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'LIVING TWO LIVES'

Perceptions, attitudes and experiences of spouses of UK offshore workers

The work pattern of North Sea oil workers (typically, 2–3 weeks offshore alternating with a similar period of leave) imposes significant demands on the families concerned. The effects of 'intermittent husband absence' were recognized in the 1980s, but little recent research has focused on the adaptation of offshore families in spite of changes in the industry, in local communities, and in society more widely. The material reported here was derived from survey responses (N = 245), and from telephone interviews (N = 39) with spouses of men working offshore in 2001–2002. Demographic data, descriptive material, and literature findings are drawn together and illustrated with quotations to present a picture of spouses' perceptions, both positive and negative, of offshore lifestyles. Particular areas of interest are responses to the repeated partings and reunions involved in offshore work; the impact of intermittent father absences on children; communications with the absent partner; and employment outside the home and its role in the lives of offshore spouses. Spouses' concerns about offshore safety and job security are also noted. Relative to earlier research, the findings present a more favourable impression of the adaptation and satisfaction of offshore families.

Keywords offshore work; spouses; family lifestyles; North Sea employment; oil and gas industry

Le mode de travail des employés travaillant sur les installations pétrolières dans la mer du Nord (normalement 2 à 3 semaines offshore, alternant avec une période similaire de congé) impose des sacrifices importants aux familles concernées. Les effets de l'absence périodique du mari étaient déjà rapportés dans les années 1980, mais les adaptations effectués par les familles offshore n'ont pas été étudiés récemment malgré les changements fondamentaux dans l'industrie, dans les communautés locales, et dans la société au sens plus large. Les informations rapportées ici sont dérivées des réponses au sondage (N = 245) et des interviews téléphoniques (N = 39) avec des épouses des employés travaillant offshore dans la période 2001–2002. Les données démographiques, le matériel descriptif et les résultats de la recherche de littérature sont résumées et illustrées avec des citations pour générer une image des perceptions (positives et négatives) des épouses du style de vie offshore. D'un intérêt particulier sont les réponses aux séparations et réunions répétées caractéristique pour le travail offshore; l'effet de l'absence périodique du père sur les enfants; les conversations avec le mari absent; et l'emploi hors de la maison et son rôle dans les vies des épouses offshore. Les soucis des épouses concernant l'exigence de sécurité offshore et la sécurité

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d'emploi, sont aussi décrits. Par rapport aux recherches préalables, les résultats présentent une impression plus favorable de l'adaptation et satisfaction des familles offshore.

Mots-cléfs travail offshore; épouses; style de vie familiale; emploi dans la mer du Nord; industrie pétrolière et gaz

Introduction

The work schedule of UK offshore personnel typically involves periods of 2 or 3 weeks work on North Sea oil and gas installations, alternating with a similar period of shore leave. This work pattern imposes significant demands on the personal and psychosocial adaptation of the individuals and families concerned (e.g. Clark, McCann, Morrice, & Taylor, 1985; Lewis, Porter, & Shrimpton, 1988a). Moreover, the effects of offshore work impact not only on the families directly involved but also on the wider communities in which they live (Moore, 1988; Rosen & Voorhees-Rosen, 1978), particularly in areas (such as Aberdeen) which have relatively high concentrations of offshore employees. Although numbers have decreased in recent years, the oil and gas industry continues to employ a substantial offshore workforce; recent estimates indicate that more than 20,000 personnel currently work in the UK sector of the North Sea (Department of Trade and Industry, 2003).

The great majority (approximately 97%) of these offshore employees are men, most of whom are married (Horsley & MacKenzie, 1997; Parkes & Clark, 1997). In earlier work, Clark and Taylor (1988) reported that 93% of the 200 offshore spouses in their study had children, including 41% with pre-school children. The average age of the UK North Sea workforce has increased over the past decade (Parkes, 1998), with some reduction in the proportion of offshore families with children at home, but more than half of a large sample of offshore workers surveyed in 1995–1996 had children less than 18 years old (Parkes & Clark, 1997). A further consequence of the increased age of the offshore workforce is that a higher proportion of the families concerned are likely to care for elderly relatives, an issue not considered in existing literature on offshore families.

The offshore lifestyle requires families to cope with regular absences (usually of the husband), and the emotional demands of repeated partings and reunions. This lifestyle, and its implications for individual and family well-being, was studied by psychologists and medical specialists in the early years of North Sea exploration and production. Among the wives of offshore oil workers, Morrice and his colleagues (Clark et al., 1985; Clark & Taylor, 1988; Morrice, Taylor, Clark, & McCann, 1985) identified a characteristic pattern of affective distress and behavioural changes. This pattern, labelled '*intermittent husband syndrome*', was found to merit psychiatric intervention in 10% of the sample ($N = 200$). However, in a further study, Taylor, Morrice, Clark, and McCann (1985)) found no differences in mental and physical health between the wives of comparable onshore and offshore personnel.

The potential problems of 'intermittent husband absence' impact not only on offshore spouses, but also on the children of offshore personnel and others who work

at remote sites (e.g. Cotterell, 1986; Mauthner, Maclean, & McKee, 2000). In particular, Mauthner et al., in interviews with children (aged 8–12 years) from offshore families, found that the repeated departures of their fathers were a source of distress, especially if key events (e.g. birthdays) were missed through his absence. The interview material also suggested that the children were concerned about the hazards of offshore work, and about the effects of their fathers' absences on their mothers. More positively, however, they were aware that, when their fathers were at home, they saw more of them than the children of fathers working onshore.

Psychosocial issues arising from the development of the offshore oil industry have also been examined from a sociological perspective; this work encompasses the social and economic effects of oil development on rural areas (e.g. Rosen & Voorhees-Rosen, 1978), and the experiences and attitudes of offshore families. In particular, Lewis et al. (1988a) brought together a number of different perspectives on the lifestyles of the spouses of offshore oil personnel. The material both supported and extended the findings of Morrice and his colleagues. The concerns of wives about the safety of their husbands while offshore, the demands of managing domestic and parenting tasks alone, the contradictions and discontinuities inherent in the experiences of offshore wives, and the importance of social and emotional support from family and community members, are all documented in these essays (e.g. Lewis, Shrimpton, & Storey, 1988b; Moore, 1988; Solheim, 1988). Parallels with other occupations that involve extended periods away from home are evident (e.g. Beckman, Marsella, & Finney, 1979; Binkley, 1990; Eastman, Archer, & Ball, 1990; Forsyth & Gramling, 1990).

Although irregular shift patterns, long work hours, and other forms of 'unsocial hours' working have become increasingly common in the UK workforce as a whole in recent years (e.g. Green, 2001; Jacobs & Gornick, 2002; Taylor, 2002), these work patterns nonetheless allow off-duty time at home in each 24-hour period. In contrast, 'commute' employment (such as that in the offshore oil industry and in Australian 'fly-in' mines) routinely necessitates weeks or months away from home, and thus imposes additional demands that are qualitatively different from those of irregular or long work hours. Nonetheless, as Shrimpton and Storey (2001) point out, 'commute' employment should not be seen as inherently problematic; like other work systems, it offers both advantages and disadvantages.

One particular issue that affects offshore families is the employment of spouses outside the home. Some 15 years ago, in discussing this issue, Solheim (1988, p. 141) noted '*women are on the move out of the family, and into wider social spheres*'. Since then, changes in society have greatly extended the employment opportunities open to women, increasing the likelihood that the spouses of male offshore personnel will choose to engage in paid work, often with a strong commitment to responsible and demanding jobs. Along with these changes in employment patterns have come stronger expectations on the part of women that their husbands will assist with childcare and routine household chores. These expectations cannot be met by offshore workers when they are away and, even when they return home, they may be reluctant to participate fully in domestic and childcare activities.

Recent changes in the oil and gas industry: Implications for offshore families

The studies cited above reflect the range of research that has been carried out into the lifestyle and psychosocial adaptation of offshore families. However, much of the research in this area dates from the relatively early days of offshore oil exploration and production; since then, the industry has changed in ways that affect offshore personnel and their families. In particular, following the Piper Alpha disaster (Cullen, 1990), significant improvements to offshore safety regimes were introduced, involving modifications to structures, procedures, and regulations; however, the extent to which these measures have alleviated spouses' serious concerns about the potential hazards of North Sea work expressed in the 1980s (e.g. Lewis et al., 1988b) is unclear. A further potentially favourable change has been the widespread extension of telecommunication facilities; in allowing offshore workers and their spouses to maintain day-to-day contact, telephone communication plays a potentially important role in managing work–home pressures and domestic problems (Collinson, 1998).

However, less favourably, the UK offshore oil and gas industry has been exposed to extensive restructuring and down-manning over the past decade as part of the CRINE (Cost Reduction In the New Era) initiative introduced early in the 1990s (CRINE Secretariat, 1993). Overall, the UK offshore workforce has decreased from 34,200 personnel in 1993 to 22,200 in 2003 (Department of Trade and Industry, 2003). Moreover, many offshore workers consider that their conditions of employment have worsened, particularly in terms of increased workloads, reduced job security, and eroded pay differentials relative to their onshore counterparts (Shrimpton & Storey, 2001). Cost-cutting measures impact not only on offshore workers themselves, but also on their spouses, families, and local communities. Thus, there is a need for up-to-date research into the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of offshore workers and their families in the current industry climate. The present study seeks to increase understanding of the lifestyles of offshore families in the light of the changes that have taken place in the oil and gas industry as a whole, and in society more widely, over the past two decades.

Present study

The work reported here examines, from a psychological perspective, the perceptions (both positive and negative), attitudes, and concerns of the spouses of offshore workers employed in the UK sector of the North Sea. Descriptive analyses of demographic and personal factors are presented, but the main emphasis is on narrative material derived from survey questionnaires and telephone interviews. In direct quotations, describing their attitudes, experiences and feelings, the spouses speak for themselves against a wider background of literature findings and descriptive data.

Data collection

Survey data

During two separate studies of offshore personnel, men who were married or in long-term relationships[1] were asked if their spouses would be interested in participating in

a 'family and lifestyle' study. The spouses of those who replied positively (N = 483) were contacted by mail at their home addresses with details of the planned work. Some did not respond, but questionnaires were sent out to all spouses who expressed an interest in taking part. In total, 409 questionnaires were distributed; 245 were returned completed (a response rate of 59.9%).

The questionnaire included items relating to age, education, paid employment, marital status, number of children living at home and their ages, number of years that their partner had worked offshore during the marriage, and spouses' ratings of their preference for their partner to work onshore or offshore (1–5 scale). The questionnaire also provided space for open-ended comments related to these items. The characteristics of the sample are summarized in table 1. In addition, spouses were asked how frequently they were affected by specific, and potentially problematic, aspects of the offshore lifestyle. These items, which were derived from the existing literature, are detailed in table 2, together with the proportions of responses in each of three categories, '*rarely or never*' (coded 0), '*sometimes*' (coded 1), and '*often*' (coded 2). An overall score was calculated by summing the responses (alpha = 0.70).

Telephone interviews

Using an approach similar to that described by Clark and Taylor (1988), responses to the survey questionnaire were further explored in a series of recorded telephone interviews. All participants in the first survey group ($n = 170$) were asked if they would be willing to take part in such an interview. Sixty-three per cent of those asked expressed interest; the remainder were either unwilling (25%) or did not respond (12%) to this question. Telephone interviews were conducted with a sub-sample ($n = 39$) of those who responded positively. The topics covered in the interviews included family relationships, coping styles, adjustment to partner's absences, decision-making, perceptions of their partner's work, and social life. The spouses who participated in interviews did not differ from the remaining spouses in the demographic and family characteristics shown in table 1, or in the extent of the concerns listed in table 2, with the exception that they were less likely to be in paid employment ($\chi^2 = 4.5$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$). Among those not employed in paid work, 32% were interviewed, as compared with 18% of those who were in paid work.

In describing the findings of the present study, the material is divided into several broad areas of interest identified in the Introduction; where appropriate, descriptive statistics are presented as a background to a more general account of the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of the spouses. This material is illustrated with direct quotations, primarily taken from the interviews[2] but also from open-ended responses to survey items.

Spouses' adjustment to the offshore lifestyle

The work/leave schedule of North Sea personnel requires not only offshore workers but also their spouses and children to cope with the emotional demands of repeated partings and reunions, and with disruption to shared family, social, and community

TABLE 1 Characteristics of the spouse sample

Factor Levels	*N*	*%*
Age group (years)		
22–29	16	6.6
30–39	69	28.3
40–49	105	43.0
50–59	54	22.1
Highest educational qualification		
No formal qualifications	30	12.3
GCSE/O-level or equivalent	72	29.6
A-levels or equivalent	46	18.9
Degree/higher degree	37	15.2
Other qualifications/diploma	58	23.9
Age of youngest child, if any		
Less than 6 years	45	18.5
6–16 years	84	34.4
17 years and above	83	34.0
No children	32	13.1
Spouse's employment		
None	83	33.1
Part-time	99	40.4
Full-time	65	26.5
If employed, flexible work hours		
Yes	39	23.8
No	125	76.2
Number of years partner had worked offshore during the marriage		
<5 years	30	12.2
5–9 years	49	20.0
10–14 years	42	17.1
15–19 years	60	24.5
20+ years	64	26.1
Offshore partner's occupational group		
Maintenance/technical	91	37.3
Catering	8	3.3
Production	48	19.7
Management	35	14.3
Administration/services	19	7.8
Marine/deck/drilling/construction	43	17.6

TABLE 1 (*Continued*)

Factor Levels	*N*	*%*
Offshore partner's work/leave schedule		
2 weeks offshore / 2 weeks leave	134	55.1
3 weeks offshore / 3 weeks leave	37	15.2
2 weeks offshore / 3 weeks leave	28	11.5
Other, including irregular schedules	44	18.1

N = 243–245.

activities. In this context, Solheim (1988, p. 160) notes that there are three distinct social realities for offshore families '. . . *his offshore life, her single life at home, and the joint life of "togetherness". These have to somehow fit each other if the offshore family is to survive*'. It has been suggested that adjusting to this pattern of intermittent absence is a greater challenge than the actual periods of absence (e.g. Clark et al., 1985). In the present sample, 59% of the spouses reported that they '*sometimes*' or '*always*' experienced problems in adjusting to their partner's absences. The proportion was unrelated to age or other demographic factors, but this group (as compared with those who '*never or rarely*' experienced such problems) expressed a significantly greater preference for their partner to work onshore rather than offshore ($t = 4.81$, $df = 239$, $p < 0.001$). Telephone communication was also an important factor. Thus, among those who could initiate calls to the installation to contact their partners offshore, only 48% reported difficulty in adjusting to absences as compared with 73% of those who were not able to call into the installation ($\chi^2 = 14.7$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$). This result highlights the potential role of improved telecommunications in facilitating adjustment among the spouses of offshore workers.

During the weeks their partners were at home, the adaptation of spouses tended to show a characteristic pattern. Typically, initial happiness on reunion was followed by a period of annoyance, which gave way to a 'normal phase' of adaptation during

TABLE 2 Percentages of sample reporting problems associated with offshore lifestyle

How often is this a problem for you?	*Rarely or never %*	*Sometimes %*	*Often %*
Concern about partner's safety offshore	15.6	57.8	26.6
Coping with domestic emergencies	42.6	46.3	11.1
Children's reaction to their father's absence*	55.2	37.6	7.2
Adjusting to 'intermittent absences'	41.2	49.0	9.9
Disciplining children*	55.6	33.3	11.1
Arranging holidays/birthday parties, and so forth	24.9	46.1	29.0
Partner's participation in the family	63.3	30.6	6.1
Loneliness during partner's absence offshore	33.6	54.1	12.3
Average over all items	*41.5*	*44.3*	*14.2*

N = 241–245.

*For these items, N = 129 (families with children aged <17 years).

the middle of the leave period but a further build-up of tension occurred in the days prior to the partner's return offshore. The irritation often experienced during the first few days of leave reflects the potential difficulty for both partners of managing two different transitions; the offshore worker must switch from the offshore environment to home, while his spouse must switch from 'husband absent' to 'husband present' (Clark et al., 1985). During the initial days at home, the offshore partner needs to recover from an extended work period, and 're-enter' normal domestic and social life, while his spouse has to incorporate another person into her daily routine, to relinquish sole control, and to share decision-making. As one spouse put it, '*It's like living two lives*'†.

Fatigue is a major source of adjustment problems. After two or more weeks away, offshore workers frequently arrive home exhausted; thus, family demands for attention and shared activities conflict with the offshore worker's reluctance to participate socially while still tired. This problem, illustrated by the comment, '*Everybody wanted his attention, and all he wanted was to unwind*'† is particularly acute following night-shift work offshore as fatigue is combined with the need to re-establish a daytime circadian rhythm. At such times, although their partners are physically at home, tiredness and disrupted sleep hours tend to deprive their families of their company; as one spouse observed, '*You have the person there, but they're not there*'. Strains experienced during their partner's shore leave can also affect spouses' physical well-being. Thus, consistent with evidence that wives of sailors tend to experience symptoms of distress, often in the form of physical complaints, when their husbands return home (Morrison & Clements, 1997), similar somatic symptoms were reported by some spouses in the present study: '*When I go and pick him up, I always feel incredibly tired and I'm sure its just the tension. I start to yawn the minute I see him!*'†.

The offshore work situation is characterized by a high degree of structure and regulation, and some spouses expressed concern about specific aspects of their partner's behaviour on returning home from this environment. Thus, some family members felt that they were treated like offshore personnel themselves during the first few days of leave. Others commented on their partners' unrealistic expectations: '*. . . they think they come home the conquering hero, and expect things. He's had to live on a rig with a bunch of men for a fortnight, and expects, "Here I am, let's wave the flags!"*'†, and, similarly, '*When they first come home, they very much see it as they're home to relax and it drives you nuts!*' Conflicts over authority were a further source of tension: In particular, spouses found it hard to give up control and independence when their partners returned from offshore: '*I find it difficult to hand over the car keys, the house keys, the cheque book after two weeks. And the longer I do it the harder it gets*'†. Disruption of the 'single life' domestic routine was also a potential source of irritation: '*I like my own space, I find J. very untidy. I'm not a fanatic on housework, but I want to scream when I walk into the kitchen and there's coffee cups and plates everywhere!*'†. Similarly, in a Canadian study, 52% of the offshore spouses reported '*niggling arguments*' during the weeks their partners were at home (Lewis et al., 1988b).

Whilst adjustment problems may be particularly acute during the first few days, later during the leave weeks both the offshore worker and family members may find that their high expectations of the time together are not realized. Reflecting a similar point made by Morrice et al. (1985), one spouse in the present study noted '*I miss him when he's away, and when he's at home I think "When are you going back!"*'†. Anticipation

of imminent separation also creates tensions: '*The last three days of home leave get progressively tense; we are more likely to snap at one another*'. Anxiety about parting affects both the spouse '*The day before and the day he goes, I'm on a lower level than usual*' and the offshore worker, '*He tends to brood a couple of days before he goes back — you can tell his mood is changing*'. Increased tension towards the end of the leave period is consistent with the observation that a wife's expectation of her husband's impending absence is more stressful than the absence itself (Tanaka, Nakazawa, & Nakazawa, 2000). The feelings of one spouse, '*I usually wake up the day after he leaves with a sense of relief from the stress*'†, were shared by others in the present sample.

Whilst this material illustrates the nature of the concerns and strains expressed by many spouses in the present study, it would be misleading to present an unduly negative picture of their adjustment to the demands and challenges of the offshore lifestyle. In particular, in many cases, their partners' absences had allowed spouses to develop greater independence, personal confidence, and coping ability. Thus, spouses' perceptions of themselves as individuals changed as a result of managing on their own during their partners' offshore weeks: '*I have much more confidence than I used to have. But then I think half of that is having to do things because he's not here. I think that when you have to do something you realise "Oh, I could do it anyway". Although it is difficult and you would rather not do it, you can do it*'†. Similarly, '*I'm quite strong and resilient; you have to be able to adapt, there's no point feeling sorry for yourself because your husband's gone away*', and '*It's made me more self-sufficient. If an emergency arises, I have to deal with it*'. Comments such as these suggest that spouses were often able to benefit from their partners' absences in recognizing and developing their own ability to cope successfully as individuals.

There was also evidence that many spouses, especially those whose partners had worked offshore for a considerable period of time, had developed appropriate strategies for managing repeated partings and reunions. Some were able to articulate the coping strategies they used. For instance, one participant described how, during the first few days of her partner's shore leave, she deliberately restrained her irritation, and tried to give him space and time to re-adjust: '*I bite my tongue and don't plan too much for his first few days at home. We try not to get under each others' feet*'†. Another form of coping was to delay discussing problems, '*. . . don't give household problems any airing in the first few days home*', raising important matters only in the middle of their partner's leave, when tension was generally least. Others mentioned deliberate avoidance of arguments: '*I know I'm a lot more easygoing, it just goes over my head. But it's by design, I try not to bite at certain things.*'†

Consistent with the view that strategies for managing intermittent absences can be developed over time, spouses' overall ratings of the adaptational demands associated with the offshore lifestyle (table 2) were inversely related to the number of years that their partners had worked offshore; the negative correlation was significant ($r = -0.18$, $df = 238$, $p < 0.01$), and remained significant ($r = -0.14$, $df = 237$, $p < 0.05$) when age was taken into account. This finding can be interpreted as evidence that adaptation improves over time, but it is also likely that a 'survival' mechanism operates (i.e. in families that do not cope well, the offshore worker is more likely to move to onshore work). However, some support for the former explanation came from spouses who indicated that over time they had developed greater understanding of their partners' behaviour in relation to partings and

reunions. Thus, one participant commented '*It's quite tense on the day he goes back but it used to be more apparent before . . . we just accept it now. I think we consciously tried to understand each other*'†.

Impact of offshore work on marital and social relationships

Although Collinson (1998) reported widespread marital dissatisfaction among the offshore workers he interviewed ($n = 98$), only rarely were serious marital problems reported by spouses in the present study. Whilst breakdown of a previous marriage was sometimes described, the present sample was recruited from spouses living with their partners; thus, they represented a 'survivor' population in terms of both marriage and offshore employment. Two opposing themes emerged when spouses were asked about the impact of offshore work on marital and social relationships. First, some spouses expressed a positive view of the impact of offshore work on their marriage: '*Sometimes I think it makes it stronger, as when he is away, I miss him and when he's home, you try to make the most of it — you don't argue as much*'†, and '*We've been together for 30 years, maybe we wouldn't have lasted if he'd been here the whole time*'†. They also recognized that the offshore lifestyle suited some couples but not others. The words '*independent*' and '*strong*' were often used to describe those who adjusted successfully. One noted '*I don't think there are many couples who could be apart and then be together all the time. There are some of my friends who, if their husband goes away, are virtually suicidal and I think "What is wrong? Enjoy the peace and quiet!"*'†, while another pointed out '*It doesn't work for all marriages, but for strong marriages it doesn't make much difference*'.

However, a second theme was the loneliness experienced by some spouses when their partners were offshore. Two-thirds of the spouses in the present study reported that loneliness was '*sometimes*' or '*often*' a problem. A major concern was the difficulty of participating fully in social life as 'single' women while their partners were away. Typical comments were, '*If I have to attend a function or meeting, and I see other couples together, I can feel bereft sometimes*'†, and '*I don't really socialise very much at all without my husband being there . . . social life is centred around him*'. Collinson (1998) reported that fears that their spouses might become involved in extra-marital relationships were common among offshore workers. In the present study, it was apparent that some spouses deliberately restricted their 'single' social lives to reduce the temptation of extra-marital relationships, '*There are always temptations when your husband's away, and I'm not saying I would, but it would always be there*'†. However, for others, social isolation resulted not from personal choice but from friends' reluctance to socialize with the spouse on her own, '*They won't invite me out for a meal, they wait until J. is home*'†, and similarly, '*. . . friends we go out with when my husband is home seem to disappear when he goes back to work — it's a bit like being a widow*'.

Keeping busy helped to overcome loneliness especially if there were children at home: '*Family life doesn't allow for much time to think of loneliness. I also enjoy my own company*', although evenings and nights were often a problem '*If I feel lonely, it's always in the evenings when I'm stuck around the house with two kids in bed*'†. Having a job, keeping in touch with extended family members, taking part in recreational activities, and telephone contact with the offshore partner, were other strategies perceived to mitigate loneliness. Although several spouses indicated that they would like to know others in the same position, relatively few ($< 10\%$) were involved with OWLS

(Offshore Women's Link Support), an association which runs local support groups for offshore spouses; indeed, many had never heard of this organization. However, OWLS was regarded as a valuable resource by some individuals. Thus, one spouse noted, '*I find this group a support, knowing they are there. Also that they have a full understanding of offshore wives*'.

Maintaining contact during offshore weeks

The significant improvements in telephone communications between offshore installations and the mainland in recent years have influenced not only the speed and reliability of work-related communications, but also the extent to which offshore personnel can keep in touch with their families. Previously, there were usually only one or two payphones available for personal calls home, and use of them was often hindered by lengthy queues, time limitations, and lack of privacy. One spouse, whose partner had worked offshore for 17 years, highlighted these problems: '*When he first started offshore, you couldn't ring the rig. He used to have to pay for phone calls, and wait in the phone box; they'd all be queueing at prime time. Sometimes it would be too busy to ring, it would be a couple of days before I could speak to him.*'†

The present situation is very different; extensive communication facilities are available, personal calls made from installations are now usually free or subsidized, and office phones can be used for domestic as well as business calls. Thus, offshore personnel are now able to keep in regular contact with family and friends; virtually all the spouses in the present study reported that their partners could contact them by phone when offshore. Moreover, a significant proportion of the spouses (57%) were able to make direct calls to the installation, although some used this facility only for urgent matters. The frequency of contacts reported reflected widespread use of the telephone; some couples talked on the phone several times a day. Overall, 64% of the spouses indicated that they were in contact with their offshore partners by telephone '*every day*'; 25%, '*most days*'; 10%, '*once or twice a week*'; and only 1%, '*rarely, if ever*'.

Frequency of contact was not significantly related to demographic characteristics, with the exception that it was inversely, and approximately linearly, related to years of marriage. Those who were in contact '*everyday*' had been married for an average of 16 years, as compared with 19 years for those in contact '*most days*', 21 years for those in contact '*once or twice a week*', and 24 years for those who were '*rarely*' in contact. These differences were significant ($p < 0.01$), and were only partially accounted for by age differences. Offshore work/leave pattern was also significantly related to contact frequency ($\chi^2 = 17.1$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.01$). In the group working 2-week offshore schedules, 70% of the spouses reported daily contact, as compared with 60% of those working 3-week schedules, and 48% of those working irregular schedules (often with only a few days offshore).

Most spouses considered telephone contact very important while their partners were offshore. In some cases, it was primarily the spouse who valued the reassurance of a telephone call, particularly in relation to safety: '*The other thing about the fact that he phones every night is that for that night he's safe. I know that he's on the phone and he's safe*'†. Others felt that it was more important to their partners to hear about family activities and local news: '*I think it's very important to him; it's a break to hear what's going on with me and the family . . . he likes to hear the scandal and things!*'†. Some spouses,

however, spoke of restricting topics of conversation in order not to worry their husbands: '*You try to be honest with him on the phone but on the other hand you don't want him thinking things are going wrong here. He's got a stressful enough job. But when he comes home he gets on to me because I haven't told him.*' Moreover, daily conversations sometimes left little to say: '*When he phones me he has not got a lot to say because it's just work, and I have to tell him all that's going on here, and I often find it's like he's hanging on the phone waiting, wanting me to say more and I can't think of anything more to say.*'† Another spouse described a similar experience: '*I got a bit fed-up the last time, I said "Please don't ring every night, I've got nothing to talk about"*'†.

Decision-making

One consequence of the offshore work pattern is that decision-making in the family is affected by whether or not the offshore partner is at home. Several strategies for resolving issues of decision-making authority in families in which one partner is intermittently absent have been identified in research with North American offshore oil workers (Forsyth & Gauthier, 1991; Gauthier, Forsyth, & Bankston, 1993). Particularly relevant to the present study were '*periodic guest*' strategies (in which the spouse takes all decisions irrespective of whether or not her partner is at home), '*alternating authority*' strategies (in which the male partner has the primary authority, but the spouse takes decisions when he is away), and '*egalitarian*' strategies, in which all decisions are made jointly by the couple.

The '*periodic guest*' strategy was strongly represented in the present spouses' responses: '*I make all the decisions, and we don't talk about it while he's away*'†; '*He's happy to leave 95% of the decision-making to me, and probably would leave 100%*'†; and '*. . . he normally says "If you think it's right, go ahead"*'†. However, this strategy could lead to conflict if the offshore partner sought to regain decision control during his weeks at home, and the spouse was reluctant to agree to this form of '*alternating authority*'. Two typical comments reflected spouses' frustration at this situation: '*You've been making all the decisions that you have to in the last month, so when he comes home and tries to make decisions for you, it's like: "No, don't do that", even really silly things*', and '*When he comes home I get ratty with him because why's he making decisions that I've been making for a fortnight?*'†.

For some couples, however, '*alternating authority*' worked satisfactorily; several spouses mentioned consciously turning over decisions to their partners when they returned. Statements such as, '*I let him take over. I'm quite happy to do that. It's nice for him*' were typical of this group. Others experienced pressures to make decisions in their partner's absence, sometimes without adequate information, and were then blamed for mistakes when the partner returned and took control: '*The worst thing about decisions is that I'll make the wrong decision and he'll berate me for it, and that gets me really uptight and I want to scream and shout*'†.

Increased availability of telephone communication potentially favours more '*egalitarian strategies*' as decisions can be shared even when the offshore partner is away. In the present study, there was some evidence of this approach, particularly among couples who maintained frequent phone contact: '*Most decisions are made together on the phone; he's always phoned twice a day, and I've had a phone number to contact him*'†. In an earlier study, offshore workers' life satisfaction was found to depend on

their spouses' egalitarian attitudes rather than their own, although this was not true of other occupational groups (Wooddell, Gramling, & Forsyth, 1994). The authors explained this finding by suggesting that the work pattern of offshore personnel is such that they are more likely to benefit from a shift of labour in the direction of their spouses, and that wife's egalitarianism is a means to that end. In the present context, the findings suggest that egalitarian attitudes and the availability of means of communication with the offshore partner are both important in relation to shared decision-making in offshore families.

Spouses' perceptions of children's responses to father absences

As shown in table 1, 18.4% of the present sample had a youngest child aged under 6 years, and 34.4% had a youngest child in the age range 6–16 years. The material reported by Mauthner et al. (2000) suggests that, although the picture was not all positive, the children interviewed in their study perceived some benefits of the offshore lifestyle, particularly extended contact with their fathers during leave weeks. In contrast to this focus on the children themselves, the focus of the present study was offshore spouses' perceptions of the effects on children of their father's regular absences. Here, also, the picture was mixed. Some spouses did not experience any difficulties with the children when their partners were away: '*I find it easier when he's offshore as I have more time for them*'. Others mentioned specific advantages of the offshore lifestyle: '*It hasn't been a bad thing. In many ways it's been a good thing. They're in bed by 8pm; it would normally be 6 or 7 or 8pm by the time he gets home, and he would only see them for two or three days at the weekend. He has a full two weeks, he's there from the moment they get up to the moment they go to bed*'†. There were also positive views about the effects on the children's development: '*They'd wave him off and not be too bothered, whereas other friends' children, if their father was going away for a night, they'd all be in tears. They got used to the intermittent lifestyle . . . as they've grown older, they have become independent and well-adjusted*'†.

However, spouses' perceptions of the effects of absences on children were not all favourable. Sometimes children did not respond well to their father's return from offshore: '*I have two boys 11 and 12 so they sometimes don't talk a great deal to him, it's just "Hi dad, how are you?", and they get on with doing what they're doing, which I think is sometimes a bit hurtful for him*'†. In some instances, also, long-term problems relating to older children were reported: '*I think they're not as close as they would have been if he was onshore. We grew up like sisters, and she sometimes resented Dad coming home. I think it was quite difficult on her; her relationship with her father is not as good as we would like*'†.

Overall, however, more concern was expressed about younger children; thus, 62.2% of the mothers of younger children (<6 years) reported that their reaction to fathers' absences were '*sometimes*' or '*always*' a problem, as compared with 35.1% of mothers of older children (6–16 years) ($\chi^2 = 9.9$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, one mother noted, '*When they were two they'd know what was going on, and ask for him; that was stressful*', while another expressed concern about the 'rejecting' behaviour of her 3-year old daughter towards her husband, '*If he asked her for a kiss, she'd just walk over*

and cuddle me'. Spouses also worried that absences might deprive their husbands of some of the pleasure of seeing young children develop: '*They learnt so much in between his visits, I worried he was missing out. And I worried about their bonding; it takes him a while to get used to children running around*'†.

Spouses also commented on children's perceptions of offshore work; again, both positive and negative attitudes were reported. The children expressed pride, respect, and curiosity about their fathers' work, but spouses also observed their children's matter-of-fact attitude '*It's what Dad does, and that's it . . . they've always taken it as it comes*'. Awareness of the material benefits of offshore work for the children was apparent in several comments: '*He brings them things home, like duty-free drink, chocolate, perfume . . .*'†, and the leisure opportunities it allowed '*. . . you get to fit in holidays, weekends away. If they don't go to Center Parcs at least twice a year, something's wrong*'†. But spouses were also aware that younger children were often upset when their father left, particularly if they were not old enough to understand the reason: '*Because my husband goes away through the night, they go to bed at night and get up in the morning and the first thing they both say is "Where's my Dad?", and in the course of the trip they'll say "I'm missing my Dad, Mum"*'†.

One way of attempting to lessen children's distress when their fathers left to go offshore was to maintain their awareness of his regular absences: '*We prepare them for it . . . . A couple of times before he goes away we'll say "Oh, Dad's going to have to go away now". . . it's very much "Daddy's going to get his bag ready and get ready to go"*'†. Similarly, during offshore weeks, spouses attempted to involve the absent father as much as possible in the children's day-to-day life: '*We talk about Dad all the time. I'll get a card and send it to him, and the kids write on it too . . . . We say our prayers at night and say "God bless Daddy on the rig"*'†. More generally, spouses recognized the importance of providing a stable environment for the children, whether or not their father was at home '*I didn't make them have two lives; I tried to keep things the same if Dad was here or not*'†.

Among spouses with dependent children, almost half reported some concern about maintaining discipline. Spouses often felt that they had to manage children's discipline problems alone, as their partners could not be involved when offshore and they were reluctant to damage relationships with the children during leave weeks. This discrepancy in parental roles tended to lead children to perceive their mothers negatively relative to their fathers. '*They behave differently when my husband's here. He's a novelty — the best thing since sliced bread . . . [My daughter] sometimes says, "I wish you went offshore and dad didn't." . . . My husband's not a soft touch, but he's the hero sometimes, and I'm the villain*'†. Similarly, another spouse commented, '*Sometimes it feels that Daddy's good and Mummy's bad*'. Moreover, anxiety about not being able to help their children with school work in the way their father could was sometimes expressed: '*There were always moments when they'd say "I wish Dad was here", for example, maths homework*'.

Spouse employment

The intermittent pattern of offshore work tends to constrain the types of employment open to the spouses of offshore personnel. Shrimpton and Storey (2001) noted that

offshore spouses tended to prefer work (e.g. temporary jobs, or self-employment) that allowed them to fit work hours around their partner's schedule. These types of jobs are often difficult to find in the rural communities (McKee, Mauthner, & Maclean, 2000); thus, offshore spouses may experience more difficulty finding suitable employment than their counterparts whose partners work onshore. For instance, Clark and Taylor (1988) reported that only 34% of offshore wives were employed, as compared with 65% of the comparison group in the same Aberdeen area. However, these data were obtained over the years 1971–1981, and the employment situation of women has changed markedly over the past two decades.

In the present study, 67% of spouses were in paid employment; this figure compares closely with the national figure of a 69% employment rate among women of working age in the UK in 2001 (Taylor, 2002). However, in the national data, 43% of working women were in part-time (rather than full-time) employment whereas in the present sample the equivalent percentage was 60%, a significant difference ($\chi^2 = 20.2$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$). The higher rate of part-time employment among offshore spouses is consistent with their preference for work hours that placed fewer constraints on time spent with their partners during leave weeks. Moreover, as offshore personnel are relatively well paid, their spouses are less likely than their onshore counterparts to seek paid employment for financial reasons.

Employment outside the home was also influenced by family circumstances, particularly the demands of childcare. Among the spouses in the present sample who were aged less than 50 years and who had children under 6 years, 44% were not in paid employment, 49% were in part-time employment, and 7% worked full time. This distribution differed significantly ($\chi^2 = 6.96$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.05$) from the corresponding values of 46%, 34% and 20%, respectively, in the British Household Survey 1994 (quoted by Lahelma, Arber, Kivela, & Roos, 2002). Again, this finding is consistent with offshore spouses' preference for part-time work. However, the effect was less marked among spouses with older dependent children (6–16 years); in this group (again restricted to those aged less than 50 years), 27% were not employed, 48% worked part-time, and 25% worked full-time, as compared with 23% not employed, 45% employed part-time, and 32% employed full-time in the British Household Survey 1994 ($\chi^2 = 1.71$, $df = 2$, *ns*). In contrast to the findings relating to child-care responsibilities, the relationship between employment and other caring roles (particularly caring for elderly relatives) was not significant, although spouses employed outside the home were marginally less likely to report such responsibilities (16%) than those who did not have outside employment (20%).

Spouses' reasons for deciding to work outside the home

In the present study, the reasons for seeking paid work that were given most frequently by spouses (in response to an open-ended survey item) were financial considerations, career commitment, and social interaction; together, these reasons accounted for approximately 75% of responses. Neither age nor educational level was related to the reasons given, but those with children were most likely to report financial reasons for working while those with no children gave career as the most important reason. For instance, a nurse with two teenage children noted '*I*

wanted . . . to provide income to make life easier for us all. We needed to ensure we had an income to fall back on if my husband was unemployed for any time'. A further finding pointing to financial reasons for spouse employment was that spouses of offshore managers (who are typically highly paid) were less likely to be employed outside the home than those of other offshore occupational groups. Thus, 21% of the spouses of managers were not in paid employment as compared with 11% of the spouses of other groups ($\chi^2 = 4.4$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$). The lowest paid offshore personnel tend to be those employed in catering; spouses of these personnel (albeit a small group in the present study) were all employed.

However, employment among spouses was not only determined by financial and career motivations. Several spouses commented on the importance of work in filling the days when their partners were offshore. A typical comment from a spouse with no children living at home was '*I would go nuts if I didn't have a job, if he went away and I had nothing to do but housework, which I hate anyway . . . I have to have a job, even if it's just part-time*'†. Age of children was also relevant to the decision to work outside the home: '*It was different when the children were young and I was taking them to playgroup, here, there and everywhere. Once they go to school, there's only so many times you can go to the gym and that. So it is quite important to me*'†. The social aspects of outside employment also played a significant role; for instance, the mother of two small children commented, '*It's very important to me. Good to get out and chat to people. I work part-time now, and it's good to get a break from home, and to share experiences and things*'†. Another spouse noted the need to have a job '*So that I do not live two weeks on, two weeks off, as well*'. Similarly, the intrinsic importance of working was evident in the comment '*He's away for 6 months of the year to do what he wants to do, and I have to work to do what I want to do*'†.

In some cases, it was the insecurity of offshore work (particularly short-term contracts) that prompted spouses to seek employment. One participant explained '*I started because my husband's job was threatened*'. However, she went on to say how important the job had become to her: '*It's for me as a person. I need a sense of drive and commitment, and that's something else that the kids and the house and my husband don't give me*'. Similarly, '*The oil slump of 1999–2000 left my husband with no work and, with two children and a mortgage, there is no choice. There is plenty of work for my husband now, but it is hard to give up the extra money that I earn*'. Although offshore work is relatively well paid, personal financial independence also motivated some spouses to seek work: '*When my husband was home I didn't want to have the job, but I like to have my own money. So if I'm buying him something I am actually buying it.*'†

For participants in the present study, working outside the home often served as a way of coping with their partners' absences. However, it also constrained the time a couple could spend together during leave weeks, especially if the spouse was not able to adapt her work hours to correspond more closely to her partner's rigid work/leave pattern. In this respect, working part-time rather than full-time was an advantage, although only a minority of employed spouses reported flexible work hours (29% of those working part-time, and 17% of those working full-time). Those who did have flexible hours saw themselves as fortunate: '*I am lucky, I can choose when and where I work, and what conditions are acceptable*'.

Decisions *not* to work outside the home were attributed predominantly to the need to care for small children, and the wish to spend time with their partner during periods of shore leave, although some participants also noted more specific concerns.

Multiple reasons were often combined in decisions not to seek paid work, as in the comment '*I chose not to work outside the home primarily to be with the children full-time when they were small. To have more time with my husband when he is home. As we live in the countryside a great fear of mine is snow in winter, and the prospect of being cut off from children and home*'. For others, the issue was solely concerned with being at home when their partners were home: '*Alright, I'm on my own for 2 weeks, but it seems daft him being on his own for 2 weeks when he's at home*'†. Consistent with the difficulty of finding suitable employment in rural areas, not all spouses who sought employment were able to find jobs, particularly those with minimal educational qualifications; one such spouse, unhappy with several aspects of her life, commented '*Can't work!! Part-time work for decent pay doesn't exist*'.

Caring for elderly relatives or children with special needs, also made demands on some spouses and could influence employment decisions; 17% of the present participants reported having a caring role of this kind. Whilst the spouses concerned commented only rarely on these responsibilities, it was clear that their partner's support was valued when he was at home: '*He is a great help to us, especially with my mother being in hospital . . . she has dementia*'. Consistent with the importance of support in this context, concern about their partner's participation in the family was more likely to be expressed by those who had caring responsibilities as compared who did not, the percentages being 24.4% and 12.9% respectively ($\chi^2 = 5.3$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.025$).

Effects of spouses' employment

Earlier research into the lifestyle of offshore personnel and their families suggested that spouse employment tended to increase the strain experienced by the family (e.g. Taylor et al., 1985). Clark and Taylor (1988) attributed the less favourable adaptation of employed spouses (as compared with those who were not employed) to the difficulty of reconciling their offshore partner's demands with their own job demands. Similarly, Moore (1988) observed that women felt they were expected to drop their obligations and adjust to their offshore partners' needs when he returned home. In these respects, the situation of offshore families reflects in an intensified form the more general literature on the causes and consequences of family–work conflict (see, for instance, Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Frone, 2003).

Consistent with the findings cited above, Solheim (1988) noted that, among offshore spouses, the main difficulties of having a job were related not to the period of their partner's absence but to the period when he was at home. In the present study, also, anxiety about the extent to which working outside the home limited the time spent together when the offshore partner was on leave were apparent among employed spouses. The perceived dissatisfaction of their partners was a major cause of these strains, as reflected in comments such as '*I always got the impression he'd rather I didn't work when he was at home, although he knows I do enjoy it*'†. Attempts to defuse the tension with humour were not always successful: '*I make a joke of it saying "Your job keeps us apart for six months of the year", but then he says, "Yes, but your job doesn't have to keep us apart for the other six"*'†. Particular difficulties could arise for spouses employed jointly with their partners in a family business or other commercial venture, such as a guest house or farm. In some instances, the pressure of business activities led to overload of responsibility on the part of the spouse, and difficulties in making

decisions on her own. Serious problems could sometimes arise; one spouse who set up a business with her partner concluded '*It was a nightmare, it was awful. I found it very hard to cope with, a big mistake*'†.

Spouses' perceptions of offshore work conditions

In general, spouses reported a moderate level of satisfaction with the conditions of offshore employment. Although a few considered that their partners had been badly treated by the industry, others valued the support provided to employees and families; examples of such support included flexibility of shifts in cases of emergency or in order to facilitate holidays, and organized social and sports events. Moreover, the great majority of spouses were confident that the company would arrange for their partners to be flown home immediately in a family emergency. Few spouses in the present sample had actually worked offshore, but 33% of them had taken the opportunity to visit an installation as part of a company policy of familiarizing family members with the offshore environment. In spite of the generally positive views of spouses about the industry, a number of specific concerns about company policies were noted; two issues gave rise to particular anxiety and frustration.

Job insecurity in the oil and gas industry

A frequent concern among spouses was the current level of job insecurity in the oil and gas industry: '*They were all interviewed for their own job, as they were going through cut-backs . . . it was quite a worrying time as he could have lost his job*'†. Spouses' persistent fear that their partners might lose their jobs reflects recent changes in the industry (Collinson, 1998; McKee et al., 2000). McKee et al. concluded that, although the importance of 'family friendly' policies was recognized in the oil industry, job insecurity had become institutionalized as a result of the gradual breakdown of organizational paternalism. Moreover, the increase in globalization was seen as diminishing the opportunities of employees with local ties. Similarly, Collinson discusses job insecurity among offshore workers in relation to economic pressures and the problems of contract employment. His observations of 'asymmetrical power relations' and 'institutionalized inequalities' offshore, are consistent with the observations of some spouses that the hierarchical structure of the industry and poor communications increased fears of job insecurity: '*They're not really told 'til the last minute and the bosses must know what's happening*'.

Offshore safety

A second major concern among spouses was the safety of offshore installations. A considerable proportion (84%) of questionnaire respondents reported that concern about their partner's safety offshore was sometimes or always a problem to them. Although most of the spouses interviewed felt that safety had improved since the Piper Alpha disaster, some were more doubtful: '*He doesn't feel as safe working there as he used to. After Piper Alpha there was a big focus on safety, but now they're getting a bit lax*

again'. Others linked offshore work pressures to safety concerns: '*I do worry [about safety] more these past three years because my husband is stressed. It doesn't seem enough that these companies are making millions without having to push the men further*'†.

Offshore safety depends on a strong 'safety culture' (e.g. Hart, 2002; Mearns, Whitaker, & Flin, 2003); the safety of each worker depends on a commitment to safety, and adherence to safety regulations, by everyone on board. Spouses are also aware of the collective nature of offshore safety, and this inter-dependence caused concern to some: '*I find I think about whether someone offshore — no-one in particular — is doing their job properly, and whether they are complying with safety procedures. What they do affects his safety. My husband finds some workers do not have the same high safety values as he has, and I find myself worrying because he has voiced his concerns*'†. Helicopter flights, particularly to more remote installations or in bad weather, were also a source of anxiety to many spouses. However, some preferred to cope with the potential hazards of offshore work by suppressing fears: '*I try not to think about it*' and '*Mostly I do not think of safety issues too much*'.

Whilst concerns about the safety of offshore installations and helicopter flights had a rational basis, it is also possible that they reflected spouses' more generalized unease about offshore work and the family lifestyle it involved. Some correlational findings suggested the operation of generalized negative perceptions influencing views about both safety and lifestyle; thus, ratings of concern about offshore safety were significantly correlated with ratings of several other items listed in table 2, particularly 'loneliness' (tau $= 0.30$, $p < 0.001$) 'adjusting to intermittent absences' (tau $= 0.26$, $p < 0.001$), and 'arranging holidays/coping with absences at special times, e.g. Christmas' (tau $= 0.25$, $p < 0.001$). It is not possible to identify the mechanisms underlying these relationships in the present data, but the findings suggest that a negative attitude to offshore work in general may be an underlying factor.

Discussion

In spite of the increasing use of automation in offshore production processes, the need for a substantial offshore workforce in the oil and gas industry is likely to remain for many years to come. Thus, work schedules involving 'intermittent absences' of the offshore partner will continue to affect spouses and families. The present study sought to enhance understanding of the particular advantages and disadvantages associated with this lifestyle in the current social climate by extending and updating earlier work (largely carried out some 20 years ago) with material representing the attitudes and voices of the present generation of offshore spouses. In discussing the material presented, it is important to emphasize that the focus of the study was on psychological and psychosocial aspects of the offshore lifestyle; it did not seek to address wider sociological issues. Thus, research areas such as kinship, friendship and community, family structures, gender roles, changing patterns of employment, and the future of work, although relevant to studies of offshore work and family in a sociological context, were outside the scope of the present study.

Whilst spouses in the present sample reported a number of problems and concerns relating to the offshore lifestyle and its impact on children, negative views

were by no means universal. Most of the spouses appeared to have adapted relatively favourably to the demands and challenges of having a partner working offshore (indeed, one spouse described it as '*a brilliant lifestyle*'). Although a few spouses were clearly unhappy with their partner's intermittent absences, and many experienced minor (and usually transient) problems of relationships, family interactions and social life, the majority of spouses in the present sample appeared able to manage family demands, and to cope well with the emotional pressures of repeated separations and reunions. They perceived the positive as well as the negative side of the offshore lifestyle, and often welcomed the degree of independence it afforded them. In these respects, the picture was generally more encouraging than that presented in earlier research (e.g. Clark & Taylor, 1988; Morrice et al., 1985). Indeed, the present findings tend to support the view of Shrimpton and Storey (2001, p. 11) that 'commute work' (i.e. work that involves extended periods away from home) '*can be largely positive for many families and have some positive advantages for most*'.

In describing spouses' perceptions of the effects of offshore work on children, the present study complements earlier research by Mauthner et al. (2000) who examined children's own perceptions and experiences of the offshore lifestyle; in contrast, here the focus is on spouses' perceptions of their children's responses. Consistent with the findings of Mauthner et al., the present study showed that, on the whole, spouses' comments indicated that their children recognized the potential advantages of the offshore lifestyle, particularly the extended contact possible when their father was at home. However, concern was sometimes expressed that young children found it difficult to understand the reason for their father's absence, and could became distressed when he left to return offshore; some spouses described the particular strategies adopted to help younger children cope with this situation.

Methodological issues and limitations

In considering the overall findings of the present study, it is important to note that the present sample represented a 'survivor' group in two respects.

- The partners of the participants in the present sample had 'survived' in offshore employment. Personnel who find it difficult to adapt to offshore work tend to move to onshore jobs, but the present spouses all had partners currently working offshore, many of whom had been doing so for a considerable period of time (two-thirds of the spouses reported that their partners had worked offshore for 10 or more years during their marriage). Moreover, the longer the time the partner had worked offshore, the less likely was the spouse to express a preference for him to move to onshore employment. This finding is consistent with a 'survival' explanation; men working offshore are more likely to continue doing so if their spouses have adjusted to the lifestyle. Indeed, longer term concerns about problems that might arise when the offshore partner retired and was continuously at home were not uncommon among older spouses.
- The sample consisted of spouses living with their partners at the time of the study; thus, the stability of the marriage relationship had also 'survived' in spite of the potential strains of offshore work and 'intermittent absences' involved. In discussing these issues in their sample, Clark and Taylor (1988, p. 127)

emphasized that long-married 'veterans' of the offshore lifestyle are '*a self-selected group of survivors*' who experience less stress than newly-married '*novices*'. In the present study, moreover, the sample was made up of spouses whose names had initially been volunteered by their offshore partners, and who had themselves chosen to participate; in this respect, also, they may not be typical of spouses of offshore workers in general.

For all these reasons, it is likely that the present study included a disproportionate number of spouses who had responded favourably to the offshore lifestyle, and that their attitudes, perceptions, and coping strategies, and their willingness to take part in the work, reflect this adjustment. Further biases in the study may have been introduced by the limited size of the sample interviewed, and by the fact that the interviews were conducted by telephone rather than face-to-face. The interview participants may have been more confident, open, and sociable than those who did not volunteer for this part of the study, although the only evidence of differences between the two groups was that those who were interviewed were less likely to be employed outside the home. The methodological limitations of the present study need to be recognized in interpreting the findings.

However, to the extent that the adaptation of the offshore spouses in the present sample appeared to be significantly more favourable than that described by researchers in the 1980s, it is probable that the present findings also reflect wider changes in society over the subsequent years. In particular, the greater independence of women, and their increased employment opportunities relative to two decades ago, would tend to favour women such as offshore spouses who necessarily spend much of their lives separated from their partners.

In focusing on the lifestyle and attitudes of the female spouses of male offshore workers, the present paper reflects the current situation in which the great majority of offshore personnel are men. Women still comprise only a very small proportion (approximately 3%) of offshore workers in the UK North Sea sector, although in the Norwegian sector the proportion is higher (approximately 16%) (Parkes, 1998). While some women who work offshore have partners who also do so, in the majority of instances the male partner is employed onshore and takes primary responsibility for the children when his spouse is offshore. Little is presently known about the lifestyles of such families. However, this is a potentially significant topic as the number of women working offshore is likely to increase in the future. Whilst most women currently doing so are involved in catering and stewardess occupations, opportunities for those with technical and managerial qualifications are increasing, and the role of women in the offshore industry is becoming more widely accepted.

Although the present study was restricted to the spouses of male offshore personnel, in their relatively favourable long-term adjustment to the demands of the offshore lifestyle, these spouses represent an important group. From a research point of view, the need to study successful adaptation to life experiences as well as less favourable outcomes has long been emphasized (e.g. Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and finds new expression in the current interest in 'positive psychology' (e.g. Seligman, 2003). Equally, from an applied perspective, information about family adjustment to the demands of the offshore lifestyle is important for industry personnel (such as occupational health professionals and human resources managers) who have

responsibility for developing 'family-friendly' policies (McKee et al., 2000), and for the well-being of employees generally.

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The second and third authors made equal contributions to the work; their names are ordered alphabetically in the publication of this article.

Notes

1 In this paper, no distinction is made between married couples and those cohabiting in long-term relationships; the terms 'husband' and 'partner' are used interchangeably. The term 'spouse' refers to the wife or female partner.
2 Quotations from the interview records are indicated by †.

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