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Perceived coparenting quality among mutually aggressive parents : the impact of interparental and parental factors

Melissa Gerstle

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**PERCEIVED COPARENTING QUALITY AMONG
MUTUALLY AGGRESSIVE PARENTS:
THE IMPACT OF INTERPARENTAL AND PARENTAL FACTORS**

BY

MELISSA GERSTLE

B.A., Psychology, Trinity University, 2002
M.S., Psychology, University of New Mexico, 2007

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

July, 2011

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ABSTRACT

Coparenting has been found to impact all facets of family functioning, including child and parent adjustment, parenting, and even the interparental relationship itself, and, like many family processes, it can be significantly disrupted by interparental conflict.

Interparental aggression, the extreme negative pole of conflict, has previously been found to adversely affect many parts of the family system, such as child and parent adjustment and the parent-child relationship. Yet, there is a paucity of research investigating the impact of interparental aggression on the coparenting relationship. The present study investigated coparenting processes among parents displaying mutual, situation-specific aggression in a civil court-mandated sample. One hundred and one parents (55 mothers, 46 fathers) completed measures on interpersonal conflict, personality characteristics, parenting, and the coparenting relationship. Stepwise regression analyses indicated that,

for mothers, maternal report of fathers' use of negotiation and mothers' self-reported use of physical aggression were positively related, and fathers' use of psychological aggression negatively related, to perceived coparenting quality. For fathers, paternal report of mothers' use of psychological aggression negatively related to perceived coparenting quality. Report of the other parent's use of psychological aggression predicted the most variance in perceptions of coparenting relationship quality for both mothers and fathers. Parental personality characteristics were not significantly associated with coparenting or parenting styles. Lastly, among a set of parental dyads ($n = 29$), both mothers and fathers viewed themselves as more authoritative and less authoritarian than the other parent and were also "inaccurate" (i.e., divergent from other parent) in reporting the other parent's relative level of authoritative parenting. In conclusion, among mutually aggressive parents, reported use of constructive and destructive conflict resolution tactics in the interparental relationship significantly impacted the perceived quality of the coparenting relationship. Additional research is needed to further investigate the differential impact that type of interparental aggression can have on coparenting dynamics and parent and child outcomes in both non-forensic and forensic populations. The present study also examined the relevance of the coparenting construct with a more diverse sample than is typically utilized, and greater study is needed to continue expanding our understanding of this burgeoning concept across cultures.

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Introduction

Coparenting, the collaborative aspect of parenting, signifies the level of coordination between caregivers, and it has a powerful impact not only on children but also on overall family functioning. Whether in dyadic, triadic, or polyadic form (McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rao, 2004; Van Egeren, 2004), the coparenting relationship is vital to the family process, being more predictive, compared to general interparental relationship quality, of parenting and child outcomes (Feinberg, Kan, & Hetherington, 2007).

Although coparenting is integral to dynamics within the family, the emergence of coparenting as a distinct construct is relatively recent. Prior to the introduction of the concept, any joint parenting behaviors were incorporated into the overall interparental relationship, most frequently, the marital relationship. However, coparenting takes place apart from lawful agreements, occurring when two individuals mutually agree (or are socially expected) to undertake conjoint responsibility for a child (Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004). Given the importance of coparenting, it is detrimental to the family, particularly the child, when the coparenting relationship is characterized by negativity and antipathy (Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1996; Kitzmann, 2000; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998). Ineffective coparenting has been shown, in both cross-sectional and longitudinal research, to impact negatively not only child adjustment but all aspects of the family, including the parents' own adjustment, the interparental relationship, and their parenting skills (Feinberg, 2003). Further damage can result when interparental aggression impedes coparenting success (e.g., Katz & Low, 2004). The present study sought to extend this emerging work on coparenting in a sample of mutually aggressive parents along three avenues: one, to expand upon the range of conflict studied and focus on perceived

coparenting quality in the presence of mutual psychological and/or physical aggression while also accounting for interparental negotiation; two, to examine associations between perceptions of coparenting and parental personality characteristics; and three, to extend coparenting research to include ethnically diverse families of lower socioeconomic status (SES).

Theoretical Foundations of Coparenting

Origins of Coparenting Construct

The notion of coparenting emerged from two main theoretical camps: psychoanalytic/dynamic and family systems. Psychoanalytic theory contends that parents must expand their interactions to include the child while also setting limits on these interactions in order to foster healthy child development (Lidz, 1963). Spurred on by these ideas, Weissman and Cohen (1985) incorporated concepts taken from self-psychology, specifically ideas of selfobjects (i.e., objects psychologically experienced as part of the self instead of separate and independent and/or used in service of the self; Kohut, 1971) and put forth the idea that the relationship involved in coparenting is distinct from the libidinal object needs of the two adults. They posited that this self-object relationship between parents, which emerges due to the anticipation of the parent-child bond, evolves as parents engage in the act of childrearing. Weissman and Cohen also assert that, in addition to coparenting growth, there is a continuous feedback process between self and selfobjects, resulting in ongoing changes and expansions in the self for both parent and child. Thus, the coparenting relationship not only provides a framework of consistency and support, becoming a significant source of affirmation within the parenting experience, it supplies a base for the psychological growth and

development of the parents as well. The coparenting relationship then becomes incorporated into part of the parents' personal history.

The second theoretical perspective that examines the interactions between parents and offers a conceptualization of coparenting is family systems theory (e.g., S. Minuchin, 1974; P. Minuchin, 1985). Proponents of family systems theory conceive of the coparenting relationship as one of many executive subsystems (another being the interparental relationship) in which parents collectively preside over and manage the behaviors of individual family members and the interactions among family members as well as regulate overall family outcomes. To view the family as a social system affirms mutual interdependence not simply among individuals but among relationships (Gjerde, 1986).

There are some similarities and some important distinctions between these two perspectives. Inherent in both perspectives is that, in order for cooperative coparenting to occur, parents must steadfastly acknowledge, respect, and value each other's parenting roles and tasks (Weissman & Cohen, 1985; S. Munchin, 1974). In addition, both approaches posit that coparenting is distinct from the marital or intimate partner relationship and can endure in families even if the romantic interparental relationship has ended, implicitly presuming that coparenting only occurs between romantic partners. However, the family systems theory goes further to argue that the two relationships must be kept distinct, emphasizing the establishment of boundaries between the relationships. Another distinction between the two approaches is that the psychoanalytic/dynamic perspective views the relationship created around coparenting as more of a subsidiary of the intimate partner relationship, rather than of equal importance as posited by the family

systems perspective. Finally and most notably, proponents of family systems theory view the coparenting relationship in terms of interactions among multiple subsystems, whereas psychoanalytic/dynamic theory emphasizes intra-actions within individuals.

Although trends in coparenting research have been informed by both psychoanalytic/dynamic and family systems theories, coparenting research does not merely unite these distinct philosophies; it extends the field of study with its unique focus on the interparental relationship that is specific to child-centered issues (Van Egeren, 2003). This area of study represents the fusion of several research disciplines by investigating the interrelation of marriage (more broadly, the interparental relationship), parenting, and child development. In the past researchers have remarked on the tacit agreement among social scientists to partition the family for study (i.e., family sociologists and marriage, psychologists and parent-child relations) without much consideration to the connectedness of these family subsystems (Aldous, 1977; Belsky, 1981; Gable, Belsky, & Crnic, 1992). The introduction of the coparenting construct exemplified a novel endeavor in the exploration of the interrelatedness of the marital and parent-child relationships.

In addition, although the study of the marital relationship has come to include an emphasis on parenting, the coparenting construct is more suitable for examining joint parenting for several reasons. One, it acknowledges that the coparenting experience is related but distinct from experiences in the marriage (Van Egeren, 2004), affording the juxtaposition of discrepant internal and external observations. Two, coparenting processes have been shown to continue even after the dissolution of marriage (McHale et al., 2004), thus making the coparenting construct relevant for families regardless of

family structure. Three, the coparenting relationship has been shown to mediate the effects of marriage on parenting confidence and parent-child interactions (Floyd, Gilliom, & Costigan, 1998) as well as on parental negativity and adolescent adjustment (Feinberg et al., 2007).

Components of Coparenting

At present, there is no prevailing framework for how best to conceptualize the coparenting construct. However, Feinberg (2003), in drawing upon the available literature, proposed a four-component model of coparenting, consisting of the components: division of childcare labor, childrearing agreement, interparental solidarity, and joint family management. In general, this model posits that difficulties in the interparental relationship can disrupt the parent-child relationship as well as the coparenting relationship.

First, the component of division of labor relates to not only the daily tasks, duties, and responsibilities involved in childcare and household maintenance but also to continuing responsibilities for child-related financial, legal, and medical cares (Feinberg, 2003). This aspect of the model seems the least studied in coparenting research. In the marital literature the degree of traditionality in household division of labor did not appear to predict marriage maintenance or deterioration (Belsky & Hsieh, 1998); thus, it may not be the inequality in the division of responsibilities per se, but the disparity between perception and expectation. Discrepancies between mothers' expectations concerning childcare responsibilities and their reported experiences (i.e., expectancy violations) were significantly related to satisfaction in the postpartum period (Ruble, Fleming, Hackel, & Stangor, 1988).

In addition, the perception of fairness in childrearing contributions has been linked to marital quality (Terry, McHugh, & Noller, 1991) and marital satisfaction (Wilkie, Ferree, & Ratcliff, 1998), and the perceived equality in division of labor, in comparison to other couples, has been associated with psychological well-being of parents (Himsel & Goldberg, 2003). In general, a more flexible arrangement of the division of labor may be preferable in order to adjust for perceptions of fairness and to adapt to the changing needs of the family; however, for parents who engage in high levels of hostility and low levels of negotiation, a more structured arrangement may reduce opportunity for conflict (Feinberg, 2003).

The second component of the coparenting relationship is the level of interparental agreement on childrearing practices. Childrearing practices encompass a wide range of topics, including emotional and behavioral norms, discipline, educational standards and priorities, moral values, religious and spiritual preferences, safety practices, and peer associations (Feinberg, 2003). Parental agreement surrounding childrearing has been found to be related to children's psychological functioning during preschool and early school age (Block, Block, & Morrison, 1981) and also to be associated with psychological functioning in adolescence (Vaughn, Block, & Block, 1988). In fact, childrearing disagreements, compared to nonchild disagreements and global marital adjustment, uniquely contributed to the prediction of child behavior problems (Jouriles et al., 1991; Mahoney, Jouriles, & Scavone, 1997).

Furthermore, parental disagreement on childrearing issues has been positively correlated with objective observations of the presence of family discord and conflict and has subsequently predicted marital dissolution (Block et al., 1981). Indeed, parental

reports of emotional and behavioral disturbance in their children were related to marital discord only via spousal conflict over childrearing (Snyder, Klein, Gdowski, Faulstich, & LaCombe, 1988). Thus, agreement between parents on childrearing practices, in creating a more structured and predictable environment for children (Block et al., 1981), may contribute to coparenting in ways similar to perceived equity of division of labor, such as by reducing opportunities for interparental conflict.

Thirdly, interparental solidarity refers to the level of support between parents. The umbrella of support includes such features as affirmation of each other's parental competency, acknowledgement and respect of each other's contributions, and, most importantly, the degree to which each parent upholds the other's parental authority and decisions. Research suggests that parents who exhibit an ability to compromise and to resolve disputes in the interparental relationship have higher levels of parental cooperation and closeness (Camara & Resnick, 1988, 1989). The converse of a supportive coparenting relationship is not merely the absence of support but also the presence of damaging behaviors, such as criticism, disparagement, and blame (Feinberg, 2003). Of the four components, this component most reflects the psychoanalytic conceptualization of coparenting, which involves the ability and resiliency of parents to acknowledge, respect, and value each other's roles and tasks (Weissman & Cohen, 1985). Furthermore, this level of interparental solidarity may become particularly salient during periods of elevated parental conflict. Parents in marital relationships that deteriorated over time engaged in significantly more unsupportive coparenting compared to parents in marriages that did not decline (Belsky & Hsieh, 1998).

Indeed, an important antithesis to the degree of support in coparenting is the level of undermining of one another's parenting efforts, which can happen in the presence or absence of the second parent (Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001; McHale, 1995). Mutual support and undermining has been found in both nuclear (Margolin et al., 2001; McHale, 1995) and postdivorce families, regardless of custodial arrangements (Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, & Dornbusch, 1993; Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1990), and has been evidenced by both mothers and fathers. Parents who used conflict tactics involving verbal attacks, physical expressions of anger, or avoidance of the other parent were less likely to develop a cooperative coparenting relationship (Camara & Resnick, 1988, 1989). In triadic interactions research has found that fathers supported mothers' parenting efforts twice as often as the reverse but that fathers and mothers were equally more or less likely to act in unsupportive ways (Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995). Moreover, the relative proportion of supportive to undermining endeavors has been associated with child adjustment (Maccoby et al., 1993). In fact, the level of negativity present during a marital discussion was related to behaviors in a subsequent triadic interaction with the child in that both mothers and fathers exhibited less support and engagement and displayed a less democratic coparenting style in the subsequent interaction (Kitzmann, 2000), which may indirectly influence child adjustment. Therefore, the presence or absence of supportive behaviors and undermining behaviors may be a crucial aspect of coparenting in bridging associations between poor marital or interparental relations and child adjustment.

Finally, the fourth component, joint family management, is the most complex of the core coparenting relationship components and is the only component truly subsumed

under one of the two prevalent coparenting theories (i.e., family systems). Proposed by Feinberg (2003) to capture more fully the final core component, joint family management encompasses several familial interactions. Parents must regulate: one, their behavior (i.e., their thoughts, feelings, actions) toward each other; two, the interplay of their behavior as a unit in larger family interactions; and three, the level of involvement from other family members in the interparental relationship. The primary goal of joint family management is to maintain successful executive subsystems, balancing dyadic and triadic interactions in the context of whole family dynamics, though these subsystems can be disrupted in many ways (e.g., interparental conflict, coalitions). Studies have found that higher levels of overt conflict in the parental dyad were associated with greater involvement of hostile-competitive coparenting in a family play task, even after controlling for reported marital distress. In other words, interparental conflict was related to high levels of behavioral competition and verbal sparring between parents, with a reduced child-centered focus, in a triadic interaction (McHale, 1995). In addition, interparental hostility, operationalized as destructive conflict tactics (e.g., contempt, belligerence) was found to be inversely related to the level of coparenting interaction, response, and cooperation and to be directly related to coparenting disagreement. In other words, higher levels of interparental hostility were associated with greater disagreement and less interactiveness, responsiveness, and cooperation in the coparenting relationship (Katz & Gottman, 1996). Unfortunately, this study did not examine the impact of constructive conflict tactics on coparenting processes.

Moreover, families in distress have been observed to exhibit lower levels of overall alliance behaviors, with the marital alliance occupying a significantly lower

position than other family dyads, and to display greater discrepancies between mother-child and father-child alliances than did nondistressed families (Gilbert, Christensen, & Margolin, 1984). Furthermore, power imbalances within the family can disrupt joint family management. More nonegalitarian patterns of power in the parental dyad were associated with more discrepant levels of parental involvement in triadic interactions, even after controlling for parental report of distress (McHale, 1995). In sum, parents' ability to regulate familial interactions, including the interparental relationship, may be compromised by elevated levels of conflict and hostility.

Interparental Aggression

The evolving research on the distinct construct of coparenting and the burgeoning development of an organizational framework has greatly advanced the field of coparenting. The notion of coparenting, although it ideally represents collaboration between parents, has typically been studied in its more dysfunctional forms, when attempts at collaboration have failed and have resulted in ineffective coparenting. However, there remains a paucity of research on coparenting processes in the presence of extreme interparental conflict, which frequently escalates into interparental aggression. According to conflict theorists (e.g., Deutsch, 1973; Simmel, 1908/1955), social conflict is ubiquitous and inevitable. Conflict is inherent in marriage (Fincham & Bradbury, 1991) and in family life in general (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Straus & Smith, 1992). It can exist even amidst harmonious coparenting and can simply reflect a "perceived incompatibility of goals" (Fincham & Bradbury, 1991, p. 5). Although three-fifths of divorced parents were found to endorse supportive and cooperative coparenting relationships, one-fifth of parents reported being relentlessly embattled in conflict

(Whiteside, 1998). Indeed, there is a substantial body of literature investigating the effects of marital discord on children, and reviews of this literature reveal that marital discord and its related high levels of interparental conflict negatively affects children (Emery, 1982; Erel & Burman, 1995), particularly if conflict centers around the child (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Grych & Fincham, 1993; Jouriles et al., 1991). Conflict can impact, both directly and indirectly, children, parents, and relationships within the family.

Impact of Interparental Anger on Children

Direct Effects. Overall, studies have found that, from as early as infancy, children evidence distress from exposure to interadult conflict (E. M. Cummings, 1994). For instance, when examining expressions of anger and affection in naturally occurring and simulated situations, mothers who had been trained as expert observers found that their toddlers were significantly distressed by episodes of naturally occurring anger and had increased distress if the episode involved physical aggression (i.e., hitting) than if no physical attack occurred (E. M. Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1981). In addition, a five-year follow-up study found that mothers reported that the now school-aged children responded selectively to interparental conflict (E. M. Cummings, Zahn-Waxler, & Radke-Yarrow, 1984). Furthermore, laboratory studies have found that children generally evidence greater distress witnessing an angry interaction compared to a warm interaction (E. M. Cummings, 1987; E. M. Cummings, Iannotti, & Zahn-Waxler, 1985; El-Sheikh & Cummings, 1992; El-Sheikh, Cummings, & Goetsch, 1989). Besides displaying greater distress, toddlers have also been found to demonstrate increased aggression with a same-aged peer following exposure to background anger, with boys demonstrating more aggression and girls displaying more distress following exposure to

anger. In addition, after a second angry interaction, toddlers exhibited even higher levels of distress and aggression (E. M. Cummings et al., 1985). Similar to toddlers, preschoolers demonstrated increased aggression (verbal) with a same-aged peer after witnessing simulated interadult anger (E. M. Cummings, 1987). Physiological indices indicated that preschoolers showed increased systolic blood pressure in response to anger (El-Sheikh et al., 1989) and that preschoolers who had the option of terminating exposure to a simulated angry interaction displayed greater physiological reactivity than did preschoolers who did not have availability of control (El-Sheikh & Cummings, 1992).

Moreover, as conceptualizations of anger and its role in conflict expanded, different modes of expressions of anger (e.g., verbal, nonverbal, destructive/constructive) as well as the level of conflict resolution began to be examined (E. M. Cummings, Ballard, & El-Sheikh, 1991; E. M. Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, & Lake, 1991; E. M. Cummings, Simpson, & Wilson, 1993; E. M. Cummings, Vogel, Cummings, & El-Sheikh, 1989). Studies found that children perceived videotaped segments of nonverbal, verbal, and hostile (verbal-physical) expressions of anger all as negative and as significantly more negative than friendly control conditions. In addition, all modes of anger elicited negative emotions, with expressions of anger involving a physical component eliciting the most negative responses (E. M. Cummings, Ballard, & El-Sheikh, 1991; E. M. Cummings et al., 1989).

In terms of conflict resolution, research has suggested that children of all ages perceived unresolved anger (e.g., continued fighting, silent treatment) as more negative than resolved anger (e.g., compromise), and unresolved anger elicited greater anger and distress (i.e., sadness, fear) in children than did resolved anger (E. M. Cummings,

Ballard, El-Sheikh, & Lake, 1991; E. M. Cummings et al., 1989, 1993; El-Sheikh & Cummings, 1995). Results were mixed in regards to gender effects and negative emotional responses to unresolved anger. At times, boys displayed more anger (E. M. Cummings et al., 1989) but also more sadness (E. M. Cummings et al., 1993) than did girls. In a sample of 5- to 19-year-olds, unresolved anger elicited greater sadness in girls compared to boys for children under age 10; in contrast, unresolved anger elicited greater sadness in boys than in girls for children aged 10 and older (E. M. Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, & Lake, 1991).

Taken together, these findings indicate that, from infancy to adolescence, children evidence distress from exposure to interadult anger, regardless of the form of anger expression (i.e., verbal, nonverbal, hostile). In addition, if conflict from the angry interaction is unresolved, children evidence increased anger and distress. Notably, children from families in which mothers endorsed higher levels of interparental physical conflict tactics and greater child behavior problems evidenced greater distress to interadult anger (E. M. Cummings et al., 1989), and children of parents who reported higher levels of interparental physical conflict and marital dissatisfaction evidenced heightened involvement and greater reactivity to simulated conflicts between their mother and a stranger than did children whose parents did not endorse such a history (J. S. Cummings, Pellegrini, Notarius, & Cummings, 1989).

Indirect Effects. Besides the direct effects of expressed anger on children, interparental conflict can also indirectly impact children as well as overall family functioning through the parent-child relationship and, potentially, the relatively unexplored coparenting relationship. Several hypotheses have been posited to account for

the interrelatedness of the interparental relationship and the parent-child relationship, one of which has received considerable support in the literature: the spillover hypothesis. This hypothesis suggests that there is a positive, or direct, correlation between the quality of the marital relationship and the parent-child relationship. In terms of marital conflict, this hypothesis claims that a highly conflictual marital relationship would be linked to increased discord in the parent-child relationship. In a meta-analytic review of studies examining the association between marital and parent-child relations, Erel and Burman (1995) demonstrated clear support for this hypothesis, suggesting that there exists a direct correlation between the quality of the marital relationship and the quality of the parent-child relationship. In addition, longitudinal investigations (Gerard, Krishnakumar, & Buehler, 2006) found that spillover processes are relatively stable from middle childhood to adolescence and, once established, endure over time and that children play a significant role in sustaining established spillover processes. Consequently, an interparental relationship in which parents engage in high levels of conflict would be associated with poor parent-child relationships.

Nature of Interparental Aggression

Although research has shown that interparental conflict negatively impacts children both directly and indirectly via the parent-child relationship, many of these studies rely on parental self-report of marital quality and adjustment as a proxy for interparental conflict, disregarding the nature and intensity of the conflict. Conflict can take many forms, spanning a wide range of behaviors, and aggression and violence is at the negative extreme of this conflict continuum (E. M. Cummings, 1998). Although conflict may be an inevitable aspect of family life (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Straus &

Smith, 1992), aggression is not. Aggression represents intentional acts that inflict psychological or physical harm and is synonymous with abuse (Straus, Hamby, & Warren, 2003). Physical expressions of interadult anger elicit the most negative responses in children (E. M. Cummings, Ballard, & El-Sheikh, 1991), and violence, having the capacity to influence independently child adjustment, is significantly more impactful than simply high levels of marital conflict (McNeal & Amato, 1998). Therefore, an important consideration with respect to coparenting and interparental aggression regards the type of aggression present in the interparental dyad. Johnson (1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Kelly & Johnson, 2008) advocated for four distinct types of aggression within the intimate partner relationship: Coercive Controlling Violence, Violent Resistance, Situational Couple Violence, and Separation-Instigated Violence.

Coercive Controlling Violence, formerly known as patriarchal/intimate terrorism, involves the systematic control of one's intimate partner through the use of violence, emotional abuse, economic control, coercion, and isolation; its counterpart, Violent Resistance, denotes an immediate reaction to a violent, coercively controlling partner that is intended to protect from injury (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). These two types of violence are compatible (though more gender neutral) with the feminist conceptualization of intimate partner violence. From a feminist approach, intimate partner violence denotes violence that is persistent and severe and is intended to dominate and control women through use of intimidation and coercion (R. E. Dobash & Dobash, 1979; R. P. Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992). The use of terms such as "male batterer" and "wife abuse" underscores the view of male dominance as central to intimate partner violence (Kurz, 1989). Consistent with the feminist approach, Weston, Temple, and Marshall

(2005) found that, even within the context of mutually violent intimate relationships, more than half of the relationships involved men as the primary perpetrator of violence, engaging in more frequent and/or more severe violence. Notably, the authors interviewed only women, obtaining their individual perceptions of the violence dynamic in the intimate relationship.

Situational Couple Violence, which is more consistent with the family violence approach, involves mutual physical aggression, most frequently at low levels with little likelihood of escalation. This type of violence arises from the context of a specific argument and is not connected to a general pattern of control; it is the most common type of physical aggression in the general population of married and cohabiting partners (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). From a family violence framework, intimate partner violence signifies a larger social problem, impelled by societal norms condoning violence and inherent family conflict (Straus & Smith, 1992). Although proponents of this approach acknowledge that a culture of male dominance may engender violence (Straus & Smith, 1992), they highlight that intimate partner violence is equally initiated by both men and women, though women may suffer greater injury (Stets & Straus, 1990). In accordance with the family violence perspective, studies of community samples have shown that most violence in intimate relationships is mutual (e.g., Capaldi & Crosby, 1997). In fact, Caetano, Ramisetty-Mikler, and Field (2005) found that, for over 1,600 married and cohabiting White, Black, and Hispanic couples in the contiguous United States, most couples reporting violence reported bidirectional violence in which both partners perpetrated violence.

The fourth type of violence, Separation-Instigated Violence, is also seen symmetrically in both men and women and denotes the occurrence of violence when partners are in the midst of separation and when there have been no prior violent incidences, thereby representing an anomaly in the relationship. The broad distinction between Coercive Controlling Violence and Situational Couple Violence has received general empirical support in the literature (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003; Simpson, Doss, Wheeler, & Christensen, 2007; Williams & Frieze, 2005), with support for differentiation of the four types still in the early phases. In similar support of this classification, Caetano et al. (2005) found that different factors predicted the occurrence of unidirectional intimate partner violence (in which only one partner perpetrates violence) and bidirectional, or mutual, intimate partner violence. Importantly, this proposed distinction in intimate partner violence could extend to the interparental relationship and have implications for child outcomes.

In examining these four distinct types of violence posited to occur within the intimate partner relationship (Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Kelly & Johnson, 2008), in cases of Coercive Controlling Violence and Violent Resistance, a coparenting relationship may not be obtainable. In considering the four hypothetical components of coparenting (Feinberg, 2003), the central feature of control inherent in Coercive Controlling Violence as well as Violent Resistance would significantly alter each aspect of the coparenting relationship. One, an interparental relationship dominated by one parent would likely result in a wholly unbalanced division of labor in which perceptions of fairness would be trivial. Two, in terms of childrearing agreement, there would be little need to reach a consensus on childrearing practices because the controlling parent would

make the final decision as head of household. Three, there would be a lack of interparental solidarity as there would be an implicit expectation of supportive coparenting behaviors by the oppressed parent without any indication of reciprocity. Indeed, the controlling parent may undermine the other parent's coparenting behaviors in order to assert further control. Four, the final coparenting component, joint family management, would essentially be absent; there would be an intentional nonegalitarian distribution of power without efforts to work towards balanced family interactions. Most notably, attempts at a coparenting relationship might encourage another avenue through which further abuse could potentially be perpetrated (Hardesty, 2002).

Furthermore, coparenting is a dynamic process, but it would struggle to withstand the instability present in families experiencing Coercive Controlling Violence and/or Violent Resistance. For instance, mothers and fathers may exhibit differential coparenting behaviors, and maternal coparenting behaviors could readily shift, depending on the presence of the father. Holden and Ritchie (1991), through interviews of women residing in shelters, found that, compared to a control group, mothers involved in violent relationships endorsed an increased likelihood of modifying childrearing behaviors, but they did not modify the behaviors in a consistent direction. In fact, mothers reported that, although they employed different disciplinary practices than their husbands, they also altered their childrearing behaviors in the presence of their husbands. Thus, coparenting in the presence of interparental aggression characterized by Coercive Controlling Violence and/or Violent Resistance may not be achievable as a true joint parental venture. Therefore, based on the improbability of having an effective coparenting relationship in the presence of Coercive Controlling Violence and/or Violent Resistance,

the present study focused only on parental dyads exhibiting Situational Couple Violence or Separation-Instigated Violence in order to afford the full range of possible coparenting relationships.

Impact of Interparental Aggression on Children: Domestic Violence Research

Approximately 9% of youth in the United States have witnessed parental violence (Zinzow et al., 2009). The investigation of the impact of interparental violence on children has followed two primary paths. The first path examines the concept of domestic violence. It is an expansion of the research on marital physical violence, broadened to include the study of potential effects on the children concerned. Typically, this research involves clinical samples of women and children in shelters or other victim advocacy centers, and these studies primarily assess variables of interest through maternal report. In general, the predominant focus is on the impact on child functioning of witnessing paternal-to-maternal violence.

The second path also examines the impact of violence on children, but it investigates a wider scope of violent behaviors, including mild to severe psychological and physical modes of aggression. This type of research is an extension of the work on interparental conflict. If marital aggression is at the negative extreme of marital conflict (E. M. Cummings, 1998), then interparental aggression would be the negative extreme of interparental conflict. In contrast to domestic violence studies, this research frequently involves nonclinical (i.e., community-based) samples and often assesses maternal, paternal, and child report as well as coding of overt child behaviors. Overall, the focus of these studies is on the impact on children of witnessing more mutual interparental psychological and physical aggression.

Studies of the impact of domestic violence on children conducted in clinically-based locations (e.g., shelters) have relied heavily on maternal report and have found that children who have witnessed domestic violence are reported to exhibit elevated levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems in comparison to normative samples (Fantuzzo et al., 1991; Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Jouriles, Norwood, McDonald, Vincent, & Mahoney, 1996; O'Keefe, 1994; Smith, Berthelesen, & O'Connor, 1997; Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson, & Zak, 1985). Conversely, a review of studies investigating the impact of witnessing domestic violence on children (Kolbo, Blakely, & Engleman, 1996) found mixed outcomes regarding children's behavioral, emotional, social, cognitive, and physical functioning in clinically-based samples. When the scope of the review was confined to more recently published studies (i.e., conducted after 1986), the end product provided less equivocal results than previous studies for behavioral and emotional functioning, indicating that children who witness domestic violence display greater behavioral and emotional difficulties than comparison groups. In contrast, inferences regarding social, cognitive, and physical functioning remained inconclusive (Kolbo et al., 1996).

Thus, the wealth of findings on the deleterious impact of witnessing domestic violence on children is less straightforward than is typically portrayed in the domestic violence literature. One potential reason for these somewhat equivocal findings is the significant comorbidity of domestic violence and parent-child aggression (Appel & Holden, 1998), an association which is often overlooked in research. The witnessing of interparental aggression was highly correlated with parent-to-child aggression, which was in turn related to child behavior problems, but the witnessing of interparental aggression

was not directly associated with child behavior problems (Jouriles, Barling, & O'Leary, 1987). Furthermore, although the amount of violence was positively associated with father-to-child aggression, it was the amount of aggregate interparental violence and mother-to-child aggression that significantly predicted child behavior problems (O'Keefe, 1994).

Another potential reason for these somewhat equivocal findings relates to the distinct forms of violence proposed by Johnson (1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Kelly & Johnson, 2008). Given that the typical conception of domestic violence may represent four distinct types or contexts of intrafamilial violence, it is unclear whether prior research investigating the deleterious effects of domestic violence on children included samples involving Coercive Controlling Violence, Violent Resistance, Situational Couple Violence, or Separation-Instigated Violence, or some combination thereof. Johnson (1995) found that boys in families with violence analogous to Coercive Controlling Violence had significantly more adjustment difficulties than boys who experienced violence similar to Situational Couple Violence, with boys in families with Separation-Instigated Violence or no violence having the fewest problems. Therefore, the results from studies reviewed (Kolbo et al., 1996) may have been confounded by sampling a mixture of these distinct types of violence, which may have a differential impact on child outcomes.

Impact of Interparental Aggression on Children: Marital Aggression Research

Studies of the impact of marital aggression on children conducted with community-based samples have found comparable results to those with clinical samples in that children who witness interparental aggression reportedly exhibit increased levels

of externalizing and internalizing behavior problems (El-Sheikh, Cummings, Kouros, Elmore-Staton, & Buckhalt, 2008; Jouriles et al., 1996). One hypothesis put forth to explain these associations between marital aggression and child behavior problems is the emotional security theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994). This theory posits that children's responses to marital conflict are guided by implications of marital conflict for their emotional security and reflect the meaning of conflict for family relations. In other words, children implicitly evaluate marital conflict based on the appraised impact it has to contribute to or undermine their sense of emotional security within the family.

Much of the research supporting this theory has been conducted using analog research (e.g., home diaries) with parents engaging in general interparental conflict and has found that children react differently to parental use of constructive (e.g., compromise, support, affection) and destructive (e.g., threats, insults, hostility, defensiveness, withdrawal) conflict tactics (E. M. Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2003; E. M. Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp, & Dukewich, 2002; Goeke-Morey, Cummings, & Papp, 2007). In particular, exposure to destructive conflict tactics and negative parental emotionality increased the likelihood of child aggression, presumably because children perceive these methods as threats to their emotional security (E. M. Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2004). Notably, for conflicts in which children were present, parents displayed increased negative emotion and greater levels of destructive tactics, with the subject of conflict more often centering on children, than for conflicts in which children were absent (Papp, Cummings, & Goeke-Morey, 2002). Thus, by being present during interparental conflict, children were exposed to more potential threats to their emotional security and actually may have altered the use of parental conflict tactics.

With families reporting interparental aggression, in the context of everyday conflict, past marital aggression was related to the use of less constructive tactics among mothers, and it predicted less positive emotionality for mothers and more negative emotionality for both mothers and fathers (E. M. Cummings, Kouros, & Papp, 2007). Furthermore, the level of children's emotional security mediated the relationship between interparental aggression and child behavior problems such that higher levels of aggression against the father and higher levels of aggression against the mother were positively related to emotional insecurity, which was associated with higher levels of externalizing and internalizing problems as well as posttraumatic stress symptomatology. Aggression against either parent yielded similar child outcomes (El-Sheikh et al., 2008).

In conclusion, studies consisting of clinical as well as nonclinical samples have found that children who witness interparental violence exhibit increased internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, though results with clinical samples have been mixed. Possible explanations for discrepant findings relate to the comorbidity of domestic violence and parent-child aggression or to the mixed sampling of distinct types of violence. Implicit in both of these literatures is the negative impact of aggression on parenting and the parent-child relationship. In research on interparental conflict there has been some debate regarding the interrelatedness of marital and parent-child relations and whether they are directly or inversely correlated. However, it is widely assumed that interparental aggression directly influences parent-child relations in a negative manner (e.g., Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Trickett & Kuczynski, 1986), consistent with spillover effects. Yet, it is uncertain how interparental aggression may spillover and impact another familial relationship, the coparenting relationship.

Coparenting in the Context of Interparental Aggression

Only one study has investigated the interrelatedness between interparental violence and coparenting. Katz and Low (2004) examined the associations among interparental violence, positive coparenting (i.e., cooperation, positive affect), hostile-withdrawn coparenting (i.e., negativity, disengagement, withdrawal), and child outcomes. Using a community-based sample, findings suggested that parent-reported interparental violence was inversely associated with observations of positive coparenting and directly associated with observations of hostile-withdrawn coparenting during a family interaction. In addition, both interparental violence and hostile-withdrawn coparenting predicted maternal report of child delinquency, aggression, anxiety/depression, and withdrawal. In fact, hostile-withdrawn coparenting mediated the relationship between interparental violence and child anxiety/depression such that, once hostile-withdrawn coparenting was taken into account, interparental violence no longer significantly predicted child anxiety/depression (Katz & Low, 2004).

Although this study is unique in its investigation of coparenting in the context of mutual interparental physical aggression, one limitation to the study is that it did not explicitly assess levels of psychological aggression. As violence is typically preceded by psychological aggression (O'Leary, Malone, & Tyree, 1994), these parents might be engaging in elevated levels of interparental psychological aggression as well as physical aggression. Furthermore, although 64% of parents in the study reported no instances of violence, they may be psychologically aggressive towards each other, which would interfere with coparenting. Therefore, interparental psychological and physical aggression

both seem to impact coparenting adversely, though no study to date has explicitly examined the influence of both aspects on coparenting processes.

In sum, there is an extreme dearth of studies examining coparenting in the presence of interparental aggression, and the one study that did examine interparental violence and coparenting focused only on physical aggression, neglecting psychological forms. The scarcity of coparenting research among aggressive parents is most likely due to the prior lack of differentiation of types of interparental aggression and a reluctance to seemingly condone a coparenting relationship between perpetrators and victims of domestic violence. The primary aim of the present study was to investigate the interrelatedness of the perceived quality of the coparenting relationship and the degree of mutual physical and/or psychological aggression. The study also examined positive interparental elements (i.e., negotiation conflict tactics). Although the study included parents exhibiting a range in frequency and severity of aggression, it was limited to parents mutually exhibiting this aggression (i.e., Situational Couple or Separation-Instigated Violence).

Influence of Parental Personality Characteristics on Coparenting

Although the coparenting relationship is a (typically) dyadic interaction, parents bring individual differences to the interaction, including personality traits that can exert enduring causal effects on behavior. Only a few studies have examined the associations between parent personality and coparenting, though none with families in high conflict. For instance, Stright and Bales (2003) found that unsupportive coparenting during an arranged triadic interaction was negatively related to maternal personality adjustment and that maternal education and maternal personality adjustment were predictive of

supportive coparenting during the interaction. In addition, maternal personality adjustment was related to maternal perceptions of partner support in the coparenting relationship (Stright & Bales, 2003). Moreover, Belsky, Crnic, and Gable (1995) investigated the impact of parent personality characteristics on coparenting by examining the level of similarity between parents' personality styles and found that parents who reported similar personality traits exhibited fewer negative coparenting events. These studies, though informative as to the link between parent personality and coparenting, were conducted with parents experiencing normative levels of conflict.

In order to investigate parental personality characteristics and high levels of interparental conflict, it is necessary to consider forensic populations. Prior to the introduction of the coparenting construct, coparenting behaviors were incorporated into the overall interparental relationship and initially garnered scientific interests only in relation to intense interparental conflict (e.g., marital separation, divorce; Emery, 1982). As coparenting research progressed, interest remained centered on these exemplars of interparental conflict but with a focus now on the capacity of separating or divorcing parents to coparent successfully. Part of this line of research examined what personality characteristics contribute to prolonged child custody battles (an approximation of the integrity of the coparenting relationship). These studies found that child custody litigants typically elevated on the Histrionic, Narcissistic, and Compulsive personality scales on the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory (Lampel, 1999; McCann et al., 2001). Although interparental aggression was not explicitly examined, a high number of custody and access disputes involve allegations of interparental violence (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). To date, no study has examined the associations between parental personality characteristics

and coparenting in the presence of interparental aggression. However, extant studies have shown that parent personality, particularly maternal personality, is inversely related to unsupportive coparenting and that specific personality characteristics (i.e., Histrionic, Narcissistic, Compulsive) are elevated in parents demonstrating high levels of interparental conflict that may occasionally escalate to aggression. Therefore, the secondary aim of the present study was to evaluate the associations between parental personality characteristics and parenting/coparenting measures among mutually aggressive parents.

Coparenting Among Diverse Samples

Coparenting research, although in its infancy, has made great strides in recent years, yet there are some significant limitations. First, studies investigating coparenting typically include married, or formerly married, parents. Few studies have examined the construct of coparenting in cohabitating or nonmarital unions. This gap in the research is significant as perceptions of coparenting are directly associated with paternal involvement in childrearing activities (Futris & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007; McBride & Rane, 1998), and the level of involvement of fathers with their children differs dramatically depending on whether the children were born into marriage, cohabitation, or a nonmarital arrangement (Seltzer, 2000).

A second limitation in coparenting research is that the studies lack diverse samples, both in terms of ethnicity and SES. The majority of the extant coparenting literature has been conducted with middle-class, Caucasian families with parents who are well-educated. For example, in a selection of coparenting studies all employing a measure of coparenting quality, 77% to 95% of the parents were Caucasian (Bearss &

Eyberg, 1998; Bonds & Gondoli, 2007; Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, & Sokolowski, 2008), and, of those studies that inquired as to education level, the median level of education was a college degree (Bonds & Gondoli, 2007; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). Indeed, McHale et al. (2002) questioned the generalizability of the coparenting construct beyond the two-parent, middle-socioeconomic European American family. In fact, only a few studies have included ethnically diverse samples. In a study of Hispanic and European American families, Lindahl and Malik (1999) found that marriages characterized by power struggles, which have been shown to impact coparenting by disrupting joint family management (e.g., McHale, 1995), were associated with decreased maternal and paternal support for children in both Hispanic and European American families during a triadic interaction. However, although families included in this study were more ethnically diverse than in the majority of extant studies, the families were still predominantly middle-class with high levels of education. In another study involving two-parent (married or cohabitating) Mexican-American families (Cabrera, Shannon, & La Taillade, 2009), parent-reported frequency of interparental conflict was found to be the strongest predictor of conflict in the coparenting relationship even after accounting for parent mental health and family support, though level of education or SES was not explicitly described.

On the contrary, Brody and Flor (1996) examined coparenting in two-parent African American families living in rural areas. They found that perceptions of coparental support were related to family interaction quality for fathers and to child self-regulation for mothers. This study highlights two weaknesses in the extant coparenting literature. One, it addresses the disregard for the impact of SES on coparenting. Financial

difficulties could hinder the coparenting relationship in ways similar to other familial relationship, which is consistent with a sociological perspective on global concepts of stress and role strain on the family system (e.g., Margolin, 1981), or they could have minimal impact if parents are able to maintain supportive coparenting in spite of financial strain. Two, it illustrates the broader issue of a paucity of observational and interactional studies with families of color (Okasaki & Sue, 1995). Combined, these weaknesses are particularly troublesome as a larger percentage of African American and Hispanic families live in poverty in comparison to Caucasian families (McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000).

Much of the existing coparenting research has been conducted regarding elevated levels of interparental conflict and has found that high levels of coparenting conflict can have a detrimental impact on children, parents, and family relations. In examining the extreme end of conflict, interparental aggression, studies have found that children who witness interparental aggression evidence greater levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. However, few studies have investigated the impact of interparental aggression on coparenting. Emerging research has suggested that interparental aggression can manifest as hostile and competitive coparenting, which can have adverse results, in addition to those resulting from the aggression, for children and overall family functioning. Further research is needed to elucidate more fully the impact of physical as well as psychological forms of interparental aggression on coparenting, particularly with more diverse samples. Thus, the tertiary aim of the present study was to examine coparenting, particularly the outcomes of specific parenting/coparenting measures, in a lower SES, ethnically diverse sample.

Present Study

The present study had three main aims. The primary aim of this study was to investigate the interrelatedness of the perceived quality of the coparenting relationship and the degree of mutual psychological and/or physical interparental aggression as well as mutual negotiation. I hypothesized that psychological and physical aggression tactics would be negatively associated with the coparenting relationship, with higher levels of both types of aggression corresponding to a poorer coparenting relationship. This hypothesis was based on findings indicating that parents who employed verbal attacks, physical expressions of anger, or avoidance of the other parent during conflict were less likely to develop a cooperative coparenting relationship (Camara & Resnick, 1988, 1989). In addition, research has suggested that higher levels of interparental hostility were associated with greater disagreement and less interactiveness, responsiveness, and cooperation in the coparenting relationship (Katz & Gottman, 1996) and that higher levels of overt conflict in the parental dyad was associated with greater involvement of hostile-competitive coparenting (McHale, 1995). Furthermore, higher levels of interparental violence were associated with more hostile-withdrawn coparenting and less positive coparenting (Katz & Low, 2004).

Conversely, I hypothesized that parental use of negotiation tactics would be positively associated with coparenting in that greater use of negotiation would correspond to a more cooperative coparenting relationship. This hypothesis was based on findings that suggested parents' ability to compromise and to resolve disagreements without escalation was related to higher levels of parental cooperation and to increased parental closeness (Camara & Resnick, 1988, 1989). Lastly, I hypothesized that, of all the

interparental factors, reports of the other parent's use of psychological aggression would be most predictive of the perceived quality of the coparenting relationship, as negativity between parents has been shown to fully mediate the relationship between interparental violence and other family-based outcomes (i.e., child anxiety/depression; Katz & Low, 2004). I also anticipated that self-reported use of physical aggression and of negotiation would not be significant predictors of coparenting due to demand characteristics and reduced variability (i.e., low reporting levels for physical aggression, high reporting levels for negotiation).

The secondary aim of this study was to evaluate the associations between parental personality characteristics and parenting/coparenting measures. Research has suggested that parental personality traits contribute not only to a successful marital relationship but also to good parenting (Engfer, 1988), and, as the coparenting relationship has been found to mediate the effects of marriage on parenting experiences (e.g., Floyd et al., 1998; Margolin et al., 2001), I hypothesized that parental personality characteristics, specifically Histrionic, Narcissistic, and Compulsive traits (see below), would also be related to the perceived quality of the coparenting relationship. Only authoritative parenting was examined in relation to parent personality, as the Authoritative parenting style is commonly conceived of as the preferred parenting style (compared to the Authoritarian and Permissive styles) and, therefore, would likely be the most susceptible to a desire to present oneself in a favorable light. Gamble, Ramakumar, and Diaz (2007) found that, even in a non-forensic sample, both mothers and fathers indicated employing parenting strategies associated with an authoritative style of parenting, whereas they were less likely to endorse parenting strategies associated with authoritarian or permissive

parenting. Preferences for the Authoritative parenting style over the Authoritarian style have also been found cross-culturally. Varela and colleagues (2004) found that Caucasian-non-Hispanic parents and Mexican parents as well as parents of Mexican descent (i.e., Mexican-American, Mexican immigrants) all reported favoring authoritative parenting over authoritarian practices.

In regards to specific personality characteristics, personality instruments have been commonly employed in court settings in the course of child custody evaluations. Child custody litigants and the present sample of court-mandated mutually aggressive parents have several similarities: one, both groups of parents are involved in the court process; two, a high number of custody and access disputes involve allegations of interparental violence (Kelly & Johnson, 2008); and three, both groups of parents are likely to be motivated to portray themselves in a favorable light (Blood, 2008; Carr, Moretti, & Cue, 2005) or to display a “defensive response set” (p. 27, Lampel, 1999). Studies involving child custody have suggested that the majority of litigants display a certain personality profile, showing elevations on one of three scales: Histrionic, Narcissistic, and Compulsive; in fact, women were found more likely to elevate on a combination of these scales, whereas men were found more likely to elevate on a single scale (Lampel, 1999). I hypothesized that these three personality scales (Histrionic, Narcissistic, and Compulsive) would be inversely related to cooperative coparenting.

The tertiary aim of this study was to examine the concept of coparenting in a lower SES, more ethnically diverse sample than has typically been used in coparenting research. This last aim served as a basis for comparing and contrasting findings from the present study with existing coparenting literature, which has typically consisted of

middle-class, Caucasian families with well-educated parents. It also sought to expand the generalizability of extant coparenting research. In addition, for a more detailed analysis of parenting style, a subset of the total sample, consisting of only parental dyads (i.e., mother and father of the same “couple”) was utilized for closer comparison to existing studies. In particular, as no normative data exist for the version of the parenting measure utilized in the present study, attempts were made to replicate the findings from Winsler, Madigan, and Aquilino (2005) and Gamble et al. (2007), which employed a longer version of the measure, with a more diverse sample. Parents in the Winsler et al. study were generally well-educated (i.e., 16 or more years of education) and predominantly Caucasian (74.1%), followed by Asian-American (22.2%) and African-American (3.7%), whereas parents in the Gamble et al. study were virtually all of Mexican descent (90% to 92%), with the majority of both mothers and fathers being first-generation Mexican-Americans (75% and 80%, respectively). In using analyses similar to Winsler et al. and Gamble et al. in comparing mothers and fathers, I hypothesized that, consistent with findings from these studies, mothers’ self-reported use of authoritative parenting would be significantly higher than fathers’ self-reported use, and, consistent with findings from Winsler et al., mothers would rate themselves as being more authoritative than they would rate their children’s fathers. However, in divergence of previous studies, I hypothesized that fathers would rate themselves as being more authoritative than they would rate their children’s mothers, given that the Authoritative parenting style would likely be susceptible to positive impression management, particularly in a court-mandated sample. I also hypothesized, divergent from previous studies, that both mothers and fathers would rate themselves as being less authoritarian than the other parent, given

preferences cross-culturally for authoritative parenting over authoritarian parenting (e.g., Varela et al., 2004) and given the tendency of portraying oneself in a positive light in this type of setting. Moreover, consistent with the findings from Winsler et al., I hypothesized that both mothers and fathers would be “inaccurate” (i.e., divergent from other parent) in reporting the other parent’s relative level of authoritative parenting.

Method

Participants

The present study took place under the umbrella of a larger intervention study. One hundred and one parents participated in the present study (55 mothers and 46 fathers, with 29 overlapping dyads). Parents had to be at least 17 years of age, have at least one child with the other party in the court case, and be relatively proficient in the English language. In order to determine the type of violence present in the interparental dyad and subsequent study eligibility (i.e., the presence of Situational Couple Violence or Separation-Instigated Violence), the present study relied on the screening from the larger intervention study, specifically, a semi-structured interview detailing the violence in the interparental relationship as well as several self-report questionnaires about frequency, severity, and type of violence. The participation rate for the present study was 80%. Additional exclusion criteria for the present study included: (a) a history of moderate to severe traumatic brain injury; (b) cognitive impairment, as evidenced by both a verbal intelligence quotient (IQ) and a performance IQ below a standard score of 70 on the Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence (WASI; Weschler, 1999) and/or reading abilities below a 3rd grade level on the Reading subtest of the Wide Range Achievement Test-Third Edition (WRAT-3; Wilkinson, 1993); (c) very limited proficiency in the English language; (d) the wearing of an electronic monitoring bracelet; and (e) parents who have had no communication for the year prior to data collection. Although parents had to be party to a court case with the other parent to be considered eligible for study recruitment, parents could be included in the study even if the other parent did not consent to research.

Measures

Demographic information. Sociodemographic information was obtained from parents, including gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, sexual orientation, income level, and level of education attained. Length of the relationship (i.e., total time known, time dated) with the other parent was also determined.

Parenting measures. The Parenting Alliance Measure (PAM; Abidin & Konold, 1999) The PAM is a 20-item, self-report measure that assesses the degree to which parents believe they have a sound coparenting relationship with their child's other parent. For example, items assess parents' perceptions of their support for each other and their desire to communicate about their child. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale (*strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, strongly disagree*), yielding an overall score, with higher scores representing better coparenting quality. Examples of items include: *My child's other parent is willing to make personal sacrifices to help take care of our child; My child's other parent and I have the same goals for our child; My child's other parent believes I am a good parent; and My child's other parent and I communicate well about our child.* Acceptable test-retest reliability coefficients (over a 4- to 6-week period) and adequate concurrent and construct validity have been reported (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Abidin & Konold, 1999).

The Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire-Short Version (PSDQ-32; Robinson, Mandelco, Olsen, & Hart, 2001) is a 32-item, self-report questionnaire that assesses parenting style by asking participants to rate independently at what frequency (*never to always*) that they exhibit and that the other parent exhibits the given behavior with their child. Derived from the 64-item measure, the PSDQ-32 consists of three

parenting subscales: Authoritative (e.g., *Give praise when our child is good, Responsive to our child's feelings or needs*), Authoritarian (e.g., *Use physical punishment as a way of disciplining our child, Scold and criticize to make our child improve*), and Permissive (e.g., *State punishments to our child and do not actually do them, Find it difficult to discipline our child*). The three subscales yield a total of six continuous scores, with larger numbers indicating increased use of that particular parenting style: Authoritative-self, Authoritative-other parent, Authoritarian-self, Authoritarian-other parent, Permissive-self, and Permissive-other parent. The full-item measure has been shown with both maternal and paternal report to have adequate internal consistency with preschool-aged children (Winsler et al., 2005) and high internal consistency with school-aged children (Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen, & Hart, 1995). For the purpose of comparison with studies employing the full-item measure, in the present study Cronbach's α for the 32-item measure ranged from .39 to .94 (maternal report: Authoritative: $\alpha = .79$ to .94, Authoritarian: $\alpha = .73$ to .94, and Permissive: $\alpha = .69$ to .73; paternal report: Authoritative: $\alpha = .87$ to .91, Authoritarian: $\alpha = .73$ to .87, and Permissive: $\alpha = .39$ to .58).

Relationship measure. The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) The CTS2 assesses the frequency of male-to-female and female-to-male physically, sexually, and psychologically abusive acts during the preceding 12 months on a scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*more than 20 times*). The CTS2 contains five subscales: Negotiation, Psychological Aggression, Physical Assault, Sexual Coercion, and Injury. Three of the five subscales were used for this study (Negotiation, Psychological Aggression, Physical Assault). Items from the CTS2 include: *I suggested/My partner suggested a compromise to a disagreement* (Negotiation), *I*

showed my partner I cared/My partner showed care for me even though we disagreed (Negotiation), *I insulted or swore at my partner/My partner insulted or swore at me* (Psychological Aggression), *I destroyed something belonging to my partner/My partner destroyed something that belonged to me* (Psychological Aggression), *I slapped my partner/My partner slapped me* (Physical Assault), and *I punched or hit my partner/My partner punched or hit me with something that could hurt* (Physical Assault). Six scores were calculated, based on frequency and severity of the event: Negotiation (self, partner); Psychological Aggression (self, partner), and Physical Assault (self, partner). Compared to a reference sample of college students (Straus et al., 2003), study means were commensurate with normative data with the exception of Psychological Aggression – Partner, which were higher in the present study. Adequate internal consistency reliability, construct validity, and discriminant validity have been reported with the CTS2 (Straus et al., 1996).

Personality measure. The Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory-Third Edition (MCMI-III; Millon, Davis, & Millon, 1997) is a 175-item, self-report inventory designed to measure personality disorders and clinical syndromes associated with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). The MCMI-III provides 14 Clinical Personality Patterns scales (Schizoid, Avoidant, Depressive, Dependent, Histrionic, Narcissistic, Antisocial, Sadistic, Compulsive, Negativistic, Masochistic); three Severe Personality Pathology scales (Schizotypal, Borderline, Paranoid); seven Clinical Syndrome Scales (Anxiety, Somatoform, Bipolar, Dysthymia, Alcohol Dependence, Drug Dependence, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder); three Severe Clinical Syndrome scales (Thought

Disorder, Major Depression, Delusional Disorder); and three Modifying/Validity Indices (Disclosure, Desirability, Debasement).

Three scales from the MCMI-III were used for the present study: Histrionic, Narcissistic, and Compulsive. Individuals who elevate on the Histrionic scale are likely to seek out attention from others, avoiding indifference and disapproval, and to have a strong desire for repeated signs of acceptance. Individuals who elevate on the Narcissistic scale have a tendency to maintain unwavering superiority over others, overvaluing their self-worth, and to exploit others to their own advantage. Individuals who elevate on the Compulsive scale signify individuals who strive to balance hostility towards others and a fear of social disapproval, thereby acting in an overly conforming manner, and whose resentment in maintaining this balance results in anger that occasional breaks through the surface (Millon et al., 1997). The MCMI-III has been shown to have excellent reliability and validity (Millon, 1994; Millon et al., 1997). Although not explicitly a variable of interest, the Desirability Scale, which assesses a response tendency to present oneself in a favorable light, was also examined due to the nature of the sample (i.e., court-mandated). Compared to studies involving child custody litigants, present study means were comparable on the Desirability scale (Lampel, 1999; McCann et al., 2001) as well as the Histrionic, Narcissistic, and Compulsive scales (McCann et al., 2001).

Procedure

Potential participants were recruited from a larger pool of parents who had been referred to a court-ordered intervention program. The intervention specifically targeted separated or divorced parents who had experienced interpersonal violence, as these couples will continue to have contact due to continuing parenting responsibilities. Upon

appearing for their initial assessment, parents were asked if they would like to participate in research for the larger intervention study of which the present study is a small portion. Information regarding the research component was provided to each parent by a clinical psychology doctoral student at the beginning of the initial assessment. Potential participants were asked privately if they would like to participate in the research component in an attempt to ensure that they did not feel coerced to consent to research by possible authority figures (e.g., the presiding judge). The confidentiality of the data was emphasized by stating that their names would not be associated with their data.

It was explicitly stated that, although participation in the intervention was court-ordered and hence not voluntary, participation in the research component was voluntary and that access to treatment or court services would be in no way affected by a decision to decline to participate. Additionally, potential participants were informed that they have the right to discontinue participation at any time without penalty. No incentives were offered to participants for study participation. As part of the larger study, parents began with a semi-structured clinical interview and cognitive testing before being asked to complete questionnaires. The assessment was conducted by a trained clinical psychology doctoral student and supervised by a licensed psychologist. The entire assessment, including the completion of measures for the larger intervention study, took approximately four to six hours to complete, and parents were given the opportunity to divide the assessment into multiple sessions. Treatment of participants was in accordance with the ethical standards of American Psychological Association, and the present study was subject to review and was approved by the associated university's Institutional Review Board.

Analytic Strategy

To begin, preliminary analyses were conducted to provide descriptive statistics for study variables, and relationships between demographic variables (income, education level) and the major variables of interest were examined to assess for potential confounds. Then, to address the first aim of the study, parallel stepwise regression analyses were conducted, separately for mothers and fathers, in order to investigate what interparental factors (negotiation, psychological aggression, physical aggression) predict the perceived quality of the coparenting relationship based on self-report and report of the other parent's behavior. Second, intercorrelations among parental personality characteristics and parenting and coparenting measures were conducted, again separately for mothers and fathers, to evaluate whether parental personality characteristics (Histrionic, Narcissistic, Compulsive) are related to: one, perceived agreement in the use of an Authoritative parenting style; and two, the perceived quality of coparenting (per maternal or paternal report). Absolute differences were calculated to determine the extent to which a parent perceives agreement between his/her own parenting style and the other parent's parenting style (i.e., the absolute difference between the mother's rating of her use of the Authoritative parenting style and the mother's rating of the father's use of the Authoritative parenting style; the absolute difference between the father's rating of his use of the Authoritative parenting style and the father's rating of the mother's use of the Authoritative parenting style).

Third, comparisons between parenting and coparenting measures and normative and existing data were examined. Lastly, using a sample subset of parental dyads (i.e., mother and father of the same "couple," $n = 29$), analyses were conducted to compare

coparenting and parenting data from the present sample to normative data and existing studies. In attempting to replicate prior studies, three analytic methods were utilized: one, correlations and paired *t*-tests were conducted between maternal and paternal self-reports on the three parenting styles (Authoritative, Authoritarian, and Permissive); two, paired *t*-tests were conducted between the mother's self-report and the mother's report of the father's parenting style as well as between the father's self-report and the father's report of the mother's parenting style; and three, correlations were conducted between the mother's report of the father and the father's self-report as well as between the father's report of the mother and the mother's self-report to assess for accuracy in parent report.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses were conducted to assess if assumptions of normality were met. Three statistical outliers on CTS2 subscales (i.e., values greater than 3 SD from the sample mean) were identified, and those participants' data were not included in subsequent analyses. In addition, data on two CTS2 subscales (i.e., Physical Assault – self; Physical Assault – partner) were square-root transformed to reduce the marked positive skew and kurtosis.

Demographic information for the sample is summarized in Table 1. Means and standard deviations of key predictors and dependent variables by gender are presented in Table 2. A series of analyses was conducted to reduce the possibility that associations between variables of interest, such as coparenting, conflict tactics (negotiation, psychological aggression, physical aggression), parent personality, or parenting styles, were due to the influence of a third variable, namely, income or level of education. Parental income was divided into tertiles (under \$10,000, \$10,000-\$30,000, over \$30,000) in an effort to create approximately equal groups, and results indicated no systematic differences among the variables of interest by gender. Level of education was also divided into tertiles [less than high school or equivalent, graduated high school/General Educational Development (G.E.D.) certification, completed some post-high school training or secondary education]. Results indicated that, after controlling for multiple comparisons, there were no significant differences among the variables of interest by gender. A bivariate correlational matrix of variables of interest by gender is presented in Table 3.

Table 1.
Demographic Characteristics of the Total Sample (N = 101)

| | Mean (SD) | |
|-------------------------------|--------------|------|
| Age | 28.54 (6.58) | |
| | <i>n</i> | % |
| Gender | | |
| Mothers | 55 | 54.5 |
| Fathers | 46 | 45.5 |
| Ethnicity | | |
| Hispanic | 60 | 59.4 |
| Mexican American | 2 | 2.0 |
| Chicano | 1 | 1.0 |
| Caucasian | 16 | 15.8 |
| Black/African-American | 3 | 3.0 |
| Native American | 3 | 3.0 |
| Asian | 2 | 2.0 |
| Hispanic-Caucasian (biethnic) | 6 | 5.9 |
| Other | 8 | 8.0 |
| Marital Status | | |
| Never Married | 45 | 44.6 |
| Co-habiting | 9 | 8.9 |
| Married | 8 | 7.9 |
| Separated | 22 | 21.8 |
| Divorced | 17 | 16.8 |
| Sexuality^a | | |
| Straight/Heterosexual | 98 | 97.0 |
| Gay/Homosexual | 1 | 1.0 |
| Bisexual | 1 | 1.0 |
| Annual Income | | |
| Under \$10,000 | 36 | 35.6 |
| \$10,000-\$20,000 | 17 | 16.8 |
| \$20,000-\$30,000 | 22 | 21.8 |
| \$30,000-\$40,000 | 8 | 7.9 |
| \$40,000-\$50,000 | 13 | 12.9 |
| Over \$50,000 | 5 | 5.0 |
| Education Level | | |
| Elementary/Middle School | 2 | 2.0 |
| Some high school | 14 | 13.9 |
| High school graduate | 21 | 20.8 |
| G.E.D. certification | 18 | 17.8 |
| Technical/Vocational | 8 | 7.9 |
| 1-2 years college | 19 | 18.8 |
| 2+ years college | 9 | 8.9 |
| College graduate | 8 | 7.9 |
| Post-baccalaureate work | 2 | 2.0 |

Note. G.E.D. = General Educational Development.

^aAll parents participated in the study with an opposite-sex coparent.

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations for Key Variables

| | Mothers (<i>n</i> = 55) | Fathers (<i>n</i> = 46) |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| PAM | | |
| Total | 40.98 (11.40) | 39.33 (12.02) |
| CTS2 | | |
| Negotiation--Self | 60.45 (47.64) | 68.52 (45.31) |
| Negotiation--Partner | 37.91 (36.45) | 39.89 (35.20) |
| Psychological Aggression--Self | 21.38 (25.35) | 24.72 (22.83) |
| Psychological Aggression--Partner | 40.78 (34.85) | 52.52 (39.24) |
| Physical Assault--Self | 2.58 (4.25) | 2.35 (4.94) |
| Physical Assault--Partner | 17.22 (29.85) | 17.37 (25.07) |
| MCMII-III | | |
| Desirability | 79.65 (16.54) | 77.57 (16.01) |
| Histrionic | 78.62 (17.84) | 55.74 (15.41) |
| Narcissistic | 72.05 (18.31) | 62.00 (16.02) |
| Compulsive | 74.96 (15.39) | 61.28 (15.50) |
| PSDQ-32 | | |
| Authoritative--Self | 47.35 (5.94) | 43.22 (8.81) |
| Authoritative--Partner | 33.16 (12.16) | 35.52 (11.37) |
| Authoritarian--Self | 17.53 (4.05) | 18.76 (4.68) |
| Authoritarian--Partner | 26.09 (11.79) | 24.59 (9.00) |
| Permissive--Self | 11.09 (3.46) | 10.63 (2.70) |
| Permissive--Partner | 12.51 (4.64) | 12.48 (3.89) |
| Authoritative Discrepancy | 14.29 (12.40) | 8.13 (9.40) |

Note. PAM = Parenting Alliance Measure. CTS2 = Conflict Tactics Scale-Revised. MCMII-III = Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory-Third Edition. PSDQ-32 = Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (32-item version).

Interparental Conflict Tactics and Perceived Quality of Coparenting Relationship

In order to examine the interrelatedness of perceived coparenting relationship quality and mutual physical and/or psychological aggression as well as mutual negotiation, separate but parallel stepwise regression analyses were conducted by gender. For these regressions, ratings of frequency of use of conflict tactics (i.e., six variables: ratings for both self and the other parent along the dimensions of physical assault, psychological aggression, and negotiation) were entered stepwise into the regression equation, with the overall perception of the coparenting relationship as the outcome variable. Results of the

Table 3

Intercorrelations between Coparenting/Parenting, Interparental Factors, and Parent Personality

| | Mothers (<i>n</i> = 55) | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|----------------------------|
| | CTS2 | | | | | | MCMII-III | | | | PSDQ-32 |
| | Neg'n: Self | Neg'n: Partner | Psych'l Agg: Self | Psych'l Agg: Partner | Phys Assault: Self | Phys Assault: Partner | Desir ^a | Hist ^a | Narc | Comp | Av Discrep ^a |
| PAM | .03 | .39** | .11 | -.25 | .25 | -.23 | .07 | .01 | -.10 | -.04 | -.78 [‡] |
| CTS2 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Negotiation: Self | --- | .66 [‡] | .39** | .60 [‡] | .24 | .30* | -.01 | -.06 | -.14 | .03 | -.07 |
| Negotiation: Partner | | --- | .40** | .28* | .29* | -.02 | -.05 | -.12 | -.02 | .04 | -.48 [‡] |
| Psych'l Agg: Self | | | --- | .65 [‡] | .66** | .29* | -.02 | -.12 | -.13 | -.03 | -.29* |
| Psych'l Agg: Partner | | | | --- | .33* | .61 [‡] | -.11 | -.07 | -.14 | -.01 | .15 |
| Phys Assault: Self | | | | | --- | .22 | -.02 | -.11 | .00 | .03 | -.32* |
| Phys Assault: Partner | | | | | | --- | -.14 | .01 | -.04 | .05 | .00 |
| MCMII-III | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Desirability ^a | | | | | | | --- | .39** | .48 [‡] | .48 [‡] | -.01 |
| Histrionic ^a | | | | | | | | --- | .36** | -.14 | .24 |
| Narcissistic | | | | | | | | | --- | .13 | .00 |
| Compulsive | | | | | | | | | | --- | .01 |

Table 3 (cont.)

Intercorrelations between Coparenting/Parenting, Interparental Factors, and Parent Personality

| | Fathers (n = 46) | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------------|--------|----------------------------|
| | CTS2 | | | | | | MCMII-III | | | | PSDQ-32 |
| | Neg'n: Self | Neg'n: Partner | Psych'l Agg: Self | Psych'l Agg: Partner | Phys Assault: Self | Phys Assault: Partner | Desir ^a | Hist | Narc ^a | Comp | Av Discrep ^a |
| PAM | -.24 | .21 | -.09 | -.53 [‡] | .14 | -.33* | -.02 | .16 | .17 | .01 | -.73 [‡] |
| CTS2 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Negotiation: Self | --- | .51 [‡] | .38* | .52 [‡] | .16 | .32* | -.19 | -.43** | -.48** | -.16 | .14 |
| Negotiation: Partner | | --- | .39** | -.00 | .33* | -.07 | -.07 | -.13 | -.22 | -.26 | -.29 |
| Psych'l Agg: Self | | | --- | .38** | .34* | .12 | -.45** | -.41** | -.25 | -.39** | -.24 |
| Psych'l Agg: Partner | | | | --- | -.02 | .68 [‡] | -.14 | -.37* | -.28 | -.14 | .39** |
| Phys Assault: Self | | | | | --- | .10 | -.15 | -.33* | .01 | -.21 | -.32* |
| Phys Assault: Partner | | | | | | --- | -.03 | -.13 | .04 | .00 | .30 |
| MCMII-III | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Desirability ^a | | | | | | | --- | .68 [‡] | .52 [‡] | .44** | .10 |
| Histrionic | | | | | | | | --- | .46** | .34* | -.00 |
| Narcissistic ^a | | | | | | | | | --- | -.02 | -.00 |
| Compulsive | | | | | | | | | | --- | -.04 |

Note. PAM = Parenting Alliance Measure. CTS2 = Conflict Tactics Scale-Revised version. MCMII-III = Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory-Third Edition. PSDQ-32: Av Discrep = Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (32-item version); Authoritative Discrepancy.

^aNon-parametric tests (i.e., Spearman correlations) were employed.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. ‡ $p < .001$.

parallel regressions are presented in Table 4. Measures of the degree of multicollinearity were within acceptable limits [i.e., Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) less than 10; Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1995].

For mothers, when predicting perceptions of coparenting relationship quality, maternal report of fathers' use of negotiation and psychological aggression and mothers' self-reported use of physical assault predicted unique variance in how mothers perceived

Table 4
Stepwise Regression Analyses Predicting Perceived Coparenting Quality

| | Mothers (<i>n</i> = 56) | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| | R ² | Adj R ² | F | ΔF | β | <i>t</i> | VIF |
| Model 1 <i>CTS2 Neg'n--Partner</i> | 0.16 | 0.14 | 9.69** | --- | 0.39 | 3.11** | 1.00 |
| Model 2 <i>CTS2 Neg'n--Partner</i> <i>CTS2 Psych'l Agg--Partner</i> | 0.30 | 0.27 | 10.95 [‡] | 10.47** | 0.50 -0.39 | 4.14 -3.24** | 1.08 1.08 |
| Final Model <i>CTS2 Neg'n--Partner</i> <i>CTS2 Psych'l Agg--Partner</i> <i>CTS2 Phys Assault--Self</i> | 0.38 | 0.35 | 10.50 [‡] | 7.06* | 0.44 -0.50 0.32 | 3.81 [‡] -4.11 [‡] 2.66* | 1.12 1.22 1.21 |
| | Fathers (<i>n</i> = 48) | | | | | | |
| | R ² | Adj R ² | F | ΔF | β | <i>t</i> | VIF |
| Final Model <i>CTS2 Psych'l Agg--Partner</i> | 0.28 | 0.26 | 16.78 [‡] | --- | -0.53 | -4.10 [‡] | 1.00 |

Note. CTS2 = Conflict Tactics Scale-Revised version. VIF = Variance Inflation Factor.
* *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. [‡] *p* < .001.

the quality of the coparenting relationship [$R^2 = 0.38$, $F(3, 54) = 10.50$, $p = .01$]. Neither fathers' use of physical assault nor mothers' own use of negotiation or psychological aggression was retained in the final regression model. Both fathers' use of negotiation and mothers' own use of physical assault were directly related to perceived coparenting success [$\beta = 0.44$, $t(54) = 3.81$, $p = .001$; $\beta = 0.32$, $t(54) = 2.66$, $p < .05$, respectively], whereas fathers' use of psychological aggression was inversely related to perceived coparenting success [$\beta = -0.50$, $t(54) = -4.11$, $p < .001$].

For fathers, when predicting perceived quality of the coparenting relationship, paternal report of mothers' use of psychological aggression predicted unique variance in fathers' perceptions of coparenting quality [$R^2 = 0.28$, $F(1, 45) = 16.78$, $p < .001$]. Neither mothers' use of physical assault, fathers' own use of psychological aggression, fathers' own use physical assault, nor use of negotiation by either parent was retained in the final regression model. Similar to mothers, fathers' reports of mothers' use of psychological aggression was inversely related to perceived coparenting success [$\beta = -0.53$, $t(45) = -4.10$, $p < .001$].¹

As hypothesized, the other parent's use of psychological aggression accounted for the most variance in the final regression model for both mothers and fathers (see Table 4). Contrary to my hypotheses, several of the variables anticipated to remain in the final model (i.e., parent's own use of psychological aggression, other parent's use of physical assault) did not significantly predict coparenting quality; however, consistent with my hypotheses, parents' own use of negotiation was not a significant predictor of coparenting

¹ Given that, for fathers, several CTS2 variables were significantly correlated with MCMI-III: Desirability, a post-hoc hierarchical regression analysis was conducted. For this post-hoc analysis, Desirability was entered into the first block of the regression equation and the six conflict tactics variables were entered stepwise into the second block. Results of this regression analysis were commensurate with initial findings.

quality. The other parent's use of negotiation had mixed results and was only a significant predictor for how mothers (but not fathers) perceived the quality of the coparenting relationship, although post-hoc analyses revealed no significant differences between mothers' and fathers' report of the other parent's level of negotiation. Furthermore, again contrary to my hypotheses, mothers' self-reported use of physical assault significantly predicted perceived coparenting quality.

Parental Personality Characteristics and Parenting/Coparenting

Intercorrelations among parental personality characteristics and parenting and coparenting measures are presented in Table 3. For both mothers and fathers, the MCMI-III profile was characterized by a clinically significant elevation (i.e., base rate > 74) on the Desirability scale. In addition, among mothers, 63.6% had significant elevations on the Histrionic scale, 36.4% on the Narcissistic scale, and 56.4% on the Compulsive scale, with eight mothers (14.5%) having significant elevations on all three clinical scales. Among fathers, 10.9% had significant elevations on the Histrionic scale, 17.4% on the Narcissistic scale, and 19.6% on the Compulsive scale, with no fathers having significant elevations on all three clinical scales.

Parent personality and authoritative parenting. In order to examine how parental personality characteristics related to perceived agreement in the use of the Authoritative parenting style, correlations between variables were computed. As preliminary analyses revealed that Desirability scores on the MCMI-III were significantly correlated with all three clinical scales (i.e., Histrionic, Narcissistic, Compulsive) for both mothers and fathers, partial correlations were performed, controlling for Desirability. Nonparametric tests (Spearman correlations) were chosen due to the skewed distribution of the

Desirability, Narcissistic, and Authoritative parenting discrepancy variables, with separate tests conducted by gender. Results indicated that, for both mothers and fathers, perceived agreement between his/her own use of the Authoritative parenting style and his/her report of the other parent's use of the Authoritative parenting style was not significantly related to Histrionic, Narcissistic, or Compulsive personality scores on the MCMI-III. However, mothers' perceived agreement in the use of the Authoritative parenting style and mothers' scores on the Histrionic scale demonstrated a statistical trend ($r_s = 0.24, p < .10$).

Parental personality characteristics and coparenting. In order to examine how parental personality characteristics related to perceived coparenting quality, correlations between variables were computed. Again, as preliminary analyses revealed that Desirability scores on the MCMI-III were significantly correlated with all three clinical scales for both mothers and fathers and given the skewed distributions of the Desirability and Narcissistic variables, Spearman partial correlations were performed, controlling for Desirability. Separate tests were conducted by gender. Results indicated that, for both mothers and fathers, perceived coparenting quality was not significantly related to Histrionic, Narcissistic, or Compulsive personality scores on the MCMI-III.

Measurement Construct of Coparenting in Diverse Sample

Given the dearth of literature on several measures employed in this study, analyses were conducted in order to compare current findings to normative data and existing studies. First, study means on the PAM were compared to a normative sample (Abidin & Konold, 1999), which was largely Caucasian (80.5%; followed by African-American, 14.5%), and older (mean age of 39 years). No significant differences were

found on the PAM between means from the present study and normative means for separated/divorced parents. The PAM was also examined in relation to the PSDQ-32, specifically, the reported discrepancy between a parent's own use of the Authoritative parenting style and other parent's reported use of the Authoritative parenting style. Results indicated that perceived coparenting quality was significantly and inversely correlated with perceived agreement in the use of authoritative parenting for both mothers and fathers ($r_s = -.78, p < .001$), suggesting adequate construct validity for this computed discrepancy variable.

Second, study means on the PSDQ-32 were compared to extant studies employing the full, 64-item measure (i.e., Gamble et al., 2007; Winsler et al., 2005), and significant differences were found for mothers' and fathers' self-reported use as well as reports of the other parent's use of the three parenting styles. Means, standard deviations, and internal consistency estimates (Cronbach's α) are presented in Table 5. Compared to the Winsler et al. (2005) sample of well-educated Caucasian parents, *t*-tests revealed significant differences in mothers' self-reports of authoritativeness and authoritarianism, mothers' reports of paternal authoritativeness and permissiveness, fathers' self-reports of authoritarianism, and fathers' reports of maternal authoritativeness and permissiveness. Specifically, present study findings were higher for mothers' self-reports of authoritativeness, mothers' reports of paternal permissiveness, and fathers' reports of maternal permissiveness and lower for both parents' self-reports of authoritarianism as well as reports of the other parent's authoritativeness. In comparison to the Gamble et al. (2007) sample of largely first-generation Mexican-American parents, *t*-tests revealed

Table 5

Means, Standard Deviations, and Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients for Mothers' and Fathers' Report of Their Own and the Other Parent's Parenting Styles

| Parenting Style | Mothers | | Fathers | |
|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | On Self | On Partner | On Self | On Partner |
| Authoritative | | | | |
| Mean | 4.30 ^b | 3.01 ^{a,f} | 3.93 | 3.23 ^{c,f} |
| S.D. | 0.54 | 1.11 | 0.80 | 1.03 |
| Alpha (α) | .79 | .94 ^c | .87 | .91 ^d |
| Authoritarian | | | | |
| Mean | 1.46 ^{c,f} | 2.17 | 1.56 ^{c,f} | 2.05 |
| S.D. | 0.34 | 0.98 | 0.39 | 0.75 |
| Alpha (α) | .73 | .94 ^{b,f} | .73 ^d | .87 ^a |
| Permissive | | | | |
| Mean | 2.22 | 2.50 ^a | 2.13 | 2.50 ^{b,f} |
| S.D. | 0.69 | 0.93 | 0.54 | 0.77 |
| Alpha (α) | .69 | .73 | .39 ^a | .58 ^a |

Note. PSDQ-32: Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (32-item version).

Significant difference compared to Winsler et al. (2005):

^a $p < .05$. ^b $p < .01$. ^c $p < .001$.

Significant difference compared to Gamble et al. (2007):

^d $p < .05$. ^e $p < .01$. ^f $p < .001$.

significant differences in mothers' self-reports of authoritarianism, mothers' reports of paternal authoritativeness and permissiveness, fathers' self-reports of authoritarianism, and fathers' reports of maternal authoritativeness and permissiveness. Current findings were higher for mothers' reports of paternal authoritativeness and permissiveness and fathers' reports of maternal permissiveness and lower for both parents' self-reports of authoritarianism and fathers' reports of maternal authoritativeness. Notably, differences

observed with these prior studies were generally in the same direction, with the exception of mothers' reports of paternal authoritativeness in which the mean in the present study was lower than that of Winsler et al. but higher than that of Gamble et al. In terms of internal consistency for the PSDQ-32, estimates for the present study were generally comparable or superior to Winsler et al. (2005), with the exception of fathers' self-reports of permissiveness and of maternal permissiveness, which were found to be inadequate ($\alpha = .39$ to $.58$) and may be related to the small number of items for this scale (i.e., five) on the 32-item version. Estimates were also comparable or superior to Gamble et al. (2007) except for fathers' self-reports of authoritarianism.

Furthermore, as the PSDQ-32 has been utilized in only a few studies, a series of paired *t*-tests were conducted with a subset of the larger sample consisting of only parental dyads ($n = 29$) in an effort to more closely compare and replicate findings from Winsler et al. (2005) and Gamble et al. (2007) with a lower SES, more ethnically diverse sample. Of note, the ethnic make-up of this subset was proportionate to the total sample (i.e., Hispanic, 58.6%; Caucasian, 13.8%; Hispanic/Caucasian, 5.2%; African-American, 3.4%; and so on). To begin, Spearman correlations were conducted (given the skewed distribution of the data) between mothers' and fathers' self-reports for the three parenting styles and revealed little similarity between mothers' and fathers' self-reported styles ($r_s = -.17$ for Authoritative; $r_s = .54$, $p < .01$ for Authoritarian; $r_s = .10$ for Permissive). Results of paired *t*-tests revealed that, contrary to findings from Winsler et al. and Gamble et al., mothers' self-reported use of the Authoritative parenting style was not significantly higher than fathers' self-reported use. Consistent with prior studies, no

significant differences were found between mothers' and fathers' self-reported use of authoritarian or permissive parenting.

In addition, results indicated that, consistent with Winsler et al. (2005), mothers rated themselves as being more authoritative as a parent than they rated their children's fathers [$t(28) = 5.95, p < .001$]. Conversely, mothers also rated themselves as being less authoritarian as a parent than they rated their children's fathers [$t(28) = -4.34, p < .001$], which is divergent from prior studies that found no differences in mothers' self-reported use and reports of fathers' use of authoritarian parenting. As hypothesized, but in contrast with previous studies, fathers rated themselves as being more authoritative [$t(28) = 3.96, p < .001$] and less authoritarian [$t(28) = -3.58, p = .001$] than their children's mothers. Lastly, also as hypothesized, results from the present study are congruent with findings from Winsler et al. and indicate that both mothers and fathers were "inaccurate" (i.e., nonsignificant correlations between self and other parent reports) in reporting the other parent's relative level of authoritative parenting.

Discussion

Coparenting, the collaborative (and ideally cooperative) relationship between parents, has only recently been recognized as a distinct construct and is a burgeoning area of study. Separate from intimate aspects of the interparental relationship, the coparenting relationship is crucial to the family process and persists in the face of parental separation and divorce. Independent of other interparental factors, coparenting significantly affects all facets of the family, including interparental relationship, child adjustment, parental adjustment, and parenting (Feinberg, 2003), and is more predictive than the overall interparental relationship of parenting and child outcomes (Feinberg et al., 2007).

Extant research has shown that interparental conflict has a detrimental effect on coparenting, but there is a dearth of research on the impact of *interparental aggression* on perceived coparenting quality. The present study represents an important step in expanding our growing understanding of coparenting processes by exploring the complexities of the coparenting relationship in the context of mutual, interparental aggression. This study had three main aims: one, to investigate the impact of both positive and negative interparental conflict tactics on the perceived quality of the coparenting relationship; two, to evaluate associations between parental personality characteristics and parenting/coparenting; and three, to examine the novel construct of coparenting in a lower SES, ethnically diverse sample.

Interparental Conflict Tactics and Coparenting

First, in examining the interrelatedness of coparenting and interparental factors (i.e., negotiation, psychological aggression, physical aggression), findings from the present study indicated that reports of the other parent's use of psychological aggression

and of negotiation (maternal report only) as well as self-reported use of physical aggression (maternal report only) were significant predictors of perceived overall coparenting quality. For mothers, maternal report of fathers' use of negotiation and mothers' self-reported use of physical aggression were positively related, and fathers' use of psychological aggression negatively related, to perceived coparenting quality. For fathers, paternal report of mothers' use of psychological aggression was negatively related to perceived coparenting quality. These findings are consistent with extant studies that found that negative parental expressiveness (e.g., contempt) was directly associated with reported coparenting conflict (Kolak & Volling, 2007) and that marital hostility, as indexed by elevated levels of wife contempt and husband belligerence, was also associated with high interparental disagreement in coparenting (Katz & Gottman, 1996). Additionally, observed negativity during a marital exchange was related to a less democratic coparenting style following the exchange (Kitzmann, 2000). In addition, as hypothesized, the reported level of psychological aggression employed by the other parent was the strongest predictor of perceived coparenting quality. This finding is congruent with previous research that has shown psychological aggression to be often viewed by victims as worse than physical aggression (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990; O'Leary, 1999).

Notably, in direct contrast to what was hypothesized, mothers' own use of physical aggression was directly associated with perceived coparenting quality. One possible explanation for this unexpected finding is that physical aggression can be seen as a highly potent tactic in conflict resolution and may be used to force cooperation and compliance (Lloyd & Emery, 1994); thus, mothers who employ physically aggressive

tactics may perceive greater cooperation by the other parent in the coparenting relationship. More generally, Archer (2000) posited that women's use of physical aggression might be related to perceived control and risk of retaliation such that women may be more likely to use physical aggression in relationships in which they perceive greater control and less threat of retaliation. An additional possible explanation for this unexpected finding is that physical aggression can be viewed as a last resort to conflict resolution (Lloyd, Koval, & Cate, 1989); as more nonegalitarian patterns of marital power have been associated with significant disparities in coparenting involvement (McHale, 1995), a mother's own use of physical aggression may be perceived as helping equalize the distribution of power, particularly in the context of a patriarchal society, thereby facilitating coparenting processes. Conversely, less use of self-reported physical aggression in the context of an aggressive relationship may be associated with a poorer coparenting relationship because mothers may perceive themselves as ineffectual in achieving and/or maintaining power in the relationship.

Alternatively, the positive association between mothers' self-reported use of physical aggression and perceived coparenting quality may instead correspond to a low level of present engagement in both the interparental and coparenting relationships. Parents may simply be sustaining minimal levels of interaction, positive or negative, in their relationship with the other parent, analogous to findings with distressed marriages (e.g., Lloyd, 1996). Additionally, parents may be intentionally distancing themselves from one another because of their current court involvement and fear of potential legal consequences, thereby resulting in fewer opportunities for interaction altogether. Thus,

low levels of physical aggression within a context of mutual aggression may simply be a striking indication signifying an overall desire to detach from the other parent.

In mixed support of study hypotheses, maternal report of fathers' use of negotiation was found to be a significant predictor of mothers' perceptions of quality of the coparenting relationship; however, paternal report of mothers' use of negotiation was not significantly associated with fathers' perceptions of coparenting relationship quality. For mothers, their reports of paternal use of negotiation positively predicted perceived coparenting quality. This direct association may be related to perceived level of engagement and willingness to resolve conflict in the interparental relationship, as parents who are able to compromise and resolve disputes have higher levels of parental cooperation and closeness (Camara & Resnick, 1988, 1989). Although limited research exists regarding the impact of positive interparental factors on the coparenting relationship, extant studies on marital hostility have found a common interaction pattern among distressed couples in that men were more likely to withdraw from conflict ("husband withdrawal;" Katz & Gottman, 1996) and that fathers from marriages in which there was destructive conflict were more withdrawn than were fathers from harmonious or disengaged marriages (Lindahl & Malik, 1999). Thus, in the context of mutual aggression, mothers may be more sensitive than fathers to attempts at positive engagement (i.e., negotiation) by the other parent and may regard coparenting efforts accordingly. Similarly, mothers who perceived fathers to be more engaged in child caregiving activities viewed the coparenting relationship as stronger (Futris & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007).

In addition, compared to fathers, mothers may be more attuned to fathers accepting influence and guidance in the interparental relationship, interpreting such overtures as a willingness to resolve conflict. Gottman, Driver, and Tabares (2002) found that rejection of influence by husbands, but not by wives, was a significant predictor of divorce. Wives' rejection of influence had little impact, as wives were accepting husbands' influence at a fairly high level, but husbands rejecting influence from their wives predicted the longitudinal course of the marriage (Gottman et al., 2002). Furthermore, as negotiation reflects the extent to which positive affect is present and communicated in the interparental relationship (i.e., through expression of feelings of care and respect), intrapersonal flexibility (characterized by open-mindedness, ingenuity, independence) may also promote a generally positive interaction. Paternal flexibility has been found to make independent contributions to coparenting harmony even after controlling for marital quality (Talbot & McHale, 2004). From the perspective of the maternal gatekeeping hypothesis (e.g., Allen & Hawkins, 1999), Talbot and McHale (2004) theorized that paternal flexibility in accepting their partner's guidance facilitated cooperation in coparenting. Therefore, mothers' perceptions of fathers accepting influence and attempting to negotiate conflict may act as a barometer for the quality of the coparenting relationship.

Conversely, fathers' ratings of mothers' negotiation skills did not significantly impact fathers' perceptions of the coparenting relationship quality. One possible explanation for this absence of a parallel finding is that, in the context of typical conflict, past interparental aggression has been found to predict less positive emotionality for mothers (E. M. Cummings et al., 2007) and, perhaps, reduced use of constructive conflict

tactics. No significant differences were found in the present study between mothers' and fathers' reports of the other parent's use of negotiation; however, as fathers may be used to a high level of maternal acceptance of influence in the interpersonal relationship (Gottman et al., 2002), present findings may still represent a decline in maternal use of constructive conflict tactics, which is adversely affecting coparenting quality.

Another potential explanation for paternal report of mothers' use of negotiation not significantly predicting perceptions of coparenting relationship quality relates to the complex interaction that has been found between coparenting quality and maternal encouragement. When coparenting quality was low, fathers were *more* involved when there was *less* maternal encouragement (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). This result suggests that coparenting quality may influence fathers' receptiveness to mothers' use of negotiation, and, in turn, positive maternal overtures may have a paradoxical effect on fathers' perceptions of coparenting quality if not in the context of a strong coparenting relationship. Relatedly, paternal perceptions of marital consensus (i.e., agreement on non-child topics) had a similar complex relationship with coparenting that was contrary to expectations. Specifically, findings revealed a negative association between husbands' reports of consensus and wives' perceptions of coparenting quality in that husbands' reports of greater agreement in the interparental relationship was associated with maternal perceptions of a *weaker* coparenting relationship (Hughes, Gordon, & Gaertner, 2004), which is, perhaps, again consistent with the maternal gatekeeping hypothesis (e.g., Allen & Hawkins, 1999).

Lastly, the same studies that provided differential support for fathers' use of negotiation as a significant predictor of perceived coparenting quality are congruent with

the absence of a parallel finding for mothers and suggest that fathers may have a particularly potent effect on family processes. For example, paternal (but not maternal) flexibility served an ameliorative function in buffering the association between marital quality and coparenting negativity (Talbot & McHale, 2004). In addition, although both maternal and paternal positive expressiveness were shown to be positively related to coparenting cooperation, paternal positive expressiveness, in particular, was found to be beneficial to coparenting processes (Kolak & Volling, 2007). Therefore, fathers' level of positivity and how it is received by mothers may represent a potentially unique and weighty factor impacting the coparenting relationship.

Parent Personality and Parenting/Coparenting

The second aim of the present study was to examine associations between parent personality and parenting/coparenting measures. Results indicated that parental personality characteristics (i.e., Histrionic, Narcissistic, Compulsive) were not significantly related to perceived coparenting quality or perceived agreement between parents' reports of their own use and the other parent's use of authoritative parenting. Current findings failed to extend existing research findings involving parents exhibiting normative levels of conflict that demonstrated a link between maternal personality and coparenting (Stright & Bales, 2003). One possible explanation is that the relationship between coparenting and parent personality may be fully mediated by interparental aggression. As extant studies have found that Histrionic, Narcissistic, and Compulsive are often elevated in parents with high levels of conflict (Lampel, 1999; McCann et al., 2001) and that interparental conflict has been found to impact adversely the coparenting relationship (e.g., Katz & Gottman, 1996), elevations in personality traits may be only

indirectly related to coparenting through interparental conflict for high conflict families. Unfortunately, small sample size and low power prevented analyses of this hypothesis in the present study.

Moreover, the lack of findings relating parental personality characteristics and coparenting and parenting measures may be attributed to the type of sample employed in the study. Court-ordered clients may fear legal repercussions for a negative clinical evaluation and may be suspicious about having their behavior scrutinized in a clinical assessment (O'Leary & Murphy, 1999). Support for this notion can be found in the elevated scores on the Desirability scale of the MCMI-III, reflecting a desire to portray oneself in a favorable light. Other studies have also failed to find a reliable link between individual personality traits and coparenting (Gable, Crnic, & Belsky, 1994). However, the answer may lie in the reported differences between parental personality characteristics, not in the scale elevations themselves. Gable, Crnic, and Belsky (1994) found that supportive coparenting was less frequent, and negatively laden unsupportive coparenting more frequent, as differences in personality became greater between spouses.

Another possibility for the absence of significant findings relates to the personality dimensions assessed in this study (Histrionic, Narcissistic, and Compulsive), which have been shown to be elevated in child custody litigants (Lampel, 1999) and are intended to correspond to personality disorders and clinical syndromes (Millon et al., 1997). Studies that have demonstrated significant correlations between parent personality and coparenting have employed less pathologizing instruments in assessing individual personality traits, such as the California Psychological Inventory (Gough, 1987) and its factors of Flexibility and Self-Control (Talbot & McHale, 2004) and the NEO-Five

Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992) and its factors of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Stright & Bales, 2003). Future studies, even those conducted with forensic samples, may need to consider a range of personality dimensions and assessment instruments.

Coparenting in Diverse Samples

Lastly, the third aim of the present study was to extend coparenting research to include ethnically diverse families of lower SES by comparing current findings to normative data and existing studies on coparenting. Of note, the present sample was also more diverse than typical studies in terms of marital status, with over half of the sample having never been married and the remainder divided largely between being currently married or divorced. In regards to coparenting, or parenting alliance, data from the present study were commensurate with normative data for separated/divorced mothers and fathers. Regarding parenting more generally, study data were compared to extant studies involving more homogeneous, non-forensic samples (i.e., Gamble et al., 2007, involving parents of predominantly Mexican heritage; Winsler et al., 2005, involving generally well-educated, Caucasian parents). Given the newness of the measure utilized in the present study, prior studies employed a former, but analogous, version of the measure, yet some significant differences were detected. Of note, in the present study both mothers' and fathers' reports of the other parent's use of authoritative parenting were generally lower than in prior studies as were self-reports of their own use of authoritarian parenting. Interestingly, mother's reports of fathers' use of authoritative parenting was significantly lower than one previous study (i.e., Winsler et al., 2005) but significantly higher than another (i.e., Gamble et al., 2007), though current findings are

consistent with both studies in that mothers tended to view themselves as more authoritative than their children's fathers. However, in contrast to existing studies, fathers also viewed themselves as more authoritative than their children's mothers.

In addition, contrary to prior studies that found equivocal results, mothers viewed themselves as significantly less authoritarian than their children's fathers, and fathers demonstrated a similar pattern in rating themselves as less authoritarian than their children's mothers. This group of findings, with both mothers and fathers viewing themselves as more authoritative and less authoritarian than the other parent, may pertain more to the nature of the sample (i.e., court-mandated) and a desire to "market" themselves as parents by presenting themselves in a positive light (Lampel, 1999), rather than differences related to sample diversity. In a similar vein, although both mothers and fathers reportedly favored the Authoritative parenting style, both were "inaccurate" (i.e., divergent from the other parent) in stating the other parent's relative level of authoritative parenting, reporting the other parent's use of authoritative parenting as less than the self-reported use, perhaps to create a more favorable impression of themselves by comparison. In general, present findings appear to be more indicative of results found with court-mandated parents, who are more likely to portray themselves in a favorable light (Blood, 2008; Carr et al., 2005), rather than results of parents who are ethnically and socioeconomically diverse.

Implications for Coparenting Framework

Findings from the present study were interpreted within the context of Feinberg's (2003) four-component model of coparenting. This study addressed to some degree three of the four hypothesized components: childrearing agreement, interparental solidarity,

and joint family management. The remaining component, division of childcare labor, was not assessed and would be difficult to assess in the present sample, given that division of childcare responsibilities is probably in the midst of a significant transition due to recency of parental separation. Overall, findings provide general support for Feinberg's (2003) model. First, regarding childrearing agreement, both mothers and fathers reportedly favored the Authoritative parenting style, but self-reported use of authoritative parenting was discrepant from the level of use perceived by the other parent. In addition, there was little similarity between self-reported parenting styles within the same parental dyad. This level of perceived discrepancy, or disagreement, is likely to render the coparenting relationship vulnerable to conflict.

Second, the component of interparental solidarity, or the level of supportive and undermining behavior present between parents, received some validation in the present study, particularly regarding the absence of support in the coparenting relationship. Use of psychological aggression by the other parent was the strongest predictor of perceived coparenting quality for both mothers and fathers. In addition, given that parents were "inaccurate" in reporting the other parent's relative level of authoritative parenting, there may also be a lack of acknowledgment and respect of the other parent's contributions to the coparenting relationship. Third, joint family management, seemingly the most comprehensive component, was not explicitly examined in the present study. However, the nature of the sample (i.e., mutually aggressive parents) as well as the participant referral source (i.e., court system) provides an indication of how poorly parents were able to regulate their behavior towards each other. In fact, mothers' own use of physical aggression as a significant predictor of coparenting quality is evidence of the difficulties

experienced in maintaining a successful executive subsystem. In sum, the present study provides some support for Feinberg's (2003) conceptualization of coparenting. However, many more studies are needed to fully explore the now-distinct construct of coparenting, particularly within the context of high levels of interparental conflict or aggression.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the present study. First, the study was cross-sectional in design, thereby restricting the ability to infer causation and limiting understanding of the direction of influence between intra- and interparental factors and the coparenting relationship. Similarly, as items on the coparenting measure assessed coparenting quality at a discrete point in time, the study was unable to capture the dynamic nature of the coparenting relationship. Coparenting is fluid, ever responding to changes in children's needs and in parental roles and expectations; as children age and develop, so does the coparenting relationship. Although longitudinal studies may help to partly explain the success or demise of a coparenting relationship, greater consideration is needed regarding "turning points" in the relationship at which the trajectory may shift. As conflict is inherent in family life (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Straus & Smith, 1992), it may be particularly illuminating to study what follows an episode of coparenting conflict, for example, whether there are attempts made to repair the relationship.

In addition, McHale and colleagues (2004) advocated for comprehensive examination of coparenting through assessment of coparenting beliefs, perceptions, and observed practices. The present study only examined one of these aspects, perception of coparenting quality, utilizing a single outcome variable. Although it would not have been ethically sound to stage a triadic interaction for observational purposes, given the parents'

history of physical aggression (and, typically, protective court orders), greater assessment of parents' beliefs about the general importance of coparenting as well as their aspirations and goals for the future of their own coparenting relationship might have afforded a more in-depth analysis of long-standing views of coparenting. The present study also did not include assessment of child functioning, which would have provided outcome data for the impact of coparenting relationship quality and parenting practices on their children.

Another limitation of the study is that the findings have somewhat limited generalizability. In order to be eligible for participation, parents had to be already seeking assistance and/or responding to accusations in the civil court system, and only parents who had contact with each other in the past year and who had at least some contact with their child(ren) were included in the study. Thus, the findings have limited relevance to families with more severe forms of violence (e.g., patriarchal or intimate terrorism) or less severe and/or less prevalent forms of conflict in which the threshold for help-seeking has not yet been exceeded. In addition, although the present sample was ethnically diverse with the majority of parents of ethnic minority status, the study design did not assess for level of acculturation and excluded non-English-speaking parents. Finally, as there was considerable variability in the ages of children whose parents participated in the present study, which may represent a potential confound for study findings.

Summary and Future Directions

Coparenting, though only recently emerging as a field of study in its own right, has already been found to be integral to family functioning. The central importance of the coparenting relationship as well as the nature of the family system renders coparenting both a powerful influence as well as a vulnerable target that can be significantly impacted

by both interparental and parental factors. Among mutually aggressive parents, psychological aggression by either mothers or fathers (as reported by the other parent) was found to be most damaging to the perceived quality of the coparenting relationship, whereas perceived paternal (but not maternal) use of negotiation predicted better perceptions of coparenting quality. Mothers' self-reported use of physical aggression was unexpectedly and *positively* related to perceived coparenting quality, and additional study is required to fully understand and interpret the implications of this finding. As the body of coparenting literature expands, it will important to examine the coparenting relationship longitudinally to study the development and course of coparenting health in relation to these interparental factors and, subsequently, the effect on child and parent outcomes in both community-based and forensic samples.

Parental personality characteristics were not found to be significantly associated with perceptions of coparenting quality or discrepancies in authoritative parenting. However, given the forensic nature of the sample, the (self-reported) assessment of personality characteristics may have been subject to parental desires to create favorable impressions of themselves as parents. Additional study examining personality differences *between* parents and their associations to coparenting and parenting practices may yield added results and help to shed light on the relationship between personality and coparenting. Furthermore, future research is needed to investigate the impact of response tendencies, not only on personality measures but on coparenting and parenting measures as well, to evaluate the utility of self-report with forensic samples. Of note, coparenting and parenting measures were found to be reasonable for use with this more ethnically diverse, lower SES sample of parents, and findings were comparable even to non-forensic

samples, supporting the relevance of the coparenting construct in several ethnic and cultural groups. Further study is needed to expand and enhance our understanding of coparenting and its implications across cultures.

An important consideration with respect to the effect of interparental aggression on coparenting regards the type of aggression present in the interparental dyad. The present study was conducted with a sample of parents displaying mutual aggression, exhibiting either Situational Couple or Separation-Instigated Violence, types that are typically milder in form, arise out of a specific argument, and are manifested through psychological and/or physical means. These two types were specifically chosen due to the decreased likelihood of high levels of aggression and violence and the increased probability of a coparenting relationship existing, thereby representing a potential population for intervention. Caution is recommended regarding the other two types of intimate partner violence (i.e., Coercive Controlling Violence, Violent Resistance), which are connected to a general pattern of control and where establishing and/or attempting to maintain a coparenting relationship is likely not a safe option. This particular typology of intimate partner violence is a relatively unexplored area of study, especially in relation to coparenting processes, but it may soon help to explain the differential impact of aggression/violence on coparenting dynamics as well as to afford greater understanding of the consequences of interparental aggression for parents and their children.

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