mothers in military families believed their children rapidly adapted to their father’s temporary absences, particularly those who exhibited an understanding of the reasons behind their fathers’ absence (Andres & Moelker, 2011; Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009). Similarly, spouses of UK offshore workers reported that their families had adapted in a relatively favorable manner to the changes in family life associated with having a parent working offshore (Parkes, Carnell, & Farmer, 2005).

With a family member frequently absent from the household, the family as a system must manage both their presence and absence (Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007). Even if absences are not prolonged, frequent absences of a father may place strain on the family system as continual partings, separations, and reunions may result in the repeated reorganisation of a family’s roles and responsibilities (Boss, 1999; Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994). The concept of family boundary ambiguity provides a useful conceptual lens to examine intermittent father absence (Boss, 1975). Broadly defined, family boundary ambiguity is “a state in which family members are uncertain in their perception about who is in or out of the family, and who is performing what roles and tasks within the family system” (Boss & Greenberg, 1984, p. 536). Although boundary ambiguity was defined with families experiencing traumatic loss in mind, Boss (1980) highlighted the potential for its utility in studying more common boundary changes across the family cycle, such as parental divorce or when adolescents move out of the home. In families that have fathers who are frequently absent due to work commitments, boundary ambiguity is thought to be particularly salient, resulting in blurred family boundaries, and confused roles and responsibilities (Huebner et al., 2007; Mauthner, MacLean, & McKee, 2000; Zvonkovic, Solomon, Humble, & Manoogian, 2005). Through descriptions of modifications in
their roles, routines, and responsibilities, adolescents with deployed fathers have alluded to the fact that issues related to boundary ambiguity may arise (Huebner et al., 2007).

The Present Study. Although previous literature has investigated employment-related father absence in occupations such as the military, the experiences of families in Ireland with a father intermittently absent have never before been explored. Hence, the current study aims to address this by gaining an insight into the experiences of Irish adolescents who have a father working abroad due to the downturn in the economy. Research in this area is important in order to acknowledge any impacts that this family structure has on family life and family members’ well-being. Enhancing our understanding of how employment-related father absence affects families will facilitate efforts to promote beneficial policies for families with a father employed abroad.

Adolescents are placed between parents and younger siblings at an intermediary level, thus may be in a position to outline their own experiences, in addition to any differences they perceive in their younger siblings and parents since their father began working abroad. It is hoped that the use of semi-structured interviews will provide adolescents with the opportunity to share these experiences. Through the use of an inductive qualitative design, the present study intends to help frame expectations for families with fathers considering employment options overseas. Thus, thematic analysis will be employed to summarise and represent the data in a manner that is readily accessible to the general public (Howitt, 2010). The present study is exploratory in nature, but endeavours to reveal the experiences of adolescents in families with a father employed abroad.

Method

Respondents. Seven adolescents, two male and five female, participated in individual interviews. Respondents’ ages ranged from 14 to 18 years, with a mean age of 16. Respondents were recruited through an online blog on the Irish Times ‘Generation Emigration’ website detailing the objectives of the study, participation criteria, and contact details of the researcher (Cronin, 2012). All of the respondents were Irish and currently had their paternal parent employed abroad. Inclusion criteria required fathers to be overseas for at least two weeks at a time, beginning in the previous three years.

Materials. The researcher prepared a semi-structured interview schedule. The School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee in Trinity College Dublin granted approval for the use of the interview schedule in the study. A review of previous literature surrounding intermitt-
father absence informed the general areas addressed by the interview schedule, which included questions covering:

- The family’s current arrangement and background information
- Any differences noticed in the home, family members, and themselves since their father began working abroad
- Advice for a family contemplating a similar arrangement

Respondents received information sheets and consent forms prior to participation. Following participation, debriefing forms were provided, with contact details of the researcher and support services available. Interviews were audio recorded using the ‘Voice Memos’ application on an Apple iPhone 4S, and recordings were subsequently transferred onto an Apple MacBook Pro for transcription and analysis purposes.

Procedure. Pilot study. Two interviews were carried out for the pilot study to assess the approximate timing of participation, as well as to ensure the suitability and clarity of the interview schedule. The pilot study suggested that the interview schedule and approach worked well. On review, amendments were made to the phrasing of some interview questions to facilitate respondents’ clearer understanding of what was being asked.

Present study. A mutually convenient time was arranged for the researcher to visit respondents’ homes to conduct the study. Specific and detailed information pertaining to the study design and the participation requirements was provided to adolescents and their at-home parent. Participants were given this information both verbally, and through the provision of an information sheet, prior to requesting written consent. During this time respondents were invited to discuss any queries or concerns they had with the researcher.

Upon receipt of written consent from parents and adolescents, adolescents were interviewed in a quiet, distraction-free room with the door open and a parent nearby in their home. The interviewer positioned herself adjacent to respondents in an attempt to create an unintimidating atmosphere. Respondents’ anonymity was reiterated, as was the fact that the interview would be audio recorded. Respondents were reminded that they were free to withdraw from participation at any point. Once verbal assent was obtained, the recording device was turned on and the interview proceeded in accordance with the semi-structured interview schedule. Interviews were open and flexible, facilitating adolescents to describe their personal experiences, whilst allowing the researcher to elicit follow-up information. Interviews ranged from 11 to 26 minutes each in length, with a mean interview time of 17.28 minutes. Finally, respondents were encouraged to voice any queries or conc-
erns, before being thanked and subsequently provided with a debriefing form.

**Data Analysis.** Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and verified with the original audio recordings for accuracy. To ensure anonymity, respondents’ names were replaced with pseudonyms and all identifying information was removed from transcriptions.

Thematic analysis, a qualitative data analysis procedure used to identify, analyse, and report patterns or themes emerging from a data set (Howitt, 2010), was used to analyse the interview transcripts. The analysis was data-driven and searched for semantic themes through a cyclical and recursive interpretation process in accordance with the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial codes were generated through immersion in the data, after reading and rereading the transcripts several times in their entirety. Placing annotation in the right margin of transcripts highlighted initial impressions and interpretations, and codes were noted in the left margin. A list of codes generated from all of the transcripts was produced, and similar codes were then sorted into initial themes. These were subsequently condensed, placing alike themes together, and finally reorganised, reduced, and reviewed, ensuring each theme was easily distinguishable. An appropriate name for each theme was then determined.

In keeping with the principles of qualitative research methods, the analysis included codes mentioned by a minority of respondents in an attempt to account for the complexity in the data. Codes were not predetermined by the researcher but were grounded in the data through creating codes of recurrent topics and concepts.

**Reliability.** The interview schedule was designed around research into the experiences of families with a father working abroad, thus grounding the questions in previous research in the area of temporary parental absence. The aforementioned pilot study allowed for a review of the interview schedule, leading to slight modifications being made. Internal validity was assessed through an independent researcher examining the coded transcripts, deriving themes and labels that they saw fit. Subsequently themes and subthemes were discussed with the researcher.

The researcher was consistent in their approach to interviewing adolescents and care was taken to avoid leading questions. The researcher intended to avoid misinterpretations of responses in the interview through asking follow-up questions and exploring them further when necessary. Any instance where it seemed possible that the researcher had influenced a response was excluded from the analysis.

**Reflexivity**
It is important to note that the researcher’s father was employed abroad, and overseas for up to three months at a time due to the economic downturn in Ireland. Every effort was made to ensure this shared experience did not allow any preconceptions or biases to impact on the study in any way. The researcher made an entry in a reflective journal after each interview, outlining any impressions or opinions that had emerged. This additionally allowed the researcher to monitor any feelings or preconceptions they became aware of that may have impacted on the data.

**Analysis**

**Background Context of Families.** A summary of the responses gathered through preliminary questioning addressing respondents’ family structure, and their father’s patterns of absence from the home, can be seen in Table 1. Respondents invariably indicated that it was financial factors, and the lack of employment available in Ireland, that compelled their father to begin working abroad.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position in Family</th>
<th>Month Father First Began Working Abroad</th>
<th>Average Duration of Father’s Absence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Second eldest of 3</td>
<td>June, 2012</td>
<td>3-4 Months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shane</td>
<td>Only Child</td>
<td>November, 2009</td>
<td>2-3 Months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>Eldest of 3</td>
<td>October, 2012</td>
<td>2-3 Weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Youngest of 2</td>
<td>April, 2011</td>
<td>2-3 Months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Youngest of 3</td>
<td>June, 2011</td>
<td>6 Weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Second youngest of 4</td>
<td>January, 2010</td>
<td>3-4 Weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reighn</td>
<td>Second eldest of 5</td>
<td>January, 2010</td>
<td>3 Months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Thematic Analysis.** Following thematic analysis of the data, five overarching themes were identified. The accompanying sub-themes noted within four of these main themes are outlined in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Life Goes On&quot;</td>
<td>Adjustment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continuity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Changing Family Dynamics</td>
<td>Shifting Roles</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Changing Relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional Repercussions</td>
<td>'We Miss Him'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anxiety and Ambiguity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern for Family Members</td>
<td>Focus on Positives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support Seeking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Life Goes On’. Respondents indicated that ‘Life Goes On’ for their families despite their father’s employment-related absences. Adolescents mentioned how through a process of adjustment, they had become accustomed to their modified family arrangement. Adolescents also identified many aspects of their lives that remained constant.

**Adjustment.** Although acknowledging
aspects of family life that had changed, respondents described how they had become accustomed to having their father working abroad. Respondents indicated that things began to feel normal and that family members soon became ‘used to the situation’. Most adolescents described that adjusting to their father’s intermittent absences was ‘easier than [they] thought it was going to be’, and that they would advise others that ‘it’s really not too bad having a parent away’.

“At the start you take it for granted that you have two parents at home. Like it’s normal that you have two parents at home, but now, it’s normal that he’s away. It’s just a normal daily routine like anybody else.” (Rachel)

Continuity. Adolescents indicated that many aspects of their daily lives continued in the manner they were before their father began working away, particularly aspects of their lives outside of their family, such as their social and academic pursuits.

“We kind of do the same things as we did before he left.” (Kathie)

“We miss him a lot but nothing much has changed. We still live the same lives and we miss him, but we do the same things and get on just as well.” (Robyn)

Changing Family Dynamics. Adolescents identified changes in their family dynamics since their father began working abroad. Respondents specified how family members’ roles and responsibilities shifted, and described how relationships within the family were altered.

Shifting Roles. Adolescents described changes in their family’s roles, routines, and responsibilities since their father began working abroad. All adolescents described the requirement to help more at home and many referred to the fact that responsibilities and chores that their father was previously accountable for, were now being carried out by other family members. Some adolescents alluded to the fact that a few of their father’s roles remained unfulfilled in his temporary absences. These included his role in providing specific guidance and advice in domains their mother is unfamiliar with, and his role as a second parent available to drive them to extra-curricular and social activities.

“We definitely have to help [mum] out more. She can’t be everywhere so we need to do what she can’t do really…And I guess things that [dad] would do we all kind of do.” (Robyn)

Adolescents relayed some difficulties encountered when their father comes home and is unfamiliar with the new roles and routines the family has adopted. Some adolescents described how they are accustomed to only having their mum around, and may find it ‘annoying’ when their
father is home and additionally taking on a parenting role.

“We’ve gotten used to just having mum and we don’t really need him around as much as he would like…Like we have different responsibilities and stuff and then [dad] kind of comes home and he’d be like ‘oh, you have to do this’, and we’re like ‘ya, we already do that in general so there’s no point in you telling us’, and then he gets annoyed.” (Laura)

Changing Relationships. All adolescents recounted how they have become closer to their mother and siblings since their father began working away, and many attributed this to the increase in time they spend together. Most adolescents also indicated feeling like they were drifting apart from their father.

“When he comes home it’s really weird…before I would be closer to my dad, but now I’d say I wouldn’t be close to him. Nowhere near as much as I was, I’m better with mum now like…I’d feel like if we were together what do we talk about.” (Rachel)

Emotional Repercussions. Respondents associated certain emotions with having their father routinely absent from the home. Adolescents described how they miss their father whilst he is abroad, as well as expressing feelings of anxiety and ambiguity relating to his employment overseas.

‘We Miss Him’. Adolescents frequently mentioned how much they miss the absent parent whilst he is abroad, and notice how other family members feel similarly. Most respondents additionally mentioned how they particularly miss the presence of their father, or spouse, at important events and milestones such as birthdays and school performances.

“There’s sometimes when maybe you just want a hug and you really miss him and you sort of feel that he’s away for most of your life.” (Shane)

Anxiety & Ambiguity. Adolescents suggested feelings of worry and uncertainty, in terms of when they would see their father next, what their father’s life and job were like abroad, and what the future would hold for their family. Adolescents expressed worry for their father’s personal safety whilst he was abroad.

“You’re always a bit worried and cautious about what’s going to happen to dad when he’s away in a foreign country. Like if anything bad happened or anything he’s so far away from you…when he’s home you feel sort of a bit safer and you don’t have to worry so much.” (Shane)

Concern for Family Members. Respondents indicated that they pay careful attention to the wellbeing of their family
members, and described how changes in family members’ emotions and behaviours elicited their concern. All adolescents were aware that their mother was ‘overwhelmed’ and ‘tired all the time’, noticing her increased loneliness and stress levels. Adolescents recognised that it’s particularly hard on their younger siblings. Some adolescents also voiced concern about their father and expressed that ‘they miss you as much as you miss them’.

“Sometimes I feel a bit sorry for mum when she’s doing everything…I think that she’s more stressed cause she has to do everything and she gets a lot more tired easier.” (Chris)

**Coping Strategies.** Respondents indicated that they have employed some positive coping strategies in adjusting to their father’s employment abroad, particularly through focusing on the positive aspects of their family’s current situation, as well as seeking support from family and friends.

**Focus on Positives.** Adolescents demonstrated a level of understanding about the reasons behind their father’s current employment abroad, and readily commented on the positive aspects of their family situation. Respondents described how they ‘make the most of the time’ they have with their father in between his time abroad, and how they appreciate that he focuses all of his time on his family when he’s home. Respondents also described how with their father’s income they are in a position to continue their previous lifestyle, and many now go on more family holidays. Respondents outlined the positives associated with taking on more responsibilities in the home, describing an increase in family members’ independence, maturity, and self-sufficiency.

“I didn’t mind him going cause I knew it would benefit us all…It was the best solution for us…I knew it would be a change, but it would be a positive change, and I had to look at it that way.” (Amy)

**Support Seeking.** When anxious or stressed, some adolescents described seeking support from family members. Other adolescents mentioned the benefits associated with consulting friends in a similar situation, with a family member employed abroad, for advice and support.

“Three of my friends have parents that go away so if I’m kind of struggling I talk to them about it.” (Laura)

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to gain an insight into the experiences of families with a father working abroad for reasons related to the current economic climate. Specifically, the experiences of adolescents were explored. The themes and accompanying sub-themes identified in the
analysis contribute to a depiction of respondents’ experiences. Findings revealed some commonalities in families’ experiences, with each respondent describing modifications in their family’s roles, responsibilities, and relationships, though ultimately indicating ‘life goes on’ despite the intermittent absences of their father. The themes indicated that changes occurred in family dynamics as a result of a father’s temporary absences. However, respondents described how many aspects of their lives remained constant, and family members seemed to adjust and become accustomed to the temporal and spatial distance that defines transnational family life.

Respondents described reallocating the roles and responsibilities that their father was previously accountable for to other family members. Peebles-Kleiger and Kleiger (1994) similarly reported that frequent absences of a family member result in the repeated reorganisation of a family system’s boundaries and role assignments. It appears mothers primarily take over these new roles. Adolescents described an increase in their mother’s irritability and stress levels, but also alluded to the key supportive role that their mother plays when their father is intermittently absent. Thus, the way in which mothers deal with this increased stress and workload may prove influential in predicting the overall adjustment of their families.

In accordance with the concept of boundary ambiguity, Boss (2004) contended that to healthily adapt to a family member who is frequently absent, one should gradually disconnect with them, whilst reconnecting with another available and caring person. Respondents in the present study described how family relationships are altered in a comparable fashion when their father is routinely absent from the home. All respondents depicted how the relationships between family members at home strengthen as they simultaneously adapt to life without their father’s everyday presence. Most adolescents indicated feeling like they were drif-
ting apart from their father. However, respondents also gave positive accounts of being reunited with their father on his return visits. These conflicting depictions of the shared relationship between adolescents and their fathers working abroad, may be an insight into the contradictory feelings adolescents have towards their intermittently absent father. It was beyond the scope of the present study to investigate if having a father working abroad could result in a permanently strained father-child relationship. However, this highlights an important area for further research.

Heubner et al. (2007) commented on the fact that adolescents are expected to assume various roles and responsibilities during their father’s absence, and often relinquish these roles whilst their father is temporarily home. Findings from the present study indicate a similar pattern of role allocation. This may place confusion on adolescents regarding their place in the family system (Boss, 2006). Adolescents depicted becoming accustomed to life without their father’s everyday presence, particularly when his absences are prolonged. Some adolescents described issues with the reintegration of their father upon his return, implying that having him home upsets the balance of roles and responsibilities that has been achieved. Adolescents additionally indicated how complying with their father’s parental role and authority could initially prove problematic. By ensuring adolescents are aware of the expectations for their new roles, and whether they are temporary or relatively permanent, issues related to boundary ambiguity may be reduced. Fathers returning home should anticipate changes that may have occurred in family life during their absence. However, through encouraging family discussions and a renegotiation of rules and responsibilities, families may be better able to readapt when reunited with their father.

Respondents made it apparent that they pay careful attention to the wellbeing of their family members, and revealed having an increased level of concern for them. Adolescents attentively identified an increase in their mothers stress and tiredness, and findings suggested that mothers might be unaware of how closely their adolescents monitor their behaviours and emotions. Similar to results reported by Huebner et al. (2007), adolescents were also concerned about how their younger siblings were coping with having their father intermittently absent. Some adolescents noticed changes in their younger siblings’ sleeping patterns and irritability, particularly at times when their father comes home and leaves again. This may be illustrative of the emotional demands associated with the repeated partings and reunions of a parent (Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994). Adolescents face normative stressors associated with puberty and academic transitions, and may thus be considered particularly vulnerable in fami-
lies with a father working abroad. However, Andres and Moelker (2011) reported that younger children tend to experience more adjustment problems. The present findings tentatively support this claim as adolescents implied they believed it was hardest on the youngest members in their family, though further investigation into this is warranted.

Adolescents demonstrate that they are aware of the underlying factors that have led their father to begin working abroad and focused on the positive aspects of their father’s employment circumstances. This may prove beneficial, as Andres and Moelker (2011) concluded that children who exhibit a level of understanding of the reasons behind their father’s absence are better able to adapt. The ability to recognise the positive aspects of having their father working abroad may help adolescents to alleviate any potential negative feelings towards their parents or their current familial arrangement. Respondents indicated that their families continue to function whilst their father is working abroad, adjusting appropriately to new structures and roles, and demonstrating resiliency in their ability to adapt to changes in family life. The present findings are in line with previous research concluding that most families adapt relatively favourably to the demands and challenges associated with having a parent work abroad (Andres & Moelker, 2011; Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009; Parkes, Carnell, & Farmer, 2005).

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research. The findings should be interpreted with caution as the sample size demarcates the generalisations that can be drawn. Recruitment through advertisement may have resulted in a particular sample of adolescents whose personality characteristics make them amenable to speaking about their experiences and engaging with current research. Data generated in the interviews is taken to represent respondents’ perspectives and not objective fact. Thus, the reliability of the findings from these respondents cannot be asserted or assumed for others.

Although the present study may not fully capture the adjustment of all adolescents in Irish families with a father employed abroad, it is hoped that this exploratory work can be utilised to inform future research. The impacts of having a father work abroad have been thought to vary depending on the child’s age, the duration and regularity of the father’s absence, as well as the frequency of the father’s contact and time at home (Boss, 2004; Mauthner, MacLean, & McKee, 2000). Exploration of these factors in future research would enhance our understanding of the experiences of families with fathers working abroad.

Subsequent quantitative research might develop the broad observations
identified in the present study. The inclusion of an appropriate category in national population surveys such as the Census may be an important step towards looking into this family circumstance, providing an estimation of the number of Irish fathers who work abroad. It would additionally be interesting to explore father’s perspectives of being intermittently absent from their family. Some respondents alluded to the fact that it may be particularly hard on fathers, adjusting to a new job and foreign country without other family members nearby, and coming home to a family that has become accustomed to his absence. Despite the fact that participant recruitment was not exclusive regarding the gender of the parent working abroad, the sample included only families in which the father worked overseas. A comparison between the experiences of families facing maternal and paternal intermittent absences would be an interesting avenue for future investigation.

**Conclusion**

The empirical data presented in this report is not necessarily a definitive narrative of every adolescent’s experiences of having a father intermittently absent. However, considering the experiences of families in Ireland with a father working abroad have been largely neglected in the literature, these limitations should not reject the key findings highlighted in this study. When the composition of a family alters as a result of having a father working abroad, routines and responsibilities must be adjusted, and relationships within the family may change. However, adolescents seem to be adaptable and resilient, becoming more attuned to the wellbeing of others in their family. Respondents were determined to present their situation in a positive light, emphasising that they had become accustomed to their modified family structure. The findings of this study suggest recommendations to help alleviate the impact of intermittent father absence, and provide a foundation from which to explore methods to support families confronted with such situations.

**References**


