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## **Coparenting Relationships After Divorce: Variations by Type of Marital Violence and Fathers Role Differentiation**

J. L. Hardesty  
*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

Lyndal Khaw  
*Montclair State University, khawl@mail.montclair.edu*

G. H. Chung  
*Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service*

J. M. Martin  
*Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service*

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# Coparenting Relationships After Divorce: Variations by Type of Marital Violence and Fathers' Role Differentiation\*

Jennifer L. Hardesty

Lyndal Khaw

Grace H. Chung

Jennifer M. Martin\*\*

**Abstract:** Using grounded theory methods, we examined coparenting relationships for 25 divorced mothers who experienced violence during their marriages. How well former husbands were able to differentiate, or keep separate, their parental and spousal roles emerged as central to coparenting dynamics and was partly related to type of marital violence. Linking differentiation to types of marital violence advances our theoretical understanding of variations in coparenting relationships after divorce. Results can be used to more effectively match divorcing parents with appropriate interventions.

**Key Words:** boundaries, control, coparenting, differentiation, divorce, intimate partner violence.

Our theoretical and empirical understanding of intimate partner violence (IPV) and coparenting with an abusive former partner have increased in recent years. Studies have documented increased risk of violence during and immediately after separation (Hotton, 2001), ongoing abuse of women via access to children (Hardesty & Ganong, 2006), and institutional failure to prioritize women's safety in the context of coparenting after separation (Wuest, Ford-Gilboe, Merritt-Gray, & Berman, 2003). Clearly, for some women, violence continues after separation with little potential for safe coparenting. Possible variations in coparenting relationships, however, have not been extensively researched. To address this gap, we used in-depth interviews with 25 women to explore variability in their coparenting relationships with abusive former husbands. In

particular, we sought to uncover how the dynamics of these relationships may be linked to different types of marital violence. Uncovering possible links can facilitate efforts to match divorcing parents with appropriate interventions.

## Coparenting After Divorce

Coparenting after divorce refers to parents' ongoing involvement with each other on issues related to their children. Involvement can include child-related discussions, joint decision making, or participation in children's activities. Coparenting is not synonymous with cooperation, however, as relationships vary from minimal to high interaction and agreement (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987). From a family

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\*\*Jennifer L. Hardesty is an assistant professor in the Department of Human and Community Development at the University of Illinois, 243 Bevier Hall, MC-180, 905 S. Goodwin Avenue, Urbana, IL 61801 (hardesty@illinois.edu). Lyndal Khaw is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Human and Community Development at the University of Illinois, 167 Bevier Hall, MC-180, 905 S. Goodwin Avenue, Urbana, IL 61801 (khaw@illinois.edu). Grace H. Chung is an assistant professor in the Department of Family and Child Studies at Montclair State University, 1 Normal Avenue, Montclair, NJ 07043 (grace.0210@gmail.com). Jennifer M. Martin is a social worker in the Bedford Stuyvesant Family Center at the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Services, 20 New York Avenue, 2nd Floor, Brooklyn, NY 11216 (jennifer.martin@dfa.state.ny.us).

systems perspective, a central task of developing effective coparenting relationships after divorce is boundary renegotiation (Emery & Dillon, 1994).

Boundaries refer to “explicit and implicit rules that define the structure of family relationships” (Emery & Dillon, 1994, p. 374). After divorce, parents must redefine their rules about how to relate to each other as parents while no longer being partners (Bohannon, 1971). As part of this process, parents must learn how to differentiate, or keep separate, their parental and spousal roles (Minuchin, 1974). In marriage, the boundaries around these roles often overlap. The roles must be separated after divorce to “reduce the contamination of parental roles by spousal conflicts” (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987, p. 107).

An ongoing renegotiation of boundaries is a required part of the developmental process of divorce (Emery, 1994). The first couple of years after divorce are particularly important for renegotiating boundaries, as numerous structural changes take place and new patterns of coparenting are developed (Emery & Dillon, 1994). This initial adjustment period is often characterized by conflict, but as parents work through these conflicts, they draw new boundaries around their roles (Emery). For parents in general, the adjustment period is usually a temporary disruption before conflict decreases (King & Heard, 1999; Madden-Derich, Leonard, & Scott, 1999). However, whether similar patterns of adjustment are to be expected among divorced parents with a history of IPV remains unknown.

### **Coparenting and Intimate Partner Violence**

For abused women, renegotiating boundaries after divorce poses unique challenges and risks. Separating from an abusive partner does not necessarily end the violence (Hotton, 2001). Instead, separation may threaten an abuser’s sense of control and instigate more violence (Walker, Logan, Jordan, & Campbell, 2004), particularly in the immediate period after separation (Fleury, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2000). Risk may continue if former partners coparent after separation because abusers continue to have access to their former wives (Hardesty & Ganong, 2006). Indeed, women have reported physical assaults after separation as well as harassment related to custody and child support (see Walker et al.). Violence after

separation may be further enabled by the current legal system, which assumes that it is in children’s best interest to maintain relationships with both parents after divorce (Amato & Rivera, 1999). Because of this overarching assumption, women’s attempts to protect their own and their children’s safety are often undermined or overlooked, and women are left feeling unsafe and fearful when coparenting with their former husbands (Hardesty & Chung, 2006).

Although researchers have clearly documented that risk continues for some women, possible variations in coparenting relationships have not been extensively researched. Specifically, little is known about how coparenting after separation and type of violence during marriage may be linked. Johnson and Ferraro (2000) identified two types of IPV: intimate terrorism and situational couple violence. Although each is a type of IPV, the context in which the violence occurs is quite different. In intimate terrorism, physical violence is one tactic among many abusers use to exert control over their partners; whereas, situational couple violence arises in the context of specific arguments without an underlying motive to control one’s partner. In their decade review of research, Johnson and Ferraro concluded that the most promising direction for future research is to further examine contextual variations of IPV. Such distinctions are central to our theoretical understanding of IPV and “force us to question our tendency to generalize carelessly from one context to another” (Johnson & Ferraro, p. 1).

To date, the coparenting experiences (e.g., ongoing violence and control issues) documented in the violence literature likely involve situations of intimate terrorism. In contrast, the divorce literature likely includes more situational couple violence, although most of these studies do not make such distinctions (Lawrence, Ro, Barry, & Bunde, 2006). In fact, divorce researchers have often defined violence as “high conflict” between former partners (Jaffe, Lemon, & Poisson, 2003; Whiteside, 1998) making it difficult to distinguish unique experiences related to violence. Failure to distinguish types of violence contributes to a one-size-fits-all approach to intervention. As Ver Steegh (2005) argued, when all IPV is treated as intimate terrorism, some women are denied services that may be safe and effective for situational couple violence. When all IPV is treated as situational couple violence, some women are forced to participate in unsafe services that minimize or

ignore the issues of control in intimate terrorism (Ver Steegh). Thus, integrating the violence and divorce literatures would provide a more nuanced understanding of how types of IPV relate to coparenting dynamics after separation and contribute to more effective interventions.

Only one study (Hardesty & Ganong, 2006), to our knowledge, has considered the potential influence of type of marital violence on coparenting after separation. Using qualitative interviews, they found that women who reported intimate terrorism in marriage also reported high involvement by former husbands with children after divorce; however, coparenting relationships were complicated by their former husbands' ongoing abuse and control of former wives. In situations of situational couple violence, former partners did not actively coparent because men maintained little or no contact with their children or former wives. These results are limited, however, because the majority of women (15 out of 19) reported intimate terrorism, making any comparisons on the basis of type of violence extremely tentative. Also, the majority of participants were divorced for 2 years or less and may not have fully established new patterns of coparenting. Thus, research is needed to uncover possible links between the type of marital violence and the dynamics of coparenting relationships beyond the initial adjustment period.

## Research Questions

Given these gaps, the current study aimed to integrate and build upon the violence and divorce literatures by exploring links between types of marital violence and coparenting relationships after divorce. Specifically, we explored the following research questions: (a) What are the variations in coparenting relationships after the initial adjustment period following divorce? (b) How are variations in coparenting relationships related to types of marital violence? (c) What are the consequences of coparenting relationships for mothers and parent-child relationships? We focused on women survivors and male perpetrators because separation is associated with risks for male violence against women (Hotton, 2001) and because women are often primary caregivers of children after separation with the responsibility of facilitating father-child contact (Thompson & Amato, 1999).

## Method

### *Recruitment and Data Collection*

We attempted to answer the research questions by conducting in-depth interviews with divorced mothers who were abused by their former husbands. Inclusion criteria were that women (a) experienced at least two incidents of physical abuse by their former husbands (to establish a pattern of physical abuse), (b) were separated for at least 2 years (to allow for a period of adjustment), and (c) had at least one child younger than 18 years in the home at the time of separation (to ensure the relevance of parenting issues after separation). Our recruitment strategies were intended to avoid previous sample limitations such that agency samples (e.g., women's shelters) tend to include mostly intimate terrorism, and general community samples tend to include mostly situational couple violence (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). To obtain a sample of women with diverse violence experiences, we used a combination of strategies.

First, we accessed public divorce records in a large Midwest county and randomly selected 75 mothers who divorced between 2000 and 2002. Using phone directories from 2000 to 2004 and Internet resources, we attempted to obtain their current addresses and phone numbers. We then mailed letters inviting women to contact us about a research study on mothers' experiences with divorce. For safety reasons, we did not mention the study's focus on IPV. Letters invited women to call us if they were interested in the study and stated that we would contact them by phone if they did not respond in 1 week. At the same time, we posted fliers throughout the community, mailed fliers to agencies asking them to post or share the information, and posted fliers on two listservs used to announce events and opportunities in the community. We broadly targeted IPV, parenting, and general community audiences in an effort to obtain a diverse sample. Unlike letters mailed to residences, fliers stated our interest in recruiting divorced mothers whose partner had ever physically hurt them.

We screened for physical abuse using seven items (e.g., kick, choke, threaten with gun) from the Physical Assault subscale of the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). A total of 31 women contacted us: 2

did not meet the abuse criteria (they had received letters, which did not specify the study's focus on IPV) and 1 had been separated for less than 2 years. Of the 28 women who met the criteria, 3 failed to show for more than one scheduled interview. Of the 25 women interviewed, 12 responded to fliers posted on community listservs, 8 responded to fliers posted in the community, 3 responded to letters sent to their residences, and 2 contacted us after hearing about the study from a friend or family member. We suspect that our efforts to identify participants using public records were not as successful because of the transient nature of both divorced and abused women as well as the length of time since their divorces.

Seventeen of the women in our sample were White, 7 were African American, and 1 was Asian. The mean age of the sample was 44 (range 28 – 68), and the mean years of education was 14.4 (range 11 – 21). Women were married an average of 10.3 years (range 1 – 39). One woman's divorce was pending after a 2-year separation, and one had been divorced for 6 months after a 2-year separation. All the other women had been divorced for at least 2 years ( $M = 11.7$ , range 2 – 32). They had a mean of two children (range 1 – 8). At separation, the average age of the oldest or solo minor child was 6.3 years old (range 1 – 16), and the average age of the youngest minor child was 5 years old (range 1 – 12). Two women were pregnant at the time of separation. Mothers had sole ( $n = 21$ ) or joint physical and/or legal custody ( $n = 4$ ) arrangements. Fathers had supervised ( $n = 4$ ) and unsupervised ( $n = 15$ ) visitation. Six fathers were not awarded visitation. At the time of the interviews, 18 mothers were single, 4 were residing with new partners, and 3 were remarried.

The first author conducted the interviews in participants' homes or a university office. Interviews were semistructured with broad questions followed by probes. Questions were focused on IPV, fathers' contact and involvement with children, women's relationships with former partners, and parent-child relationships. As recommended by Matthews (2005), participants were asked to describe specific experiences (e.g., tell me what happened the last time you and your former husband exchanged the children) rather than general feelings (e.g., tell me how you feel about sharing custody). In doing so, we obtained detailed contextual data about women's experiences as well as their perceptions and feelings about their experiences, which they provided in the

process of describing events. Interviews lasted about an hour and were digitally recorded and transcribed. We replaced participants' names with pseudonyms and disguised identifying information to protect confidentiality. Participants received \$30 and a list of community resources related to parenting, divorce, and IPV.

### Data Analysis

Grounded theory methods were used because our goal was to generate a theoretical explanation of how and why coparenting relationships with abusive former husbands vary. Grounded theory methods offer systematic procedures to develop an inductively derived theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) through identification of the key constructs of the phenomenon of interest and their relationships—as well as context and process. In the current study, we used three stages of coding. Although we describe our methods in a linear fashion, the process was iterative and dynamic in that we moved back and forth between stages as new information emerged.

In the first stage, each author independently open coded the first 10 interviews. Open coding involves attaching labels to discrete ideas in the text related to the phenomenon of interest. Our coding scheme included emergent codes and existing codes, such as sensitizing concepts from family systems theory (e.g., boundaries, differentiation of roles). As suggested by Charmaz (2006), we coded data as actions (e.g., setting boundaries) in order to define what was happening in the data. We held group meetings to develop the initial coding scheme. Consistent with constant comparative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we coded new interviews with the existing coding scheme and revised it as needed on the basis of emergent findings.

In the second stage, axial coding, we moved from developing codes to hypothesizing relationships between them. In doing this, we placed a “focal [code] temporarily at the center of the analytical inquiry” (LaRossa, 2005, p. 848) and examined its relationship to other codes. For example, we grouped actions into three types and observed that each could be categorized by different *contexts*, *facilitating conditions*, and *consequences* (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Contexts refer to the larger milieu within which actions take place. For example, we used Johnson and Ferraro's (2000) types of IPV to categorize different contexts of violence. We categorized violence that

was motivated by control and accompanied by nonviolent control tactics as intimate terrorism. We categorized violence that occurred within specific arguments (e.g., disclosure of an affair) but was not part of an overall pattern of control as situational couple violence. Facilitating conditions refer to the circumstances that facilitate actions within different contexts. Conditions “answer the why, where, how come, and when questions” relative to actions (Strauss & Corbin, p. 128). Finally, consequences are the outcomes of actions.

In the third stage, selective coding, we developed the “main [theoretical] story underlying the analysis” (LaRossa, 2005, p. 850) by identifying the core variable. The core variable is the one variable that is centrally relevant to the relationships uncovered by axial coding.

Trustworthiness, or the degree to which study findings are supported by evidence and can be trusted as accurate reflections of participants’ experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was pursued in several ways. First, bias was reduced by investigator triangulation, or the process of analyzing interview data separately, comparing findings, and discussing discrepancies until reaching consensus (Denzin, 1970). All authors participated in this process of cross-checking and verifying interpretations. We also consulted with two colleagues who were not involved in the project but are experienced in grounded theory analysis and IPV research for their feedback on our data collection, analysis procedures, and interpretation of findings (e.g., our conceptualization of differentiation). Third, through negative case analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we examined cases that appeared to be exceptions to our general findings and incorporated these differences into the results. Finally, we thoroughly documented our process of data collection and analysis and used participants’ quotes as evidence of our conclusions.

## Results

The concept of “differentiation” emerged as the core variable in this study because of “its ability to pull the other [variables] together to form an explanatory whole” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Differentiation may be defined as the separation between parental and spousal roles. In this study, the construct encompasses boundary issues relative to how well former husbands, from the mothers’ perspectives,

were able to keep separate their parental and spousal roles. Three patterns emerged: poorly differentiated, well differentiated, and absent former husbands. Poorly differentiated former husbands reportedly had a history of intimate terrorism and continued to exert control over their former wives via children and the courts. Mothers’ actions were directed at resisting this controlling intrusion. In contrast, well-differentiated former husbands reportedly worked with mothers to minimize spousal conflicts and prioritize parental roles. The majority of these former husbands had a history of situational couple violence. Finally, with absent former husbands, a reconfiguration of family boundaries after divorce resulted in essentially no coparenting relationship. This pattern was not linked to type of marital violence. Within each group, distinct coparenting dynamics were observed (see Table 1).

### *Poorly Differentiated Former Husbands: Controlling Intrusion via Children and Courts*

Poorly differentiated former husbands ( $n = 11$ ) were characterized by their lack of separation between parental and spousal roles. These coparenting relationships were dominated by controlling intrusion, whereby former husbands reportedly used the children and the courts to maintain control over their former wives. According to mothers, their former husbands’ actions with respect to parenting (e.g., visitation, custody, child support) were inseparable from their efforts to reassert control. All mothers reported intimate terrorism during marriage, in which physical violence was just one control tactic among many used by their husbands. After separation, all mothers in this group continued to be afraid that their former husbands would hurt them or their children. Thus, a context of fear and control persisted.

Mothers in this group reported ongoing struggles as they tried to maintain a constructive coparenting relationship. From the mothers’ perspective, their former husbands seemed more interested in controlling them than maintaining relationships with their children. Evangeline recalled:

He accused me of abusing my daughter, . . . which did not happen. It was a very traumatic situation and when she eventually came back [after the charges were proven false], he was never punished for having used the system in

Table 1. *Coparenting Relationships*

	Poorly Differentiated Former Husbands ( <i>n</i> = 11)	Well-Differentiated Former Husbands ( <i>n</i> = 7)	Absent Former Husbands ( <i>n</i> = 7)
Definition	Unclear separation of parental and spousal roles	Clear separation of parental and spousal roles	No coparental relationship
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intimate terrorism</li> <li>• Controlling intrusion</li> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Ongoing litigation</li> <li>• Lack of child support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Situational couple violence for majority</li> <li>• Parenting conflicts</li> <li>• No fear (safety)</li> <li>• No litigation</li> <li>• Child support</li> <li>• Younger on average</li> <li>• More recent separations on average</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fathers' substance abuse for majority</li> <li>• No litigation</li> <li>• No child support</li> </ul>
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting rigid boundaries to minimize intrusion</li> <li>• Requesting formal interventions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negotiating clear boundaries to minimize conflict</li> <li>• Reinforcing each other's parenting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parenting without fathers</li> </ul>
Facilitating conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes in mothers relative to fear and self-esteem</li> <li>• Father presence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Mutual respect</li> <li>• Geographical distance</li> <li>• Father presence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Father absence or incapacity</li> <li>• Help from grandparents</li> </ul>
Consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mothers placing less value on father-child relationships</li> <li>• Cutoff or distant parent-child and coparental relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mothers continuing to value father-child relationships</li> <li>• Ongoing parent-child and coparental relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mothers' sadness, regret, and guilt</li> <li>• Little to no parent-child or former spouse contact</li> </ul>

this way. That scared the hell out of me. I don't think he believed it for a minute. . . . I think he wanted to get back at me . . . sort of to put me in my place, which it worked, because I didn't push him on child support [or] custody. I didn't push him on all these things [because] I was afraid. He wanted to hurt me, and the way he hurt me was through my child.

Visitation exchanges were the most common location where mothers observed their former husbands continuing to assert control. For example, Jocelyn noted:

[Exchanges] were stressful for the kids, I'm sure, because he would say, 'Well, the house is

a mess, you look like a whore, . . . you're not treating the kids right, they're not clean. . . . You know, it was the same routine that I wasn't good enough, and he had to condemn [me] for everything [I] did. . . . That was the way [he] manipulated and controlled [me].

The courts presented additional opportunities for controlling intrusion. Seven out of 11 mothers in this group reported ongoing litigation with former husbands. In four of the seven cases, former husbands initiated litigation to increase visitation and reduce child support. In three of the seven cases, mothers initiated litigation—two to obtain child support that was not paid and one to request supervision of visits—all of which fathers countered with motions to decrease child support. Courtney

explained what happened when she returned to court because of child support:

He would see me in front of the courtroom and he would come to me [with] this big grin on his face. He said, 'I will never pay you a penny. . . . Everything was a chance to control. Even [the] battle for child support was his means [of] trying to get to me.

The lack of differentiation between parental and spousal roles may partly explain why 9 out of 11 fathers did not regularly pay court-ordered child support (one mother was too afraid to pursue child support). Mothers believed that their former husbands were financially capable of paying but chose not to as a way to stay in control. To resist intrusion but allow children to maintain relationships with fathers, mothers' actions were directed at forcing a separation between parental and spousal roles.

*Actions.* Mothers reported two actions (or strategies) for resisting controlling intrusion: setting rigid boundaries and requesting formal interventions. Rigid boundaries were firm rules about how to relate as coparents that were upheld in the face of challenge. Ingrid explained how she set rigid boundaries to mitigate intrusion: "[I'd say to him], 'You want to act [abusive], that's not a problem. I'll just call my lawyer. . . . We'll work it out that way. We're not going to discuss this in front of the kids.'" Setting rigid boundaries was difficult because, from the mothers' perspective, fathers had difficulty perceiving (or treating) their children as separate from their former wives. Daisy explained how her former husband came to her house for a scheduled visit with the children but left without even speaking to them once he learned that she would not be present. Thus, she believed his relationship with the children was contingent upon continued contact with and access to her.

Mothers requested formal interventions when their attempts at setting rigid boundaries were unsuccessful. Specifically, 8 out of 11 had called the police and 6 had obtained protective orders. For example, Daisy invited her former husband to their daughter's birthday celebration. During the event, "he jumped me." As a result, Daisy called the police and housing authorities to keep him off the property.

*Facilitating conditions.* Strategies to resist controlling intrusion were facilitated by changes within

mothers. Specifically, mothers learned to reduce their fear and build their self-esteem over time. Annette commented on both of these. Regarding fear management, she explained: "I created [a] reality in my head [that] fear has its own house and that's where the fear lives [separate from me], because otherwise I crumble under the [stress] of talking to him." She later reflected on the role of education in improving her self-esteem:

Education makes me feel more powerful. I feel like I can support [myself and my child] now . . . which was not how I felt when we first separated. I only had a high school diploma. I had the self-esteem of a gnat. There are still days I have the self-esteem of a gnat, but they're not every day any more.

Indeed, 6 out of 11 women sought advanced education during the process of leaving and/or after separation to gain the strength to resist their former husbands' control over them.

*Consequences.* As women struggled against controlling intrusion, they came to place less value on maintaining children's relationships with fathers. Mothers initially supported father-child contact because their former husbands had never directly abused the children. From their perspective, his abuse of her did not reflect upon him as a father. Lori explained: "[My former husband] had never been violent against [our son]. His violence seemed to be against women." Similarly, Yvonne wanted her daughter to have contact with her father "because he was never abusive to her and I thought it [was] in her best interest to have a relationship with her father because she loved her father and he loved her."

According to their retrospective accounts, however, the ability to make the distinction between his abuse as a spouse and his role as a father became more difficult as they witnessed the effects of ongoing intrusion on their children. For example, Annette ended the phone calls between her former husband and their son, Frankie, when:

Frankie started hurting himself. I listened to a phone conversation and discovered [my former husband] is berating him, telling him, 'You're making me feel unloved. I'm not going to call you anymore if you don't do what I



want you to do' kind of emotional blackmailing. [I thought,] 'You're done talking to my kid. . . . What scared me the most [was that Frankie] would hit himself, that he would pound on his legs or whack himself in the chest and I was scared that he was really going to [hurt himself]. . . . We weren't going to get to that point so I terminated his phone visitation.

At the time of the interviews, women were not able to identify positive outcomes of ongoing father-child contact and about half had come to believe their former husbands were not good fathers. Over time, fathers' relationships with children had become cutoff or distant, with four fathers withdrawing from contact with their children.

#### *Well-Differentiated Former Husbands: Minimizing Conflict by Respecting Boundaries*

In contrast to the first group, well-differentiated former husbands ( $n = 7$ ) were reportedly able to separate parental and spousal roles after divorce. Mothers described safe coparenting relationships that were characterized by respect for each other's boundaries. These women were not afraid of their former husbands. The majority ( $n = 5$ ) of these coparenting relationships occurred in the context of previous situational couple violence, in which violence occurred during specific arguments but was not part of a general pattern of control. Two mothers in this group reported intimate terrorism; however, none of the mothers reported violence and control that persisted after the immediate separation period. These parents were younger on average and had separated more recently compared to parents in the other groups.

In this group, boundaries between parental and spousal roles were clarified over time as parents redefined their relationship as coparents while no longer being partners. Conflict centered on clarifying responsibilities and expectations, rather than on issues of control. Despite conflicts, mothers and fathers prioritized parenting over former spouse issues. According to mothers, their former husbands' behaviors were motivated by their desire to maintain positive relationships with their children. Five out of seven women in this group received regular child support, and none were in protracted litigation.

*Actions.* Mothers in this group used informal actions (or strategies) to minimize conflict with

former husbands. Because mothers perceived fathers to be responsive to their concerns about children's well-being, however, formal interventions were rarely sought. Two women did seek formal interventions (e.g., protection orders) during the initial separation period when risks to the children increased because of fathers' alcohol abuse.

Two informal actions were used: negotiating clear boundaries and reinforcing each other's parenting. Clear boundaries identified what topics and behaviors were unacceptable within a constructive coparenting relationship. Former spouses made mutual efforts to create clear boundaries. For example, Holly's former husband moved to a neighboring city after their divorce. Initially, he stayed at Holly's house when he visited the children but conflicts erupted when he reportedly asked questions about her personal life. She now sets clear boundaries when he visits to avoid the potential for conflict: "He's called and asked, 'Can I come next week and visit?' . . . I told him, '[Yes, but] who are you going to stay with?' . . . My [point] was, 'You cannot stay with me.'" Likewise, when mothers tried to manage fathers' interactions with children (e.g., by encouraging certain activities during visits), fathers set clear boundaries around their time with children. Delilah described her former husband's reaction when she wanted to know more about what he does with their son on the weekends: "He'd tell me it's none of my business. [What] he does with him when he has him is his time."

Clear boundaries were also explained to children. Hailey recalled what happened when her daughter learned that her father was dating:

I've tried to get [our daughter] to see that Daddy has a right to his boundaries. . . . [I] explained to her, 'You live with me. You're with me all the time. You know all my friends. You know my boyfriend. You know people I work with. . . . You're not with Daddy [enough] to know all of his friends, everywhere he goes. You've never been to his church with him so you don't know his pastor. . . . That doesn't mean we're not a family. There [are] two different households [in this family].'

Thus, negotiating clear boundaries reportedly involved efforts by both parents to clarify parental roles as distinct from former spouse issues. These

dynamics were in contrast to the first group, in which mothers set rigid boundaries that were not mutually negotiated but were directed at resisting their former husbands' controlling intrusion.

A second strategy to minimize conflict was reinforcing each other's parenting. This strategy was evoked often in response to problems with children. Mimi recalled a time when her son, Denzel, refused to bathe:

I had a problem with Denzel not wanting to have his bath. Denzel would like to have a bath probably once or twice a week. . . . [I called my former husband, and he said,] 'I'll come and talk to him, and, if it's okay with you, we'll settle for four times a week.' I said, 'I really would like seven days a week!' (*laughs*) And he says, 'Okay, well let's compromise to six.'

Such actions helped to reinforce that the parenting relationship took precedence over any issues between former spouses.

*Facilitating conditions.* Strategies to minimize conflict were facilitated by communication and mutual respect. Hailey's narrative illustrates both of these when she explained what happened when she asked her former husband not to come to their daughter's horse riding lessons:

He said, 'I feel like you leave me out.' And I said, 'Well, we're divorced so I expect that you will leave me out of some things, and I will leave you out of some things. But this is something that's [special] between me and her and that I'd like to keep that way.' And he was fine with it after [I explained it to him]. He only does come when we invite him, so I think he respects those boundaries.

Mimi also explained that her former husband "never comes [over] without calling. He's turned out to be what I would consider a gentleman now—very, you know, respectful of my life now."

Importantly, two mothers in this group experienced intimate terrorism in their marriages. Consistent with negative case analysis, we explored why these coparenting relationships were not dominated by controlling intrusion, as were those in the first group. Adina's former husband lived several states away from her, which she believed minimized the

potential for controlling intrusion: "[As for our relationship], it's less an issue because we are so far apart. . . . It's not a day to day struggle now because obviously . . . [his control] is not there." Time since separation may also have played a role, as both had been apart from their former husbands for the shortest periods of time compared to all other women in the sample. With time, their relationships may resemble those in the first group, especially if violence or control issues resurface. Adina, whose divorce was not finalized, alluded to this possibility: "I could see [custody] turning into a real control issue. I could see that turning into him saying [our son] has to live in the state [where he lives], which then means I would have to move back [there]."

*Consequences.* All the women in this group valued the father-child relationship and wanted children to maintain relationships with fathers. They believed their former husbands wanted to and would maintain relationships with their children. These women attributed their former husbands' reported shortcomings to personal struggles or skills deficits rather than ill intent, as in the first group. As Nancy put it, "I think he does love the kids. He just doesn't know how to be a good parent. I think that probably has a lot do with how he was raised." Similarly, two mothers who did not regularly receive court-ordered child support explained that their former husbands were un- or underemployed because of personal problems not because of intentional efforts to evade payments. Fathers in this group had ongoing contact and involvement with their children, and mothers gradually regained positive affect toward their former husbands, referring to them with terms such as friend, care, like, and love.

#### *Absent Former Husbands: Vacating the Coparental Role Through Structural Change*

Absent former husbands ( $n = 7$ ) made no efforts to coparent after separation. Indeed, structural changes after separation, described below, made coparenting unnecessary. These relationships were not related to type of marital violence: four experienced intimate terrorism and three experienced situational couple violence. However, mothers in this group were more likely to report substance abuse by former husbands (four vs. three in the other groups combined).

Absence from the coparental role took three forms. First, in four cases, fathers immediately exited the family's boundaries before their divorces were

final. Fathers did not maintain contact with children after separation, and none sought custody or visitation. Valerie surmised, "I think he stopped [coming around] because of fear of going to jail. [He] had a record [for drugs], and if he didn't want to go back to prison, he needed to leave me alone." In two cases, husbands fled immediately after inflicting severe physical violence on their wives. Years later, both women remained afraid that their former husbands would return to abuse them again. Vera recollected: "I have said to my daughter all along that . . . if ever she wanted to reconnect [with her father] that I would do what I could to help that happen. But, I had concerns [about] safety." All but one mother chose not to pursue unpaid court-ordered child support to avoid further contact with former husbands.

Second, in two of the seven cases, grandparents assumed a primary parenting role. Former spouses communicated with the grandparents rather than each other, and children had contact with one or both parents through the grandparents. For example, because of serious health problems, Felicia sent her children to live with her mother after separation. Felicia described their separate relationships with the children:

Everybody has different roles in [the children's] lives. . . . [Their] dad is not there with them all the time, but he comes and [takes them] out. They [live] with my mom. I come [over to visit]. [Even though our roles are different,] we . . . want them to be happy.

In Angelica's case, the paternal grandmother mediated the contact between the children and their father while the children remained in their mother's custody. Because of the father's reported alcohol abuse, the courts restricted his visitations to occur solely in the grandmother's house. For both Felicia and Angelica, fathers' involvement with children was limited from the beginning and former spouse contact was unnecessary as they were not actively coparenting. Neither received court-ordered child support.

Finally, in a unique case of reconfiguring family roles, Ruthann and her oldest son became the caretakers of the father after divorce. The father, an alcoholic, required increased supervision and medical attention over the years. Ruthann explained, "We took care of him . . . because of the alcohol. . . . He

stayed living in his own house and we went by and checked on him once or twice a day, sometimes more." The mother redefined her relationship with her former husband as caregiver and patient rather than as coparents. This was further refined when the oldest son gained legal guardianship of his father, further defining the father as a dependent.

Although the dynamics of these seven cases differed, they were similar in that coparenting and relating as former spouses were not necessary because of structural changes in the families' roles and boundaries. Most experienced no violence after separation. Former spouses did not communicate with each other about parenting, even when both parents remained in contact with children. For the most part, mothers parented alone, which was facilitated by former husbands' absence or incapacity and, for some, the help of grandparents. Over time, children had little to no contact with fathers. For half of the mothers, their former husbands' reported addiction to alcohol or other drugs provided an important context for understanding their behaviors. Emotions expressed by these women included sadness, regret, and guilt over their family reconfigurations after separation. Thus, what appeared to be clean breaks between some former spouses were not; the emotional impact of this ambiguous loss continued to affect them.

## Discussion

Differentiation emerged as central to the variations in coparenting relationships with abusive former husbands. For divorce scholars, the notion of differentiating parental and spousal roles is not new. In 1971, Bohannon proposed six stations of divorce, one of which was the coparental divorce. The tasks associated with this stage included learning how to continue as parents while no longer being partners. Minuchin (1974) also emphasized the importance of viewing parental and spousal roles separately. Although difficulty in clearly separating these roles has been linked to high conflict after divorce (Madden-Derdich et al., 1999), this is the first study, to our knowledge, to explicate its central role in women's relationships with abusive former husbands. This is also the first study to identify type of marital violence as an important context for understanding how differentiation relates to coparenting dynamics after divorce. Specifically, we found that

the majority of poorly and well-differentiated former husbands could be distinguished by the type of violence reported in marriage. We turn now to a discussion of these first two groups and then address the third group, absent former husbands.

### *Linking Variations in Coparenting Relationship After Divorce to Types of Marital Violence*

This study links former husbands' ability to differentiate parental and spousal roles after divorce to types of marital violence. Women's experiences with poorly differentiated former husbands are consistent with those reported in the violence literature. Specifically, separation was just one step in a long process of achieving nonviolence, in the face of ongoing controlling intrusion and fear (Hardesty & Ganong, 2006; Wuest et al., 2003). On the basis of mothers' retrospective accounts, former husbands' reluctance to relinquish control (which is consistent with intimate terrorism; Hardesty & Ganong) prevented the renegotiation of separate parental and spousal roles that would allow for effective coparenting relationships. Over time, fathers withdrew or remained only minimally involved in their children's lives.

In contrast, women's experiences with well-differentiated former husbands were more similar to those documented in the divorce literature. They were able to develop safe coparenting relationships, with varying degrees of cooperation, despite no longer being a couple. A history of situational couple violence was more common among these women. Thus, even if these former husbands' actions were the same as poorly differentiated former husbands, mothers interpreted their actions differently, as they were not laden with control. Although conflict was present and boundaries were established and violated, fathers were reportedly able to differentiate their parental and spousal roles, allowing for former spouses to develop respect for each other as parents. The capacity of these fathers to differentiate may be cohort specific. As younger and more recently separated, they may be more informed about developing effective coparenting relationships as a result of the increasing trend among states to mandate parent education programs for divorcing parents (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008).

Although we relied on mothers' accounts only, our results are remarkably consistent with Arendell's (1995) research in which she interviewed divorced fathers, some of whom had been violent. Similar to

our findings regarding poor differentiation, the majority of men in her study did not differentiate parental and spousal roles. Further, their discourse on fathering after divorce was intricately linked to issues of male power and control. Arendell (2001) posited that by perceiving children as "extensions of their mothers" (p. 374), fathers maintained the centrality of their former wives in the coparenting dynamics. Reducing mothers' status to that of the children also allowed fathers to devalue their former wives and dismiss their children's feelings as separate from their mothers. Arendell (1995) also concluded that these fathers' actions (e.g., withholding child support, challenging custody, withdrawing from contact with children) were aimed at reasserting control, with half reporting that they used violence or threats toward this end.

Similar to the well-differentiated former husbands in our study, a minority of men in Arendell's (1995) sample were more flexible in their perceptions of fathering and better able to renegotiate workable relationships after divorce. For these fathers, centrality was given to their children. They assumed responsibility for their relationships with children as evidenced by their actions (e.g., minimizing conflict, paying child support). Parental and spousal roles were deliberately kept separate, which contributed to their ability to parent together. Although two reported violence, it "consisted of an isolated, brief event" (Arendell, 1995, p. 198) and was not part of a pattern of control.

Our study builds upon Arendell's work by identifying fathers' ability to differentiate as central to variations in coparenting relationships, specifically among parents with a history of IPV. Further, we explicitly link types of marital violence to fathers' ability to effectively differentiate their parental and spousal roles after divorce. On the basis of our findings, we propose that coparenting in the context of intimate terrorism versus situational couple violence represents qualitatively distinct experiences rather than a continuum of coparenting experiences. Whiteside (1998) summarized research on coparenting relationships after divorce on a continuum from cooperation to high conflict, with high conflict including some couples with a history of violence. Our findings suggest a different conceptual approach. Specifically, our findings support the use of a typology that is distinguished by the presence or absence of efforts to assert control postseparation. We emphasize that these two groups are not distinguished by

the presence or absence of a history of violence. All women in the current sample experienced IPV in marriage. Instead, we argue that the underlying context of control prevents some former husbands from being able to differentiate parental and spousal roles. This inability to differentiate makes effective coparenting challenging, if not impossible.

The need to conceptualize these as distinct experiences becomes most evident when contrasting the women's actions in the two groups. Consistent with other research (e.g., Wuest et al., 2003), managing coparenting relationships for women with poorly differentiated former husbands was about resisting controlling intrusion and trying to force a separation between parental and spousal roles that would allow children to have relationships with their fathers while keeping themselves safe. These women, all whom experienced intimate terrorism in marriage, relied on formal interventions because informal actions were not effective in protecting them. In contrast, those with well-differentiated former husbands were able to focus on developing effective coparenting relationships, despite conflict, because their context was absent of fear and control. As they experienced little intrusion and increasing mutual respect, they were able to utilize informal actions to renegotiate parental and spousal boundaries and focus on managing parenting instead of former spouse issues.

In contrast to the first two groups, women whose former husbands vacated the coparental role reported more extreme structural changes after separation, including (for some) the complete exit of fathers from the family's boundaries. Their postseparation relationships were related to issues of instability in life (e.g., substance abuse, criminal justice system involvement) rather than type of marital violence. Future research should explore the role of substance abuse, as addiction by former husbands was reported most often by women in this group and may have inhibited fathers' contact with children. Involvement in the criminal justice system because of drug-related issues may also explain why some fathers fled after a severe incident of violence. Despite the absence of former husbands as coparents, the women in this group still struggled to heal from past abuse and the perceived impact of the structural changes on their children.

In sum, although type of marital violence was an important contextual factor influencing women's coparenting relationships with abusive former husbands, issues of instability in life (e.g., substance

abuse) were also important. Geographical distance and time since separation also came into play for two of the women with well-differentiated former husbands who reported intimate terrorism. Given that some women with poorly differentiated former husbands initially used informal actions before realizing that the control would not end, these women may follow similar trajectories over time. On the other hand, it is possible that these are examples of former husbands who were able to discontinue the dynamic of control after separation. Clearly, more research using larger, more diverse samples is needed to more fully understand variations in coparenting relationships. Future research should also untangle the complex interactions among the ability to differentiate roles, types of marital violence, geographical distance, time since separation, and substance abuse.

### *Limitations*

Our findings should be interpreted with caution because of important limitations, namely our reliance on retrospective accounts and potential biases related to self-selection. Research using prospective methods that follow women after they separate or file for divorce would inform our understanding of how coparenting relationships change over time. For example, it is possible that women who experience situational couple violence may reflect more positively on their marriages and the separation process because control was not central to the dynamics. Prospective interviews, however, may capture more nuances related to how violence influences their relationships. Another limitation is that the data on fathers are from the mothers' perspectives. Although mothers' perceptions in and of themselves have important influences on how they coparent, fathers' perceptions must be reflected in future research. Including fathers' perspectives would inform intervention efforts to engage abusive men as fathers (e.g., Williams, Boggess, & Carter, 2001) by illuminating how they construct their relationships with children as separate from their relationships with former wives.

### *Implications for Practice*

Teaching parents how to differentiate parental and spousal roles is a central goal of divorce intervention programs, such as parent education classes. Parents are taught how to separate spousal conflicts from

their roles as coparents in order to facilitate cooperation and minimize conflict (Emery, 1994, p. 45). Our study suggests that this curriculum may be suitable for parents with situational couple violence. These parents would likely benefit from programs that help them redefine boundaries around their parental and spousal roles and teach them conflict resolution and anger management skills (Ver Steegh, 2005). Such curriculum would not be as appropriate for parents with intimate terrorism. Indeed, our study identified the abuser's inability to differentiate parental and spousal roles after divorce as a distinguishing characteristic of intimate terrorism. The abuser's motive to control appeared to drive the dynamics of coparenting relationships and to prevent any mutual renegotiation of boundaries after divorce.

If parents with intimate terrorism are to participate in parent education classes, different curriculum for mothers and fathers may be necessary. For example, education for mothers must include content on coercive control, safety planning, risk assessment, and legal and social resources available to them and their children. For fathers, content must reinforce a rigid and enforced separation between their access to children and their access to mothers. Ideally, in cases of intimate terrorism, parent education would be part of a comprehensive set of programs aimed at prioritizing safety and assessing risk over time if children's relationships with fathers are to continue. Unfortunately, the current legal and social system is set up to distinguish between couples with or without IPV but not different types of IPV (Ver Steegh, 2005). To improve outcomes for divorcing parents and their children, professionals must be trained to recognize different types of IPV and deliver programs that target their unique needs.

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