

Factors Associated with Coparental Relationships:  
Fathers' Perspectives

by

Michaelena C. Kelly

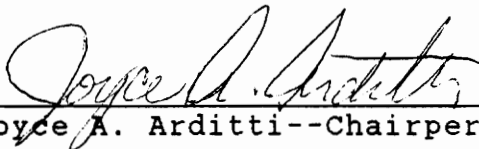
Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

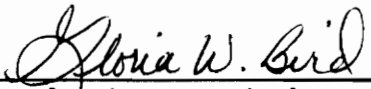
Master of Science

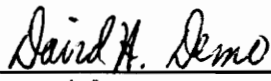
in

Family Studies

Approved:

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Joyce A. Arditti--Chairperson

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Gloria W. Bird

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
David H. Demo

August, 1992

Blacksburg, Virginia

C.2

LD

5055

V855

1992

K455

C.2

Factors Associated with Coparental Relationships:  
A Fathers' Perspective

by

Michaelena C. Kelly

Committee Chairman: Joyce A. Arditti  
Family and Child Development

(ABSTRACT)

Recent research on the effects of divorce indicates that the relationship between ex-spouses is a critical factor in the postdivorce adjustment of mothers, fathers, and children. In this study, guided by General Systems Theory and Ecological Theory, data from 225 divorced fathers was used to explore a set of selected variables which were predicted to affect the quality of their coparental relationships with former spouses. A standard multiple regression analysis revealed that a substantial amount of the variance in coparental relationships was explained by five of the eleven variables under investigation. Fathers who reported a positive coparental relationship with their ex-wives were 1) more

satisfied with their custody arrangements, 2) more likely to blame themselves for the breakup of their marriage, 3) discussed fewer topics with their ex-wives, 4) had higher educational levels, and 5) had greater feelings of closeness to their children predivorce. Implications of the findings for future research and policy are discussed.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to recognize all the people who made the completion of this project possible. Sincere appreciation and gratitude is extended to the chair of my committee, Dr. Joyce Arditti, for the use of her data, her invaluable comments and suggestions, and her consistent optimism, which kept me going through the "tough" times. I cannot imagine how difficult this process would have been without her help and assistance.

I would also like to thank Dr. Gloria Bird for her support, encouragement, and faith in my work, and Dr. Dave Demo for the valuable insight he provided through his professional expertise on the subject of divorce.

I especially want to thank my cherished friend, Chris Aveni, for the use of her computer. I must also credit her on the patience she displayed while helping me through my computer illiteracy.

Special thanks are expressed to Mary Milby whose friendship was a real blessing towards the end of this process. All the personal talks, "good

times", and late night steady breaks helped me keep a sense of sanity.

Most importantly, I would like to thank my parents for their unconditional love, inspiration, and moral support that carried me through the most stressful of times. Their relentless faith in all my endeavors has installed a sense of self-confidence that has given me the incentive to pursue all my goals and aspirations.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	vi
Chapter I.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	3
Hypothesis.....	4
Operational Definition of Terms.....	5
Chapter II.....	7
Review of Literature.....	7
Background and Significance.....	7
Factors Influencing Coparental Relationships	16
Childrearing and Coparental Relations.....	16
Custody Arrangements.....	18
Father-Child Relations.....	22
Circumstances of Separation.....	24
Conversational Content.....	26
Legal Variables.....	28
Lawyers.....	28
Satisfaction with Arrangements and	
Settlements.....	28
Background Variables.....	31

Socioeconomic Status.....	31
Characteristics of Children.....	33
Limitations of Previous Research.....	36
Chapter III.....	41
Method.....	41
Design.....	41
Sample.....	41
Instrumentation.....	42
Analysis.....	44
Chapter IV.....	45
Results.....	45
Chapter V.....	59
Discussion.....	49
Implications for Policy and Practice.....	59
Suggestions for Future Research.....	64
References.....	66
Appendices.....	74
Appendix A - Tables.....	75
Table 1 - Coding of Variables.....	76
Table 2 - Sample Descriptors.....	78
Table 3 - Correlations between Selected Variables.....	79
Table 4 - Multiple Regression Analysis....	80
Appendix B - Questionnaire.....	81

## Chapter I

### Introduction

The adversarial nature of our judicial system and the prevailing attitudes conveyed by society imply a message that ex-spouses should be enemies; otherwise why would they divorce? Contact between divorced spouses is usually considered as an indication of unresolved marital issues or an inability to "let go" of the former marriage (Stark, 1986). Because of this emphasis on the negative aspects of divorce, past literature has virtually ignored the benefits of a continuing friendship between former spouses. A divorce does not necessarily end the relationship between two individuals, it only transforms it (Elkin, 1982). Even though a man and woman are no longer husband and wife, they are still interdependent upon one another as mother and father to their children.

A growing body of evidence suggests that when former spouses are able to put their past differences behind them and carry out their roles as parents in an amicable manner, positive consequences are extended to their children, as well as to

themselves. Such consequences include less difficulty adjusting to divorce and greater emotional well-being (Ahrons, 1981; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1976; Stark, 1986). Furthermore, a continued, cooperative, and mutually supportive relationship between divorced parents reduces the stress associated with divorce for all family members (Hetherington et al., 1989).

The components promoting such a relationship have been relatively unexplored. The past literature has also made many generalizations regarding the nature of postdivorce relationships, but there has been little attention focused upon the dynamics of such relationships, and hardly any effort has been put forth in systematically linking these generalizations together (Ahrons, 1981). Previous studies have focused upon the quantity of conflict between ex-spouses, feelings toward the ex-spouse, how divorced spouses think they should relate, and the differences between men and women's divorce attitudes. Investigations on the circumstances surrounding the divorce and how they relate to ex-spousal relationships have been

relatively scarce (Fishel & Scanzoni, 1989; Goetting, 1980; Hobart, 1990). Greater attention on the factors that are predictive of coparental relationships postdivorce would provide greater understanding regarding ex-spouses behavior toward each other. Such information would be the basis for more effective intervention strategies designed to improve their relations postdivorce.

It is the aim of this project to conduct an empirical investigation that will provide a more comprehensive view of the factors affecting the quality of the postdivorce, coparental relationship. The current study will be guided by an integration of systems theory and ecological theory in order to assess how factors associated with the process of divorce and postdivorce family reorganization influences the nature of the coparental relationship. By examining aspects of conflict between ex-spouses, intervention strategies could be developed that would facilitate positive postdivorce outcomes.

#### Statement of the Problem

The purpose of the present research

project is to identify variables that are associated with the quality of the relationship between former spouses. Several of these variables have already been identified in previous research, but they have been presented in a manner that is fragmented, exploratory, and atheoretical. This study builds upon past research by including a wide variety of variables, such as child-related factors, legal issues, and background characteristics. The collective examination of these variables has received very little attention in previous divorce studies.

### Hypothesis

Based on the available empirical and theoretical literature it was hypothesized that fathers who had a positive relationship with their former spouses were more likely to:

- a. have joint custody,
- b. be satisfied with their custody arrangements and property settlements,
- c. have had a lawyer who they believed advocated positive relations with their ex-wives,

- d. have less feelings of closeness to children predivorce, and greater feelings of closeness postdivorce,
- e. blame themselves for the breakup of their marriage,
- f. have discussions with their ex-spouse that cover a wide range of topics,
- g. have higher incomes, be better educated, and have fewer children.

#### Operational Definition of Terms

The following definitions will be used for the purposes of this study:

adjustment--emotional and psychological well-being.

adversarial--unfriendly, hostile, or antagonistic.

amicable--friendly, peaceful, or harmonious.

boundaries--the totality of family process

interactions.

conflictual--characterized by discord and hostility.

coparental relationship--a relationship between

parents that involves a continuation of

childrearing obligations and responsibilities

after divorce.

ex-spousal relationship-a relationship between two formerly married people.

harmonious--agreeable and friendly.

homeostasis--the maintenance of a steady state or balance.

joint legal custody--custody arrangement in which parents assume equal responsibility for major decisions about their children.

joint physical custody--custody arrangement in which the children live substantial amounts of time with each parent.

litigation--contest in court.

mediation--a process by which couples resolve their differences by themselves with the help of a neutral third party.

rules--guidelines by which a family operates.

sole custody--an arrangement where one parent has primary responsibility for the care of the children.

split custody--when children of the same parents are divided between those parents.

## Chapter II

### Review of Literature

#### Background and Significance

According to General Systems Theory divorce is a process that results in family reorganization rather than disintegration (Ahrons & Perlmutter, 1983; Goldsmith, 1980; McIsacc, 1986). When two adults divorce but continue to share child-rearing responsibilities, members of the original family, including the former spouses, still function as a self-regulating system, although the system's characteristics (i.e., rules, roles, functions, etc...) have been altered (Goldsmith, 1980). Successful family reorganization requires that former spouses separate their spousal and parental roles, and terminate the former while redefining the latter. While the relationship between married spouses is critical to family interaction, equally important is its influence on family reorganization and interaction postdivorce.

Concepts from systems theory provide important insights into the dynamics of postdivorce relationships. Fundamental systemic concepts such

as homogenesis, rules, and boundaries, provide a framework from which to examine basic processes during the divorce which result in tension or conflict as well as providing an explanation for the ambiguity postdivorce that results in confusion as to how family members should relate to each other. For example, the family as a rule-governed system, operates according to the rules it develops. Implicit rules are unwritten, and often observed unconsciously by the members of a system. Such rules can be as simple as avoiding the discussion of particular topics in order to prevent an argument. A more complex rule would entail the secrecy of an extramarital affair. At times it is necessary to change rules so that the development of a particular relationship can progress. Explicit rules can benefit divorcing spouses due to the fact that they are mutually agreed upon and are based upon principles of fairness and equity. The formality of these written rules encourages greater cooperation and compliance with court ordered conditions (McIsaac, 1986). An example of such a rule can state, " Martha will have custody of the children

during the first two weeks of the month, while Ted has custody during the last two weeks."

The parameters of a family system are determined by defined boundaries. Boundaries help clarify acceptable ways of relating within and across the various elements within the family subsystem. The absence of clear boundaries can cause a great deal of confusion and distress among members of the postdivorce family. The specific theoretical proposition is that the greater the boundary ambiguity, the higher the family and individual dysfunction (Boss, 1986). For example, the task of redefining his parental roles may be complicated for a noncustodial father when boundaries remain unclear - in this case, he may be unsure about his paternal responsibilities, which may result in a low level of interaction with his children. Resolution of the ambiguity is necessary before the postdivorce family can reorganize and function at a lower level of stress (Boss, 1986).

Systems theory also proposes that families are constantly seeking a homeostatic balance. Failure to achieve stability will result in the destruction

of the system, as in the case of a divorce. As family members adapt to the changes that accompany a divorce a new homeostatic balance can be restored. Once this balance is achieved, members of the former system will be able to continue their relationships with each other, although in a different manner (McIsaac, 1986).

Attachment between ex-spouses has typically been viewed as pathological and as an indication of separation distress. It is not attachment per se that is viewed negatively, but rather the degree of attachment. Feelings of attachment for an ex-spouse are common as individuals deal with anxiety over the loss of a significant relationship. Some people find security by maintaining regular contact with their former spouse. However, when this desire for contact becomes "intrusive", symptoms of mental and physical disturbances start to appear. The continuation of parental roles requires former spouses to remain attached to each other, but rules and boundaries must be established to determine the extent of attachment (Kitson, 1982). The adoption of rules and boundaries varies from family to family

in order to compliment each system's characteristics and assure optimal functioning.

The innovation of custody arrangements and the increased involvement of fathers in childrearing, serve as links requiring divorced parents to engage in frequent interactions (Ahrons & Perlmutter, 1983). The coparental relationship implies a continued interdependence among former spouses (mother's behavior affects father, or vice versa), and that a change in any subsystem can have reactionary consequences for the entire family system (Goldsmith, 1980). The concept of interdependency is demonstrated by the custodial mother's influence on paternal involvement. Custodial mothers often act as "gatekeepers" for father-child relationships postdivorce and determine in part the nature and frequency of visitation. Furthermore, while not all studies are in agreement, a growing body of evidence suggests that hostile relations between ex-spouses is negatively associated with father involvement (Ahrons, 1983; Hetherington et al., 1976; Lund, 1987).

In general a continued, cooperative, and

mutually supportive relationship between divorced parents may reduce the stress associated with divorce, resulting in better psychological adjustment of the children, and parents as well (Hetherington et al., 1976; Pearson & Thoennes, 1976). It also allows the divorcing individuals to let go of the past and create new and more fulfilling lives (Elkin, 1982). The process of grieving, which is common to the divorce experience, is facilitated through continued contact. If a relationship ends abruptly there is a greater sense of loss (Weiss, 1976).

The central ideas behind ecological theory are complimentary to the concepts of systems theory. Ecological theory acknowledges that dyadic processes are reciprocal, which is comparable to systems theory's notion of interdependency among subsystems. Taken together, these two theories provide a comprehensive model of the ex-spousal relationship.

An ecological orientation is concerned with the progressive accommodation between a system and its immediate environment, and the way in which this relation is mediated by regions in the larger

physical and social milieu. The ecological framework allows for analysis of the coparental relationship across different social contexts. Each of the following levels of analysis refer to both opportunities and risks for ex-spouses, the microsystem (home and family), the mesosystem (neighborhood, extended family, and friends), exosystem (employment and the larger community), and the macrosystem (the philosophical and legal milieu that surround each family) (Hanson, 1985). The macrosystem seems especially influential to the coparental relationship because it encompasses public policies and social ideologies, which set the tone to how former spouses should interact.

It is understandable how detrimental societal attitudes can be when the following ecological thesis is considered: What matters for behavior is the environment as it is perceived rather than as it may exist in "objective" reality. If a commonly held assumption, such as, " If divorcing spouses could not agree while married, then they will not be able to agree after a divorce," is perceived by a divorcing individual as the truth, then he/she will

believe that a cooperative relationship with the former spouse is unfeasible and therefore find it useless to put any effort into the development of such a relationship.

The way divorce laws are stated plays a part in the degree of conflict between parents. Custody laws that define the non-custodial parent, usually the father as a part-time parent ("You shall support your child and shall have reasonable visitation rights") generate anger and feelings of being disenfranchised. The courts' adversarial process pits one parent against the other, further alienating them and reducing the chances of helping them to cooperate and trust each other (Elkin, 1982).

Central to an ecological framework are the importance of "ecological transitions" in determining the relationship the individual has with any given subsystem and the relationship between the subsystems themselves. Ecological transitions, defined as shifts in a role or setting, are particularly useful in understanding the functions of families postdivorce. Perhaps the most common

"ecological transition" is the shift in status from a custodial to a noncustodial parent after a divorce. For most men, such an event alters the father's involvement with their children, and invariably affects ex-wife's expectations of them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A divorce often limits a noncustodial father's access to his children, requiring greater efforts to maintain the father-child relationship. The custodial mother inevitably expects her ex-husband to fulfill his parental obligations by providing financial support to help raise the children. Another "ecological transition" is the shift from being married to becoming single.

The heuristic value of ecological theory is further demonstrated by its recognition of individual perceptions as being meaningful in and of themselves. It is important to distinguish between what is perceived and what exists in "objective" reality. While individual perceptions may distort reality and lack internal validity, they provide us with insight in terms of the nature of the divorce experience.

The theoretical ideas that have been presented are helpful in identifying the gaps in existing research. The vast majority of past research done on coparental relationships has been based on clinical samples and stereotypical generalizations (Bloom & Kindle, 1985). Few researchers have investigated the correlates of an amicable or conflictual ex-spousal relationship. More attention on the factors influencing the quality of the coparental relationship would prove useful to both legal practitioners and mental health professionals. In order to address the needs of all family members of the postdivorce family, it is crucial that we begin to understand the complex set of factors impacting upon the relationship between former spouses.

#### Factors Influencing Coparental Relations Childrearing and Coparental Relations

The quality of the coparental relationship is highly related to the degree of consensus between divorced parents on childrearing issues. In general, the more parents agree on decisions

regarding their children, the more likely they are to maintain cooperative involvement with each other (Ambert, 1988; Hobart, 1990). Conflict is likely to develop when there is an inconsistency between parents' perceptions as to what is in the best interests of their children. Hostile confrontations result as each spouse defends his/her position. In an analysis of contesting families, Hauser (1985) observed that the most disturbed relationships occurred between parents who related detailed reports of their former spouse's inadequacies in every area of childrearing. Hetherington et al. (1976) found that two-thirds of the conflictual exchanges between divorced couples involved childrearing issues. Agreement on childrearing is related to more positive attitudes towards the former spouse, thus encouraging more supportive and friendly relationships.

Goldsmith (1980) randomly selected couples who had been divorced one year in order to examine the ongoing relationship between ex-spouses. More than three-quarters of these individuals maintained a coparental relationship which was described as

conflictual or stressful as a result of basic differences in childrearing opinions. Ahrons (1981) also reported that parents who never shared childrearing decisions are more conflictual and less supportive of each other. Her finding was reported from an empirical investigation of the relationship between divorced spouses one year following their divorce. Interviews for this study were conducted with 54 pairs of divorced parents and included questions pertaining to the content and quality of their postdivorce interactions.

#### Custody Arrangements

The literature reveals inconsistent findings regarding the association between the various structures of child custody and the quality of relations between ex-spouses. Researchers' negligence in clarifying the specific conditions in which arrangements are carried out may account for these contradictions. For example, when discussing various aspects of shared parenting it should be noted whether they are referring to joint legal custody, joint physical custody, or split custody. If the distinction between these arrangements is not

recognized, the interpretation of results may not be entirely accurate. The prevalence of contradictory findings may have also resulted from various studies' emphasis on either the negative or positive aspects of a particular arrangement. Many studies are biased due to the exclusion of a discussion on both the pros and cons of different types of custody (Nelson, 1991).

Although the evidence is not entirely conclusive, several studies suggest that shared parenting, by means of joint custody, increases the possibility of a positive coparental relationship. Luepnitz (1986) studied 43 families with maternal, paternal, or joint custody and concluded that joint custody promotes greater cooperation and reduces conflict between divorcing parents. One reason for this greater cooperation could be the likelihood that joint custody is more likely to be agreed upon in mediation, which increases a sense of fairness. The maternal sole custody arrangement may be more conducive to hostility due to the amount of stress that such an arrangement creates for both parents. Sole custody represents a lopsided allocation of

parental responsibilities which results in an "overburdened mother" and an "underbenefitted father" (Elkin, 1982). Many of the aspects that tend to characterize harmonious relationships, such as frequent interaction, nonparental interactions, and the perception of a mutually supportive relationship, are more likely to be reported by parents who share childrearing in joint custody arrangements (Ahrons, 1981; Ambert, 1988; Hobart, 1990).

Pearson & Thoennes (1990) reanalyzed data from a large sample of 418 divorced parents to determine the characteristics of couples with various types of sole and joint custody arrangements, their experiences with these arrangements, and certain behavioral and attitudinal outcomes. They found that parents with sole maternal custody reported the greatest deterioration in their relationship over time. Twenty-five percent of these parents who initially reported cooperation, admitted that cooperation had become impossible within the past three years. Similiar declines were reported by only 5% to 15% of parents with joint custody.

Further support on the advantages of joint custody for ex-spouses comes from data on relitigation rates. Several studies indicate that sole custody arrangements are more likely than joint custody arrangements to return to court for reconsideration (Ilfeld, Ilfeld, & Alexander, 1982; Luepnitz, 1982). It is possible that noncustodial fathers seek reconsideration due to a desire for greater parental involvement, yet the intensity of litigation is usually indicative of some underlying hostility that ex-spouses have towards each other and is often used as a threat to get what one wants.

The use of relitigation as a direct sign of parental conflict has been questioned by many researchers (Felner & Terre, 1987; Ferreiro, 1990). In an analysis of Canadian families, conducted by Irving, Benjamin, and Trocme (1984), no relationship was found between dissatisfaction with legal-custody contracts and the decision to relitigate.

Several researchers have found that couples with joint custody are more apt to perceive their former spouse as having a good relationship with the children and to report satisfaction with that

person's performance as a parent. Such perceptions may be attributed to greater involvement with childrearing tasks and more frequent parent-child interaction on behalf of the noncustodial parent (Bloom & Kindle, 1985; Coysh, Johnston, Tschann, Wallerstein, & Kline, 1989; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990).

On the other hand, it has been argued that the frequent communication that is required in joint custody arrangements only exacerbates pre-existing hostilities. Additional stress could be placed on an already strained relationship when parents of joint custody are forced to consult frequently and reach agreements (Nelson, 1989). It is also plausible that parents who are attracted to and granted joint custody are usually predisposed to cooperate, therefore caution should be taken in presuming causality of custody arrangements. The importance of parents' prior characteristics cannot be ignored when examining their postdivorce relationships (Coysh et al., 1989; Nelson, 1989; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990).

### Father-Child Relations

There is a lack of research dealing specifically with fathers' feelings of closeness to their children and coparental relationships postdivorce. Typically studies employ measures of involvement (visitation frequency, nature of activities, mothers' reports), paying little attention to fathers' subjective feelings, which theoretically have a meaningful role in the former spousal relationship. What few attempts there have been provide little insight.

Hoffman (1983) found post-marital conflict is more likely when the father assumes a more active paternal role prior to the divorce. She explains that postdivorce conflict results in part from anger that may be directed towards the former wife who is blamed for limiting the rights and responsibilities that the father had during the marriage. Furthermore, the greater contact that results from higher levels of father involvement provides greater opportunity for conflict during marriage.

Fishel and Scanzoni (1990) found that greater paternal involvement postdivorce increases the

amount of support a mother receives, which results in more positive feelings towards the father.

#### Circumstances of Separation

Whether or not an amicable ex-spousal relationship develops is affected by the circumstances under which the marriage ended. If the decision to divorce was not mutual, or if there is still a great deal of pain and resentment, friendship is unlikely (Fishel & Scanzoni, 1990; Stark, 1986). The effect of which spouse made the decision to divorce is a significant predictor of the quality of the postdivorce relationship. A continuing friendship was seldom reported when the wife made the decision to divorce (Goldsmith, 1980; Metts, Cupach, & Bejlovec, 1989).

According to a study by Hill et al. (1976), 70% of couples remained friends when the man initiated the divorce and 71% remained friends when the decision was mutual. These findings have been supported by numerous studies that have concluded that men have more difficulty letting go of a love relationship than women (Goetting, 1980; Hill et al., 1976). Mutual decisions reduce the prevalence

of unresolved conflict, therefore eliminating the need for competitive strategies. It has also been suggested that women wait to initiate a divorce until conditions have become intolerable, so they have little desire to maintain a friendship once they are out of the marriage (Metts et al., 1989; Stark, 1986). Men are more likely to stay in touch when they are the initiators, which has been interpreted as an attempt to assuage the guilt they feel for leaving a wife that may have been dependent upon their income (Hobart, 1990).

When rating the quality of postdivorce relationships, men whose former spouses initiated the divorce reported significantly less satisfaction than men who decided themselves (Goldsmith, 1980). The dissatisfaction among men may be explained by the fact that since they are unlikely to receive child custody in the event of a divorce, they blame their wives for being "shut out" of their children's lives (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987). And considering that women are more likely than men to initiate a divorce (Goldsmith, 1980), it is not surprising to discover that 66% of coparental relationships are

described as conflictual (Ambert, 1988; Hetherington et al., 1976).

In addition to who initiated the divorce, the allocation of blame for the marital breakup has been connected to the ongoing postdivorce partnership of former husbands and wives. Blaming the spouse or an outsider rather than sharing the blame or blaming oneself is an important distinction. According to a study on the relief and distress of parting, Spanier & Thompson (1984) found that men who blamed the spouse or an outsider had greater feelings of postdivorce anger directed towards their former wife. Among wives, blaming their husbands or an outsider was associated with avoidance and a desire for less contact. The consequences of blaming may stem from feelings of anger and resentment due to desertion, rejection, or infliction of emotional pain by the former spouse. Blame and fault are synonymous terms that by themselves imply a sense of adversity.

#### Conversational Content

Researchers have found an association between high quality relationships and the ability of former

spouses to cooperatively discuss matters pertaining to mutual friends, personal problems, helping each other with household tasks, or new experiences (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987; Spanier & Thompson, 1984). The desire for a continued postdivorce relationship has been linked with the discussion of personal topics and not having to avoid certain topics (Spanier & Thompson, 1984). Ahrons & Wallisch (1987) conducted a longitudinal study of 98 pairs of former spouses in order to investigate the dynamics of their relationships. It was concluded that only 8% of the couples engaged in nonparental interaction, yet these were also the couples who maintained the friendliest postdivorce relationships. The majority of the respondents who limited the quantity of topics they discussed with their ex-spouse, were likely to have a relationship plagued by more conflict and lower cooperation.

It is not uncommon for former partners to report that they get along better after a divorce because the tension of daily confrontations has been eliminated (Hetherington et al., 1989) Couples may be able to talk more easily about personal topics

when the strain of being in an unhappy marriage has been alleviated. People are usually hesitant to openly discuss personal matters with someone who is not perceived as a friend. This assumption would explain why those ex-spouses who discussed nonparental topics maintained friendly relations with each other. It must also be noted that conversations relating to personal issues may conjure up unresolved emotions, and that is why some couples try to avoid these conversations (Ponzetti & Cate, 1987).

#### Legal Variables

Lawyers. The present goal of divorce law is to legally end a marriage, but little attention is focused upon the process by which it is ended. The way the marriage is legally terminated will have a great influence on whether the couple's conflicts will be resolved or whether the stage will be set for additional conflict in the postdivorce period (Elkin, 1982; Spanier & Thompson, 1984). The legal system's tendency to emphasize individual needs over family needs encourages conflict between divorcing spouses due to the "me" against "you" attitude

inherent in the adversarial process. Lawyers may contribute to the couple's hostility by "serving the best interests of their client." A lawyer's responsibility to represent one of the competing parties and to make a persuasive case for one side to win, merely reinforces polarized positions between parties (Elkin, 1982).

Anderson (1989) conducted a study of 205 divorced individuals to determine how the legal system affects postdivorce adjustment. She found that those respondents who were not encouraged by their lawyer to create an adversary relationship with his/her former spouse reported better adjustment and more amicable relations with his/her ex-spouse. In a similar vein, Arditti and Allen's (in press) qualitative analysis of 87 divorced fathers found that perceptions of legal inequities, and a high degree of mistrust toward lawyers, characterized men's distress postdivorce.

#### Satisfaction with Arrangements and Settlements.

The postdivorce relationship between a couple is typically characterized by quarrels concerning property, money, and custody (Hetherington et al.,

1978, 1989; Ponzetti & Cate, 1987). In her assessment of the coparental relationship, Ahrons (1981) found that among the 54 divorced couples she interviewed, financial issues were the most frequently cited as generating conflicts. In examining the process of marital dissolution, Ponzetti and Cate (1987) concluded that as disagreements over economic settlements develop, tensions are exacerbated, resulting in conflicts and resentments that impair the ex-spousal relationship. Dissatisfaction with custody arrangements and property settlements can contribute to a more generalized sense of unfairness, which may serve as a source of anger towards a former spouse (Arditti & Allen in press; Metts et.al., 1989). Anderson (1989) supported this proposition, reporting greater adversity between ex-spouses when they have settlement problems.

Noncustodial fathers have repeatedly expressed less satisfaction with custodial arrangements in comparison to custodial mothers, 56% of fathers to 33% of mothers. The significance of this finding lies in the fact that 51% of these fathers, as

compared to 19% of the mothers, reported "bad" relations between themselves and their former spouse (Goldsmith, 1980; Wright & Price, 1986). Pearson and Thoennes (1990) also found an association between legal satisfaction and the quality of the coparental relationship. They found that 77% of couples with joint custody, which has been established as promoting positive relations between ex-spouses, reported satisfaction with their arrangements. Considering that satisfaction with legal arrangements is directly tied to compliance with court-ordered child support and alimony payments, the previously cited findings have particular relevance to legal practitioners (Wright & Price, 1986). By reinforcing the ideas of shared parenting, self-determination, and addressing the emotional components of divorce, our judicial system can increase individual satisfaction and facilitate cooperation between ex-spouses.

#### Background Characteristics

Socioeconomic Status. Variation in the quality of the coparental relationship can be explained in part by several demographic factors. Several

studies provide evidence of an association between socioeconomic status (SES) and the relations among ex-spouses. The influence of SES on coparental relationships is largely indirect. For example, the following characteristics of higher SES groups have been positively correlated with amicable postdivorce relationships: nonparental relations, frequent contacts, joint custody, successful negotiation techniques, and low levels of physical or emotional abuse (Ambert, 1988; Coysh et al., 1989; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990; Pearson, Thoennes, & Vanderkooi, 1982). Lower SES groups are typically less likely to have joint custody arrangements because of the high costs of maintaining two separate households. They are also more inclined to engage in "aggressive" styles of communication partly due to lower levels of education.

Hobart (1990) explored the relationships between the formerly married and discovered that a difficult economic situation reduces the possibilities of a continuing ex-spousal relationship, but only for the husbands. Fishel and Scanzoni (1990) postulated that more money reduces a father's general stress

level and allows him to be more willing to cooperate. When fathers have more money their bargaining power is increased and they do not have to escalate their negotiation strategies to win time with their children. For women, financial independence promotes a sense of self-esteem and control, and reduces the need to turn to their ex-spouses for help and resources. Financial security frees the wife from her ex-husband, and vice versa, allowing the spousal role to be relinquished while concentrating on the coparental roles. Both partners have fewer sources of conflict and can cooperate more successfully as parents (Mashester & Harris, 1986).

Higher educational levels are related to higher socioeconomic levels, thus indirectly contributing to more harmonious relationships. Hobart's (1990) administration of a Tolerance Scale suggests that there is a direct relationship between Tolerance Score and educational attainment, relating to a broader more tolerant perspective, predictive of a more positive ex-spousal relationship. Ex-spouses in lower socioeconomic groups may be more irritable due

to their lack of financial adequacy.

Characteristics of Children. The stress that is associated with having a greater number of children is bound to surface in the interactions between ex-spouses. The more children present, the more issues there are to deal with, thus increasing the possibility of disagreements, confrontations, and dissatisfaction. Custodial mothers often receive a smaller proportion of needed support from their ex-husbands, in terms of money and childcare, when there is a greater number of shared children from their prior marriage. These findings could be attributed to a greater demand of financial resources, but fathers' lack thereof (Fishel & Scanzoni, 1990).

On the other hand, the total absence of children negates the chances of a continuing, positive postdivorce relationship. Frequency of contact is minimal, if not nonexistent, between ex-spouses without children (Bloom & Kindle, 1985). In a longitudinal study examining the relationships between ex-spouses, it was reported that 83% of non-parents rarely saw their ex-spouse, in comparison to

34% of the parents. Phone contacts were also more frequent when there were children, 44% of the parents were in frequent phone contact, while only 7% of the childless ex-spouses were. Fifty percent of the parents felt friendliness, compared to 23% of the non-parents (Ambert, 1988). While it is much more likely for parents to express feelings of love or hate towards their former spouse, it is more common for nonparents to express an attitude of indifference (Ambert, 1988). The absence of children diminishes the need to maintain contact because they do not share the mutual concerns that parents do. Furstenburg (1982) refers to a 'ritual avoidance' that takes place when there are no children. The adversarial process may not be as negative for the separated individuals with children because the negotiation of major settlement issues helps them focus on the child issues and away from their tainted marriage relationship (Anderson, 1989).

Yet despite the fact that the presence of children has the potential to encourage amicable relations, it can just as likely serve as a major source of conflict. When there are different

expectations in respect to custody, visitation, or child support, a great deal of hostility can develop towards the former spouse, therefore impairing the quality of the coparental relationship.

#### Limitations of Previous Research

Research focusing on the coparental relationship from the noncustodial father's perspective is relatively sparse in the divorce literature. The tendency to define divorced families as "single-parent families", has led to research based on the premise of paternal absence. The relationship between a divorced father and mother, which may be an important predictor of father involvement postdivorce, has received little recognition. Fathers are generally less available for easy study, because of busy work schedules, high mobility, disinterest, or location difficulties. Subsequently, the male perspective is excluded from the majority of divorce-related literature. Information about noncustodial fathers is all too often obtained from the mother (Jacobs, 1982). In order to portray a more accurate portrayal of

coparental relations postdivorce, inclusion of the father's perspective is essential. Studies based solely on the former wife's explanations are biased, for each spouse perceives "facts" and situations differently according to their own needs, values, attitudes, and beliefs (Safilious-Rothschild, 1969).

Discrepancies in ex-spouses' reports further support the importance of acknowledging individual perceptions. Significant differences in reports have been demonstrated between ex-spouses in the areas of father-child involvement, the quality of the postdivorce relationship, and the amount of support received. For example, fathers' tend to perceive themselves as more involved in childrearing than their ex-wives believe them to be (Ambert, 1988; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1976). The fact that fathers see themselves as more involved than mothers see them could be explained by their desires to maintain some significance in their children's lives (Ahrons, 1981; Tepp, 1983). Fathers also report paying more child support payments than their ex-wives report them to (Wright & Price, 1986).

Men are also more likely to depict the positive

images of their relations with their former wives, which has been explained by women's tendencies to describe situations in more emotional terms, particularly more negative terms (Spanier & Thompson, 1984). Reports indicating that women perceive more conflict with their ex-spouses has been attributed to the fact that women are socialized to expect more expressive aspects from their relationships (Ahrons, 1981). Women's negativity towards their relationships could also be influenced from the stress created by child care responsibilities and a decline in financial status, usually associated with divorce (Clarke-Stewart & Bailey, 1990). And differences in perceptions between former spouses may contribute in part to conflictual postdivorce relationships.

Based on the above concerns, this study sought to address factors impacting upon the quality of the coparental relationship in a way that has not been represented in the past literature. This study's contribution is important in that it takes into account the factors that are typically omitted, such as legal variables which are actually

significant in determining various postdivorce outcomes (Arditti & Allen, in press). Furthermore, this study is based on the father's perspective which has been understudied. Recall that Ahrons (1981) and Clarke-Stewart and Bailey (1990) suggest that men and women are quite sensitive to different issues in developing postdivorce relationships with their former mates. Through the reports of these men we can identify and attend to the specific needs and concerns relevant to divorced fathers, which have tended to be ignored in the past. If there is to be continued access between children and both their parents, it is imperative to find ways to help noncustodial fathers, who often feel shut out of childrearing responsibilities, develop more satisfactory relationships with their former spouses (Goldsmith, 1980).

This study examines the impact of a comprehensive set of variables, derived from the theoretical and empirical literature, on the quality of the coparental relationship. By focusing on child-related issues, legal variables, circumstances surrounding the divorce, as well as background

variables, a more holistic view of the ex-spousal relationship is obtained. Identifying the negative influences affecting the coparental relationship may make it possible to reduce the tensions and conflict that impair each family member's adjustment to the divorce.

## Chapter III

### Method

#### Design

The present study examined factors that were associated with the quality of coparental relationships. Data was utilized from a sample of 225 divorced men who had completed a mailed questionnaire regarding their experiences as divorced fathers. Items pertaining to the topic of investigation were selected from the questionnaire and analyzed accordingly in order to gain a better understanding of the relations between divorced spouses.

#### Sample

A secondary analysis of data previously collected from a sample of divorced men was conducted. The original sample was drawn from Roanoke County and Montgomery County court records (refer to Table 1 for a more extensive description of the original sample). The criteria for selection from the court records included having children, and to have been granted a divorce between 1986-1990. Men with paternal sole custody were excluded from

the study. Six hundred ninety-five surveys were mailed, 261 surveys were not returned, 202 were not deliverable, and 232 surveys were completed and returned, resulting in a 47% response rate. Two hundred twenty-five of the returned surveys were from respondents with joint custody or maternal sole custody. The remaining 7 surveys were returned, yet did not meet the requirements of the study because these fathers had sole custody.

#### Instrumentation

The respondents completed a short version of a survey instrument "Adjustment to Separation and Divorce" created by Spanier & Thompson in 1977 (see Spanier and Thompson, 1984). This instrument was modified in order to obtain specific information on noncustodial fathers (Arditti, 1992 a & b). For the present analysis, questions were selected from the survey which were hypothesized to be related to the coparental relationship. The following set of independent variables were considered: (1) divorce related issues: including custody arrangements, the circumstances of separation, and conversational content; (2) legal variables: including lawyers'

influence, and satisfaction with property settlements and custody arrangements; and (3) background variables: father's educational levels, number of children that the parents share, the father's present socioeconomic status, and the pre and postdivorce father-child relationship. Table 1 shows each of the variables, the questions from which the variables were derived, and how each question was coded.

---

Insert Table 1 about here

---

The dependent variable, the quality of coparental relationship, is a composite of two items and was assessed by summing respondents' scores on the following questions; "Concerning your feelings about how to raise your children, do you and your former spouse agree..(1) always, (2) almost always, (3) sometimes, (4) almost never, (5) never"; and "How would you describe the quality of the relationship you currently have with your former spouse? Would you say that it is.. (1) very good, (2) good, (3) so-so, (4) bad, (5) very bad."

The creation of this variable followed logic that is similiar to the creation of composite or latent variables in structural equations modeling (see Lavee, 1988 for a full discussion). Both theoretical and statistical considerations guided the decision to combine the scores of these two items. Recall that Ahrons (1981) defines issues related to childrearing and relationship quality as part of the coparental relationship. Furthermore, the relationship quality between ex-spouses as reported by fathers was significantly correlated to agreement on childrearing ( $r=.56^{**}$ ).

#### Analysis

A standard multiple regression analysis was utilized in order to identify the relationship between the independent variables and the quality of the coparental relationship. A standard regression analysis was chosen over a stepwise analysis because it permits a more rigorous test of the hypothesis stated on page 4 and capitalizes less on chance than stepwise regression. Stepwise regression is often used in exploratory research to develop a subset of independent variables (Howell, 1987).

## Chapter IV

### Results

A standard multiple regression analysis was performed to assess the ability of eleven independent variables to explain the quality of the coparental relationship. A summary of sample descriptors is provided in Table 2.

---

Insert Table 2 about here

---

The men in this study were predominately white, protestant, middle class, and had an average age of 37.5 years old. Education ranged from some high school to completion of graduate school, with two years of college or technical school as the mean educational level. The average length of marriage for the sample was 6.5 years and time since divorced was 26 months.

Correlations between the variables used in the multiple regression analysis appear in Table 3.

---

Insert Table 3 about here

---

The correlation matrix was inspected to check for the possibility of multicollinearity. None of the independent variables were significantly correlated at a level to suspect multicollinearity.

Table 4 summarizes the results of the multiple regression analysis. The strength and direction of

---

Insert Table 4 about here

---

the relationship between variables are indicated by standardized regression coefficients (B) and t values indicated whether the relationships were significant. Custody satisfaction, number of topics discussed, education, perceived closeness to the children prior to the divorce, number of children, satisfaction with property settlement, and blame were significant predictors of the coparental relationship.

The multiple regression analysis revealed that fathers' satisfaction with custody arrangements was the most important factor affecting the quality of coparental relationships. An estimated beta coefficient of .35 indicated that the more satisfied a father is with his custody arrangements, the more

likely he is to have a friendly coparental relationship with his ex-wife.

The second strongest predictor was the number of topics that former spouses discussed, again the direction of effect was unexpected. A  $-.34$  estimated beta coefficient indicated that ex-spouses were less likely to maintain a friendly relationship when their discussions included a wide variety of topics.

As expected fathers' educational levels were positively related to the quality of the coparental relationship. Higher educational levels were predictive of friendlier postdivorce relationships, as indicated by an estimated beta coefficient of only  $-.19$ .

A father's closeness to his children prior to a divorce predicted how well he related to his former wife postdivorce. Contrary to expectations, when fathers reported a close relationship with their children they were also more likely to positively rate their ex-spousal relationship ( $\text{beta}=.18$ ).

The analysis also revealed that the number of shared children between an ex-wife and ex-husband

had a bearing upon the quality of their postdivorce relationship. Those couples who had fewer children from their prior marriage were more inclined to relate to each other in a friendly manner (beta=.15).

Another variable that was found to significantly affect coparental relationships was a father's satisfaction with his property settlement. As indicated by an estimated beta coefficient of .13, the fathers who were more satisfied with their property settlement were also more likely to report an amicable relationship with their former spouse.

Finally, assumed blame for the breakup of the marriage was also significantly related to the quality of the coparental relationship. Unexpectedly, an estimated beta coefficient of -.13 suggests that the more responsibility a man assumed for the dissolution of his marriage, the poorer the quality of relations with his former wife.

Taken together, these variables account for 35% of the variance in coparental relationships ( $R^2_{adj}=.35$ ). F was significant ( $F=11.84^{***}$ ), indicating that the null hypothesis,  $R^2=0$ , should be rejected.

## Chapter V

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which a set of selected variables explained variation in the quality of the coparental relationship. Eleven variables were entered, and seven were significant. Custody satisfaction, topics of discussion, educational levels, predivorce closeness to children, number of children, satisfaction with property settlement, and assigned blame for the breakup of the marriage emerged as the strongest predictors.

Results from this investigation partially supported the initial hypothesis. As expected, custody satisfaction, education, number of children, and satisfaction with property settlement were positively related to the dependent variable. Quite unexpected, was the lack of significance of custody arrangements and the direction of effect for blame, number of topics discussed, and predivorce closeness.

Custody satisfaction, rather than custody arrangements, was the most salient factor affecting

parents' relationship with each other after divorce. The data were consistent with results of past studies which have suggested that positive relations between ex-spouses are more likely when fathers are satisfied with their custody arrangements (Goldsmith, 1980; Wright & Price, 1986). A dissatisfied father may resent his ex-wife due to his feelings of being excluded from his children's lives. In the past it was simply assumed that the mother would be the sole custodian in the event of a divorce. But now in an era that encourages and praises "good fathering", many men are challenging this assumption and expect more parental rights because of their perceived involvement with parenting during the marriage. If a man is denied the custody arrangements he hopes for, his negative feelings towards his ex-wife may be exacerbated.

It was hypothesized that parents with joint custody would be more likely to have an amicable relationship than those with sole custody. As indicated by the findings of this study, joint custody, in terms of how it was measured in this study, was not a significant predictor of coparental

relations. There are a number of explanations for the lack of significance of custody arrangements. The significance of custody satisfaction may have overshadowed the importance of custody arrangements, which is all the more reason to consider one's satisfaction with custody rather than the actual structural arrangements. If a man does not have custody of his children it does not necessarily mean that he is unsatisfied with these arrangements. Conversely joint custody may not invariably result in greater satisfaction for all men, especially if it is entered into under duress. Some men may find the added responsibility of joint custody undesirable, especially if they were not that involved with their children before the divorce. Furthermore, the additional resources that are required of joint custody may add to each parent's dissatisfaction and contribute to poor spousal relationships. It is plausible then, that some noncustodial fathers are relatively satisfied with their custody and visitation arrangements and that joint custody is not a viable option for all men.

In addition, the tendency to treat joint

custody as a homogeneous status conceals the fact that there are various ways in which parents work out joint custody arrangements. In fact, often times joint legal custody, differs very little structurally from maternal sole custody arrangements (Arditti. 1992b). With regard to this study, as well as many others, the association between court stipulations and actual living arrangements deserves further attention.

From a theoretical standpoint, custody arrangements may have lacked significance because of certain families' tendency to continue functioning as a single unit without defining postdivorce boundaries. For example, some parents may relate to each other in the same manner as they did when they were married, although they do not live together anymore (McIsaac, 1986).

The coparental relationship was significantly affected by the variety of topics that an ex-wife and ex-husband discussed between themselves. Reflecting upon past research it was assumed that when ex-spouses communicated about topics unrelated to their children, suggestive of a friendship, they

would have a better relationship. In contrast, these data indicated that when former spouses' conversations included a greater number of nonparental matters they were more likely to have negative relations with each other. It is possible that when ex-spouses engage in a wide range of conversational content there is a greater opportunity for confrontations to occur and for a history of conflictual interaction to become aroused. This finding provides indirect support for the idea that a high interface of contact leads to conflict (Coysh et al, 1989). The importance of establishing rules and boundaries that define the extent of contact and agreed upon content is further supported. When the spouses agree upon a way of relating and eliminate the sources of their conflict, their interactions may eventually become less problematic.

Higher educational levels were predictive of more positive relationships between former spouses. It was previously mentioned that ex-couples with more education had friendlier relationships due to their ability to negotiate effectively and to talk

cooperatively about matters that were unrelated to their children.

Consistent with this literature, education was positively related to the quality of the coparental relationship. Furthermore, more education is associated with higher SES levels. Greater financial resources, knowledge of successful communication techniques, and fewer children, are typical advantages that parents of higher SES have in their favor.

The association between father-child closeness predivorce was significant, but not in the expected direction. Based on the empirical literature and theoretical explanations, it was hypothesized that fathers who had positive relationships with their ex-wives would be less likely to report a close relationship with their children prior to the divorce. Counterintuitively, this proved to be false for the men in this study. There are several plausible explanations for the association between high levels of predivorce closeness and friendly coparental relationships. It may reflect something about a father's ability to have positive relations

in general. Fathers who report feeling closer predivorce, may be more motivated to get along with their ex-wife for their children's sake and to facilitate their father-child relationships. Previous research on this topic is scarce, thus not enough is known to adequately hypothesize the direction of effect (Hoffman, 1983).

Results of the present study indicate that the predivorce father-child relationship had a significant impact upon the quality of the coparental relationship. This finding supports the encouragement of involved fathering during marriage and reiterates how influential the interactions of one subsystem are upon another subsystem. Contrary to expectations, postdivorce closeness was not significant, which may suggest that predivorce circumstances are more influential than postdivorce circumstances in determining the quality of the coparental relationship.

As expected, it was found that the fewer number of children that an ex-wife and ex-husband had before their divorce the more likely they were to have a positive

postdivorce relationship. When there are fewer shared children, the stress associated with coparenting is not as prevalent and disagreements regarding childrearing are less likely to occur because parents do not have to consult as frequently. There is less financial strain and fewer time demands among those parents with fewer children, which ironically increases the financial support and childcare assistance provided by the noncustodial parent (Fishel & Scanzoni, 1990). A greater number of rules and boundaries must be established with additional family members, therefore increasing the difficulty of maintaining a homeostatic balance.

In accordance with the review of literature, high levels of property settlement satisfaction were positively associated with friendlier coparental relationships. It can be logically concluded that when there is an equitable division of assets, the former spouses will be less likely to feel that they have to compete against each other to receive his/her "fair share" (Ahrons, 1981). When individuals receive what they believe they deserve,

feelings of resentment are less likely to occur (Anderson, 1989). Differential access to property, money, or pensions can result in financial strain, therefore increasing the tension between two formerly married people (Clarke-Stewart & Bailey).

The importance of property settlement outcomes lends further support to the theoretical stance that families are heavily influenced by societal structures. The legal system can largely determine the quality of relations between a former husband and wife through court decisions regarding equitable distribution of property and marital assets. State laws vary according to how equity in settlements is determined, for example, how influential "fault" is in distributing property.

Systems theory's emphasis on stability further explains the importance of custody and property settlement satisfaction. According to the theory's premises, if one parent feels that a court ordered decision is imbalanced there may be continued unrest and instability within the familial system. Satisfaction also supports the position of ecological theory, acknowledging individuals' beliefs as their reality.

One particularly revealing finding in this analysis concerns the association between the quality of the coparental relationship and the amount of blame that fathers assumed for the breakup of their marriage. It was previously mentioned in the review of literature, as well as in the hypothesis, that guilt and internalized blame tend to be related to high-quality ex-spousal interaction, yet the men who accepted blame in this study tended to have worse relationships with their former wives. Perhaps these men felt a sense of remorse or shame that affected their ability to relate to their former wives (Spanier & Thompson, 1984).

The existing literature often assumes that the spouse who initiated the divorce would also take the blame for the breakup of the marriage. It must be pointed out that these two situations are not always synonymous. It is plausible for one spouse to initiate a divorce, while the other spouse takes responsibility or blame for the breakup. The findings of this study may simply reflect a hostile manifestations of guilt, which is usually a consequence of assuming blame. In order to still the guilt they felt, some of the men in this study may have expressed anger towards their former

spouse in order to justify their past behavior (Spanier & Thompson, 1984).

Systems theory's concept of interdependency and ecological theory's concept of reciprocity can help us understand the finding of poor quality relationships being associated with the amount of blame that men assumed for the breakup of their marriage. The theories assume that each spouse's behaviors are maintained by the behaviors of the other, so although the men accepted responsibility for their divorces, both parties are responsible because each spouse's actions were provoked by the actions of the other spouse. The ex-spouses may remain embittered with each other as a result of the negative feelings that were developed towards each other during their marriage.

#### Implications for Policy and Practice

Given that so many couples are divorcing, there is greater responsibility upon both legal and mental professionals to direct the divorcing couple toward those forms of conflict resolution which will serve them and their children's best interests. A review of past literature, and the findings of this study, suggests that the coparental relationship may be more successfully negotiated by the following legal and social efforts:

- (1) The development of clear definitions, that state the rights and obligations of parents after divorce, will reduce the ambiguities that encourage conflict.
- (2) The implementation of enforced mediation or conciliation. These programs reduce the likelihood of postdivorce conflict due to an emphasis on assessment of contextual versus individual functioning, changing the present to influence the future, self-determination, and the continuity of all parent-child relationships.
- (3) The incorporation of postdivorce counseling programs within the court systems. The goals of this service are to help parents reach an amicable agreement, open up channels of communication, and become more aware of the destructive impact of their anger and conflict.
- (4) The operationalization of a wide range of human service programs to meet the needs of all family members.
- (5) The development of equitable distribution laws, perhaps to more carefully consider the role of "fault".

The incorporation of systems theory and ecological theory has important implications for enhancing the quality of coparental relationships. The ecological theory aids our understanding of how families and their environments respond to each other. This valuable insight provides an impetus for social change by altering traditionally held societal assumptions that a positive relationship between ex-spouses is pathological. If it becomes more culturally accepted at all levels of the ecosystem for coparents to continue their relational bonds, then the transition from married to divorce could be less threatening (Boss, 1986). More accepting attitudes could be fostered by creating new levels of expectations for divorcing families, practicing no-fault divorce laws, and placing greater emphasis on feelings rather than facts during divorce procedures (Elkin, 1982). A comprehensive examination of the family's internal dynamics in interaction with the broader social environment can guide legal professionals in the development of policies and procedures that lessen the trauma for postdivorce families. Legal reform can contribute to more cooperative coparenting through mediation, postdivorce counseling, and mandatory educational programs (for example, some

states mandate divorcing parents to take a class on how to help children through divorce) (Ponzetti & Cate, 1987).

The relations between ex-spouses could be enhanced if professionals were made aware of how influential particular variables are in regards to the coparental relationship, such as education and custody satisfaction. Rather than making custody decisions based on general characteristics, judges and lawyers need to consider individual preferences and situations in order to guarantee maximum custody satisfaction. The availability of supportive networks, such as outreach programs, counseling groups, or training programs on conflict resolution, can help persons from lower socioeconomic statuses overcome the barriers that prevent them from having a more positive coparental relationship.

Focusing on "ecological transitions" can help ease the transition from custodial to noncustodial parenting. Parents must be reminded that this new role acquisition does not necessarily end their rights and responsibilities to their children. Even if a parent does not live in the same house as his/her children, he/she still plays a very

influential role in their lives (Hanson, 1985; Tepp, 1983).

Systems theory explains the relationships among and between members within the family system. This aspect of the theory helps define crucial points of intervention that can assist ex-spouses in the development of a postdivorce relationship. By acknowledging that change in one subsystem produces change in another, the functioning of a whole system can be strengthened by improving the relations among one particular dyad. For example, a friendly coparental relationship, will lead to positive postdivorce outcomes for the mother, father, and children. In a similiar vein, improved fathering during marriage results in greater feelings of closeness to children, which relates to better outcomes in the ex-spousal system (Hanson, 1985).

The use of these systematic models would lessen the confusion and conflict that usually accompanies the reorganizational process of divorce.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

It would be a tremendous undertaking to consider each and every factor that may be associated with the quality of coparental relationships. The remaining variation in ex-spousal relationships may be accounted for by variables that were not measured in this study, such as a child's gender or temperament (Berman, 1985), characteristics of the mother (Bloom & Kindle, 1985), impact of a parent's remarriage (Hobart, 1990), or family of origin characteristics. (Spanier & Thompson, 1984). The findings of this study have important implications for future research. First, caution should be taken about collecting data from one spouse and making inferences about their relationship or the other divorced spouse. To provide a complete description of the coparental relationship, future research must include information from both spouses.

The data for this study were collected from noncustodial fathers and fathers with joint custody. The inclusion of fathers with sole custody would provide a more thorough picture of the overall

divorced population.

More complete research on a wider variety of ethnic and racial groups, and couples' predivorce characteristics, may suggest additional variables that would increase our knowledge of postdivorce relationships.

A shortcoming of the present study, as well as many others, is that the identification of relevant variables does not provide any way of measuring them. For example, some men may consider a particular behavior as hostile while others label it as an act of indifference. Perhaps what is needed is the integration of open-ended interviews that would increase the validity of structured questionnaires.

Since results from a multiple regression analysis cannot infer causality, the implementation of more longitudinal studies would be beneficial. Such studies would reduce the effects of extraneous variation upon the topic of investigation, thus allowing researchers to make more well-grounded conclusions.

## References

- Ahrons, C.R. (1981). The continuing coparental relationship between ex-spouses. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 51, 415-428.
- Ahrons, C.R. (1983). Predictors of paternal involvement postdivorce: Mothers' and fathers' perceptions. Journal of Divorce, 6, 55-69.
- Ahrons, C.R., & Perlmutter, M.S. (1982). The relationship between former spouses: A fundamental subsystem in the remarriage family. In L. Messinger (Ed.), Therapy with Remarriage Families. Rockville MD: Aspen Systems Corporation.
- Ahrons, C.R., & Wallisch, L.S. (1985). The relationship between former spouses. In S. Duck & D. Perlman (Eds.), Understanding Personal Relationships. Beverly Hills, California: Sage.
- Ambert, A. (1988). Relationships between ex-spouses: Individual and dyadic perspectives. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 5, 327-346.
- Anderson, E.A. (1989). An exploration of a divorce statute: Implications for future policy

- development. Journal of Divorce, 12, 1-18.
- Arditti, J.A. (1992). Factors related to custody, visitation, and child support for divorced fathers: An exploratory analysis. Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 17, 23-42.
- Arditti, J.A. (1992). Differences between fathers with joint custody and noncustodial fathers. American Journal Orthopsychiatry, 62, 186-195.
- Arditti, J. A., & Allen, K.A. (in press). Distressed fathers' perceptions of legal and relational inequities. Conciliation Courts Review.
- Berman, W.H. (1985). Continued attachment after legal divorce. Journal of Family Issues, 6, 375-392.
- Bloom, B.L., & Kindle, K.R. (1985). Demographic factors in the continuing relationship between former spouses. Family Relations, 34, 375-381.
- Boss, P.G. (1980). Normative family stress: Family boundary changes across the life-span. Family Relations, 29, 445-450.
- Boss, P.G. (1986). Psychological absense in the intact family: A systems approach to a study of fathering. Marriage and Family Review, 10, 11-39.

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). The Ecology of Human Development. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Clarke-Stewart, K.A., & Bailey, B.L. (1989).  
Adjusting to divorce: Why do men have it easier?  
Journal of Divorce, 13, 75-94.
- Coysh, W.S., Johnston, J.J., Tschann, J.M.,  
Wallerstein, J.S., & Kline, M. (1989). Parental  
postdivorce adjustment in joint and sole physical  
custody families. Journal of Family Issues, 10,  
52-70.
- Elkin, M. (1982). The missing links in divorce law:  
A redefinition of process and practice. Journal  
of Divorce, 6, 37-63.
- Felner, R.D., & Terre, L. (1987). Child custody  
dispositions and children's adaptation following  
divorce. In L. Weithorn (Ed.), Psychology and  
Child Custody Determinations (pp.106-153).  
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Ferreiro, B.W. (1990). Presumption of joint custody:  
A policy dilemma. Family Relations, 39, 420-426.
- Fishel, A.H., & Scanzoni, J. (1990). An exploratory  
study of the postdivorce coparental relationship.  
Journal of Divorce, 13, 95-117.

- Furstenburg, F.F., Jr. (1982). 'Conjugal succession: Reentering Marriage after divorce'. In P.B. Baltes & O. Brim Jr. (Eds.), *Life-Span Development and Behavior*; vol. 4. New York: Academic Press.
- Goetting, A. (1980). Former spouse-current spouse relationships. Journal of Family Issues, 1, 58-80.
- Goldsmith, J. (1980). Relationships between former spouses: Descriptive findings. Journal of Divorce, 4, 1-19.
- Hanson, S.M.H. (1985). Fatherhood. American Behavioral Scientist, 29, 55-77.
- Hetherington, E.M., Cox, M., & Cox, R. (1976). Divorced fathers. The Family Coordinator, 25, 417-428.
- Hetherington, E.M., Cox, M., & Cox, R. (1989). Marital transitions. American Psychologist, 44, 303-312.
- Hill, C., Rubin, Z., Peplau, L.A. (1976). 'Breakups before marriage: The end of 103 affairs.' Journal of Social Issues, 32, 147-168.
- Hobart, C. (1990). Relationships between the

formerly married. Journal of Comparative Family Studies, 21, 81-97.

Hoffman, L.W. (1983). Increasing fathering affects on the mother, fatherhood, and family. In M.E. Lamb (Ed.) (167-190). Hilldale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Howell, D.C. (1987). Statistical Methods for Psychology. Boston, MA: PWS-Kent Publishing Company.

Ilfeld, F.W., Ilfeld, H.Z., & Alexander, J.R. (1982). Does joint custody work? A first look at outcome data of relitigation. American Journal of Psychiatry, 136, 62-66.

Jacobs, J.W. (1982). The effect of divorce on fathers: An overview of the literature. American Journal of Psychiatry, 139, 1235-1241.

Irving, H., Benjamin, M., & Trocme, N. (1984). Shared parenting: An empirical analysis utilizing a large Canadian data base. In J. Folberg (Ed.), Joint Custody and Shared Parenting (pp. 128-135). Washington, DC: Bureau of National Affairs.

Kitson, G.C. (1982). Attachment to the spouse in divorce: A scale and its application. Journal Of Marriage and the Family, 44, 379-392.

- Lavee, Y. (1988). Linear structural relationship (lisrel) in family research. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 50 , 937-948.
- Luepnitz, D. (1982). Child Custody. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.
- Luepnitz, D. (1986). A comparison of maternal, paternal, and joint custody: Understanding the varieties of postdivorce family life. Journal of Divorce, 9, 1-12.
- Lund, M.E. (1987). The noncustodial father: Common challenges in parenting after divorce. In C. Lewis & M. O'Brian (Eds.), Reassessing Fatherhood (pp.212-224). Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Masheter, C., (1990). Postdivorce relationships between ex-spouses: A literature review. Journal of Divorce, 14, 97-122.
- Masheter, C., & Harris, L.M. (1986). From divorce to friendship: A study of dialectic relationship development. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 3, 177-189.
- McIsaac, H. (1986). Toward a classification of child custody disputes: An application of family systems theory. Mediation Quarterly, 14/15,

39-50.

- Metts, S., Cupach, W.R., & Bejlovec, R.A. (1989). 'I love you to much to ever start liking you': Redefining romantic relationships. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 6, 259-274.
- Nelson, R. (1990). Parental conflict, hostility, and communication in joint and sole custody families. Journal of Divorce, 13, 145-157.
- Pearson, J., & Thoennes, N. (1990). Custody after divorce: Demographic and attitudinal patterns. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 60, 233-248.
- Pearson, J., Thoennes, N., & Vanderkooi, L. (1982). The decision to mediate: Profiles of individuals who accept and reject the opportunity to mediate contested child custody and visitation issues. Journal of Divorce, 6, 17-35.
- Ponzetti, J.J., & Cate, R.M. (1987). The developmental course of conflict in the marital dissolution process. Journal of Divorce, 10, 1-15.
- Safilios-Rothschild, C. (1969). Family sociology or wives' sociology. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 31, 290-301.

- Spanier, G.B., & Thompson, L. (1984). Parting: The Aftermath of Separation and Divorce. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Stark, E (1986, May). Friends through it all. Psychology Today, pp. 54-60.
- Tepp, A.V. (1983). Divorced fathers: Predictors of continued paternal involvement. American Journal of Psychiatry, 40, 1465-1469.
- Weiss, R.S. (1976). The emotional impact of marital separation. Journal of Social Issues, 32, 135-145.
- Wright, D.W., & Price, S.J. (1986). Court-ordered child support payment: The effect of the former spouse relationship on compliance. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 48, 869-874.

## Appendices

**Appendix A**

**Tables**

Table 1

Variables in the model, survey questions from which the variables were derived, and the coding of those variables.

Variable	Question	Coding
Custody Satisfaction	How satisfied are you with custody agreement?	not at all=5 very satisfied=1
Topics of Discussion	When you talk to your former spouse do you usually discuss...	Counted number of topics are checked
Education	Highest level of school	7th through graduate
Predivorce Closeness to Children	How close do you think you were?	not at all=5 very close=1
Number of Children	How many children did you and your former spouse have?	number of children
Satisfaction with Property Settlement	How satisfied are you with division of property?	not at all=5 very satisfied=1
Assigned Blame for Marital Breakup	Whom would you blame?	former spouse=1 both=2 myself=3
Lawyers' Influence	Would you say that dealings with lawyers made your relationship with your former spouse...	better=1 had no effect=2 worse=3
Custody Arrangements	Who has custody?	former spouse=1 joint or split=2

Variable	Question	Coding
Postdivorce Closeness to Children	Since divorce, has closeness...	increased=1 stayed the same=2 decreased=3
Time Spent with Children During Marriage	How much free time did you spend...?	most of it=1 some of it=2 a little of it=3 none of it=4
Coparental Relations with Former Spouse(fs)		
(Relationship Quality)	How would you describe quality of relationship with former spouse?	very bad=5 very good=1
(Agreement over Childrearing)	Do you and your former spouse agree...	never=5 always=1

**Table 2**  
Sample Descriptors N=225

	$\bar{x}$	SD	
Age	37.5	7.0	
Education (yrs. schooling)	14.1	2.9	
Number Children	1.7	.8	
Number of Months Divorced	25.7	16.1	
Number of Months Married	79.1	66.3	
	f	%	cum %
<b>Remarried</b>			
No	159	70.7	
Yes	66	29.3	100.0
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>			
Protestant	130	57.8	57.8
Catholic	10	4.4	62.2
Jewish	2	.9	63.1
Other	65	28.9	92.0
Atheist, Agnostic, none	18	8.0	100.0
<b>Race</b>			
Black	5	2.2	2.2
Hispanic	2	.9	3.1
Asian	1	.4	3.6
Native American	3	1.3	4.9
White	213	94.7	99.6
Other	1	.4	100.0
<b>Income</b>			
Less Than \$5,000	4	1.8	1.8
\$5,000 - \$9,999	8	3.6	5.5
\$10,000 - \$14,999	17	7.6	13.2
\$15,000 - \$19,999	26	11.6	25.0
\$20,000 - \$24,999	18	8.0	33.2
\$25,000 - \$29,999	16	7.1	40.5
\$30,000 - \$39,999	43	19.1	60.0
\$40,000 - \$49,999	35	15.6	75.9
\$50,000+	53	23.6	100.0

---

$\bar{x}$  = mean or average  
 SD = Standard deviation or variation from the mean  
 f = frequency  
 % = percent  
 cum % = cumulative percent

**Table 3**  
Correlation's Between Selected Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Custody Arrangements	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Custody Satisfaction	-.223**	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3. Predivorce Closeness to Children	-.061	.023	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4. Postdivorce Closeness to Children	.023	-.004	.048	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5. Time Spent with Children During Marriage	-.079	.044	.561**	.484**	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
6. Lawyer's Influence	.125	.040	.021	-.082	-.040	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-
7. Satisfaction with Settlements	.185**	-.161*	.015	-.065	-.075	-.007	1.000	-	-	-	-	-
8. Assigned Blame for Marital Breakup	-.062	-.088	.092	-.050	.063	.120	.107	1.000	-	-	-	-
9. Education	.006	.225**	.102	-.014	.088	.126	-.183**	.082	1.000	-	-	-
10. Number of Children	-.066	.125	.075	-.055	-.040	.027	-.125	.129	.072	1.000	-	-
11. Topics of Discussion	-.127	-.005	.035	-.048	-.086	-.027	.155	.151*	-.044	.106	1.000	-
12. Coparental Relationship	.416**	-.067	.114	.028	.008	.123*	.146*	-.164*	-.159*	.062	-.363**	1.000

\* P < .05, \*\* P < .01

Table 4  
Multiple Regression Analysis: Variables Related  
to the Coparental Relationship

	b	B	t	$\bar{x}$	SD.
Custody Satisfaction	.59	.35	6.09***	3.15	1.50
Topics of Discussion	-.84	-.34	-6.0***	1.56	1.00
Education	-.16	-.19	-3.25***	14.04	2.89
Predivorce Closeness to Children	.35	.18	2.55**	1.67	1.26
Number of Children	.40	.15	2.59**	1.71	.91
Satisfaction with Property Settlement	.11	.13	2.30**	4.21	3.10
Assigned Blame for Marital Breakup	-.37	-.13	-2.23**	1.49	.85
Lawyers' Influence	.51	.10	1.89	2.29	.52
Custody Arrangements	.29	.05	.83	2.23	.42
Postdivorce Closeness to Children	.10	.05	.73	2.11	1.24
Time Spent with Children During Marriage	-.13	-.07	-.93	1.91	1.36

$R^2$  adj..=.35

$F=11.84***$

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Appendix B**

**Questionnaire**





Demographics

Finally, I would like to ask you some background questions about you and your former spouse.

- 14. What is your age?\_\_\_\_\_.
- 15. What is the age of your former spouse?\_\_\_\_\_.
- 16. What age were you when you first married?\_\_\_\_\_.
- 17. What age were you when you married your former spouse?\_\_.
- 18. What age was your former spouse when she first married?\_\_.
- 19. What age was your former spouse when she married you?\_\_\_\_\_.
- 20. What is your race?
  - \_\_\_1. Black
  - \_\_\_2. Hispanic
  - \_\_\_3. Asian
  - \_\_\_4. Native American
  - \_\_\_5. White
  - \_\_\_6. Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_.
- 21. What is your religious affiliation?
  - \_\_\_1. Protestant
  - \_\_\_2. Catholic
  - \_\_\_3. Jewish
  - \_\_\_4. Other
  - \_\_\_5. Atheist, Agnostic, none
- 22. How many times, if any, were you divorced before the marriage we are discussing in this interview?  
\_\_\_\_\_ Enter number
- 23. Are you currently remarried?
  - \_\_\_1. No
  - \_\_\_2. Yes

VITA

## Vita

Michaelena C. Kelly

1140 Durkin St.

Camarillo, CA. 93010

Birthdate: June 23, 1968

**Education:** B.S. Human Development, September 1990

California Polytechnic State

University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

M.S. Family Studies, August 1992

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and

State University, Blacksburg, VA.

**Experience:** Lab School Teacher, Virginia Tech,  
Blacksburg, VA., September 1991-April 1992

- Prepared daily lesson plans

-Supervised teacher assistants

-Practiced appropriate child

development philosophies

Teacher Assistant, Virginia Tech

Blacksburg, VA., January 1992-April-1992

-Taught child development lessons to

undergraduates

-Supervised observations

-Graded case analyses and test papers

**Preshool Teacher, Camarillo Christian**

**School Camarillo, CA., May 1991-August 1991**

-Responsible for opening and closing  
center

-Prepared activities reflecting weekly  
themes

-Taught educational lessons

**Daycare Site Supervisor, Camarillo**

**YMCA Camarillo, CA., September 1990-**

**January 1991**

-Budgeted monthly allowance

-Prepared staff schedules

-Bought and prepared snacks

-Presided over staff meetings

-Acted as liason between daycare site  
and head office

**Emergency Response Social Worker,**

**Child Protective Services, San Luis**

**Obispo, CA., March 1990-August 1990**

-Responded to child abuse reports

- Wrote up case reports
- Evaluated family environments
- Communicated proper parenting techniques

**Achievements:** Senior Project, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

- Devised Child Abuse Pamphlet for children taken into protective custody (currently being used by San Luis Obispo County Social Services)