

MAKING THE ADJUSTMENT:  
A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF WHAT WORKS AND  
DOES NOT WORK IN POSTDIVORCE PARENTING RELATIONSHIPS

by

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ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the growing knowledge base on postdivorce parenting. Recognizing the need to facilitate a better understanding of what makes the postdivorce parenting dyad work or not work, this study explored how individuals sustain a parenting relationship with their former partners when the couple relationship ends through separation or divorce. To date, knowledge about couples' relationships has been absent from clinical approaches to assisting postdivorce parenting relationships and consequently there has been no bridge between the theories and paradigms of the couples' literature and those of postdivorce parenting.

This exploratory study examined the experiences and perspectives of 20 individual parents in Ontario, Canada. Individual interviews were held with each of the participants. The study identified key themes illuminating an emerging understanding of postdivorce relationships. These key themes will assist to better understand the postdivorce parenting relationship. Findings suggest that practitioners should consider that: (a) the postdivorce parenting relationship is highly complex and the development of a "working" or "not working" relationship results from an interaction among a range of factors; (b) understanding couple's research is essential to comprehending this complexity because, despite the couple relationship ending, former couples remain a dyad because they are parents; (c) even when the postdivorce parenting relationship is "not working", men and women describe other aspects of their lives as successful. The study's

findings have implications for mental health professionals and legal professionals working with parents during and following the divorce process.

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CHAPTER 1:  
INTRODUCTION

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to increase understanding of the complexity of postdivorce parenting relationships through examining the lived experiences of parents, in order to facilitate a better understanding of what makes the postdivorce parenting dyad work or not work. To date, knowledge about couple relationships has been absent from clinical<sup>1</sup> approaches to postdivorce parenting relationships. Previous research has identified the negative financial and psychological consequences for parents and children when postdivorce parenting relationships are ridden with conflict and dissatisfaction (Brownstone, 2009; Davies, Cummings, & Winter, 2004; Garber, 2004; Jenkins, Park, & Peterson-Badali, 1997; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Kelly, 2005; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Radovanovic, 1993; Rogers, 2004). However, bridges are lacking between the theories and paradigms about postdivorce parenting and that of couple relationships. The present study addresses this gap in the current body of knowledge. The study contributes to an expanded clinical understanding of the postdivorce relationship, through examining how individuals perceive the parenting relationship with their former partners when the couple's relationship ends in divorce. This examination will illuminate a shift in perspective, from what practitioners and professionals believe will solve problems in the relationship to the factors that couples themselves say underlie the presenting problems as well as those that are strengths in the relationship .

This understanding contributes to knowledge for parents—and professionals assisting these parents, following their divorce—to better meet the needs of their children. These findings

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<sup>1</sup> Clinical approaches refer to interventions that restore and enhance the functioning of individuals, couples and/or families through prevention and treatment (Simpson, Williams & Segall, 2007).

are pertinent to the development of training programs for counsellors and assessors working with divorced parents. Equally important, the study lays the groundwork for further research in the area of parenting and divorce by generating knowledge about what factors contribute to the relationship between parents after divorce. Understanding the relationship is critical to developing appropriate interventions.

### **Statement of the Problem**

When couples with children divorce, they still must parent. Clearly, given the strain placed upon family courts in Ontario by custody and access disputes (Brownstone, 2009), many parents are experiencing difficulty with achieving a working parenting relationship. This observation is supported by the clinical experience of the researcher. Yet in the literature limited research is evident about the complexity of the relationship between parents following divorce.

Most divorced couples are able to develop functioning parenting relationships (Kelly, 2002); however, for divorced parents who struggle in their relationship with their former partner, harmonious parenting is unlikely and children of the union are placed at risk of ongoing exposure to conflict. When children are exposed to parental conflict, they suffer negative consequences, including emotional or behavioural problems (Jenkins, Park, & Peterson-Badali, 1997; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Radovanovic, 1993; Rogers, 2004). Evidence suggests that the greater the degree of interparental conflict, the more likely the children will be drawn into the dispute (Ehrenberg, Hunter, & Eterman, 1996; Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989).

Some research has focused on the difficulties of negotiating and sustaining successful parenting relationships after divorce. For example, patterns of interaction between divorced spouses may aim to meet old marital needs (such as the need for emotional closeness; Johnson, 1996)—thus, researchers have found, parents' finding the postdivorce relationship troublesome may be due to their difficulty in giving up these old marital roles while still being required to

parent together (Ahrons, 1994; Emery, 1994). Other researchers (Ehrenberg et. al., 1996) have suggested that problems in the postdivorce parenting relationship may be grounded in individual pathology; they identified characteristics of parents who are able to negotiate and maintain a successful postdivorce parenting plan versus those who are not successful (Ehrenberg et. al., 1996; Silver & Silver, 2008). For example, narcissistic characteristics were found to undermine the success of parenting plans (Ehrenberg et. al., 1996).

While there has been some research that examines factors that undermine the postdivorce parenting relationship, few studies (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Hobart, 1990; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992) have examined how individuals sustain a functioning parenting relationship with their former partners when the couple's relationship ends in divorce. Further information regarding what contributes to functional or dysfunctional postdivorce parenting relationships is needed, because courts and mental health professionals are increasingly faced with high-conflict divorce cases (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). When parents are unable to resolve matters related to custody and access, the welfare of children is decided upon by judges, lawyers, and custody evaluators (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). Examination of the parenting relationship would identify typical sources of conflict in these relationships, thereby facilitating understanding of the dynamics between parents after divorce, improving scenarios for children of divorce, and providing knowledge for practitioners.

Although children's needs are of paramount concern, adults involved in conflictual postdivorce parenting relationships are also negatively affected. Formerly married people, some of whom originally were loving couples, may find themselves engaged in negative, angry, blaming, postdivorce relationships when it comes to negotiating the parenting of their children (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). They may find themselves financially crippled in litigious

court matters (Brownstone, 2009) and coping with health issues related to stress, such as anxiety and depression (Davies et al., 2004; Garber, 2004; Kelly, 2005; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Without an adequate understanding of what influences the functioning of the postdivorce parenting relationship, courts and mental health professionals (particularly those in the role of custody evaluators) may find themselves ill equipped to effectively support these parents. The Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (2006) has suggested that professionals working with parents after divorce must ensure that they understand the dynamics of postdivorce relationships. Mental health professionals “must also understand the complexities of divorce or separation processes and common issues concerning children in custody disputes, such as parent-child relationships, blended families, parental alienation, domestic violence, substance abuse, and child abuse” (Patel & Dale Jones, 2008, p. 192).

The present study is premised in the belief that professionals working with parents during and following divorce must approach postdivorce parenting issues with an in-depth understanding of the complexities of the postdivorce parental relationship, to which this study will contribute an increased understanding. Such an approach is critical to creating positive situations for parents and children when the couple relationship ends. The aim of this study is to contribute to the knowledge of practitioners and professionals in order that they may help divorced parents create and sustain a parenting relationship that is in the best interests of their children.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

The dissertation is organized in the manner that the research unfolded and iterative findings emerged. The contents of the chapters are as follows: Chapter 2 presents the theoretical perspectives that guided this grounded theory study. This complex topic is informed by three theories: (a) ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); (b) risk and resilience theory (Luthar &

Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1987); and (c) conflict theory (Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959). Chapter 3 provides a literature review of postdivorce parenting relationships. Included is an examination of the literature related to two bodies of research—divorce and parenting, and research on couples. Chapter 4 outlines the methodology of the study, providing the research design and methods. Included is an explanation for the use of qualitative methodology as well as a description of the study design, sampling, trustworthiness, ethics, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 5 contains the findings. In this chapter, the researcher presents the core categories and emerging themes. The chapter contains quotations from the participants and visual models to assist in the analysis and description. Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the study's findings. Limitations of the study, implications for future research and social work practice and knowledge translation are discussed in this chapter.

## CHAPTER 2:

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rank and LeCroy (1983) supported the use of multiple theories when examining family issues and behaviours, because multiple theories can provide “differing but complementary views on the issue” (p. 441), allowing for a fuller understanding of the subject. This study of the postdivorce parenting relationship was guided by (a) ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); (b) risk and resilience theory (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1987); and (c) conflict theory (Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959). Broadly, the three guiding theories contribute the following elements to the overall theoretical framework of the study: (a) an understanding that the family is situated within a larger system (ecological perspective); (b) an understanding that parents can develop a positive parenting relationship following separation, depending upon risk and protective factors (risk and resilience theory); and (c) reflections on the presence or absence of conflict in the relationship (conflict theory). The three theories also establish the groundwork for understanding family resilience, individual resilience, conflict in relationships, adversity, protective environment, and the relevance of protective and risk factors in the postdivorce parenting relationship.

The relevance of each of the theories must be understood in an integrated manner. For the purposes of clarity, however, they are presented linearly. Beginning with a discussion of ecological theory, the many layers that contribute to postdivorce parenting relationships are illustrated. The ecological framework, with its concepts about systems and subsystems, provides an overarching theory. Research has already identified the importance of understanding the many systems and relationships that come into play following parental separation (Braithwaite, McBride & Schrod, 2003; Schrod, Baxter, McBride, Braithwaite, & Fine, 2006). Ecological theory provides a person-in-context perspective, within which conflict theory and risk and

resilience theory can be examined. Risk and resiliency theory (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1987), is essential to the theoretical framework because the guiding question examines what factors may facilitate or impede the development of a working postdivorce parenting relationship. Conflict theory (Bickerdike & Littlefield, 2000; Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959) is relevant because it assists in understanding the dynamics that occur in problematic relationships, such as those often seen between parents following separation.

Using these theories to inform the study, the researcher wishes to increase understanding of the factors that may act protectively in moderating stressful events or circumstances (Hawkins-Rodgers, 2007), in addition to the factors that may pose risk to the development of working postdivorce parenting relationships.

### **Ecological Theory**

Ecological theory examines the biological and psychological traits of the individual and the many contexts within which that individual interacts, including socioeconomic conditions, family relationships, religion, culture, education, and peer supports (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ecological theory has guided research in many areas within the social sciences. As a framework, this long-standing theoretical paradigm has been applied to understanding individual and family functioning within the context of the overall social environment (Surbeck, 2003). For example, it has been used to guide research in the areas of adolescent pregnancy (Raneri & Wiemann, 2007), bullying (Mishna, Pepler, & Weiner, 2006; Swearer, Peugh, Espelage, Siebecker, Kingsbury, & Bevins, 2006), problem drinking within the family (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000) and trauma (Herman, Harvey, & Tummala-Narra, 2007).

An ecological systems framework has not been used to specifically explore postdivorce parenting relationships. However, research addressing factors that influence postdivorce



functioning attests to the framework's relevance. As an example, interpersonal and socioenvironmental factors have been explored in relation to custody and access arrangements for children (Bray, 1991; Swiss & Bourdais, 2009). Research has also identified ecological factors that are relevant to the experience of separation and divorce; including family income (Arendell, 1997); the number and age of the children (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991); the children's attachment styles (Masheter, 1991); the length of the marital relationship (Bloom & Kindle, 1985); and premarital factors, such as education (Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1990).

The present study explores the postdivorce parenting relationship by delving into the dynamics of the postdivorce parental relationship. According to ecological theory, these dynamics must be understood as part of a larger biopsychosocial system in which the dyadic relationship is contextualized within the social and physical environments. Thus, individuals within the postdivorce parenting relationship are understood to be embedded in a greater multifaceted social system. They are thus simultaneously involved in a number of other relationships, including relationships with members of the extended family and peers. These same individuals may be coping with issues related to their workplace, education, income, and culture.

Situating the family system, including the individual, as an organism that is part of the whole social environment (Germain, 1980; Germain & Gitterman, 1996), the ecological framework is foundational to social work practice. In essence, this theoretical framework locates the family in transition within a social environment that may or may not provide supportive resources to effectively moderate this transition. It may be an environment that lacks the resources necessary to make this adaptation effectively, or it may be an environment made up of

a combination of risk and supportive resources that aid the adaptive experience. The researcher is interested in which factors in the ecological system act as resources and protective factors and which act as obstacles or risk factors to people coping with this experience.

Ecological theory suggests that a postdivorce parenting relationship is the product of a process that is influenced by reciprocal interactions among internal and external factors. Under the umbrella of this framework, the complexities of making the transition from a marital relationship to one based solely upon parenting are explored. An ecological framework is essential as it is consistent with research that has identified the importance of understanding the many systems and subsystems and relationships that come into play when two separate households form, including extended family, stepfamilies, the law, and separate social networks (Braithwaite et al., 2003). Ecological theory establishes the framework for understanding family resilience, adversity, the protective environment, risk factors, and the overall relationship between parents after separation.

The many different levels within an ecological framework capture the multitude of systems and factors at play within the greater social environment and, when risk and resilience theory and conflict theory are included and embedded in it, a deeper analysis of these systems and factors can be made. The ecological framework has already been linked separately in studies addressing resilience (Herman et al., 2007). Researchers must consider the role that ecological factors may play in an individual's functioning and the internal and external resources that may assist in overcoming difficult circumstances or impede resolution of difficult circumstances. For example, adults who have the support of extended family may have less difficulty navigating negative life events than adults without this safety net. In ecological theory, no one factor can be interpreted in the absence of the broader social context.

### **Risk and Resilience Theory**

Risk and resilience theory emerged from research addressing how children positively adapt following stressful events or circumstances (Rutter, 1987). *Resilience* does not refer to a sole trait or characteristic of the individual; rather, it is a two-dimensional construct that refers to exposure to adversity (i.e., risk) plus a positive adjustment outcome. Resilient people have the ability to draw upon overall strengths and resources in life (Levine, 2009; Patterson, 2002). They may be viewed as resilient when positive adaptation results despite exposure to adverse circumstances (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). The concept of resilience has been applied to understanding adults' differential responses to the postdivorce parenting relationship. This concept has been used to examine the adults' vulnerability and factors that might modify the negative effects of adverse life circumstances (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Resilient individuals function the same as, or more positively, than individuals who have not experienced the same adversity (Brodhagen & Wise, 2008). The two central constructs of risk and resilience theory are (a) *adversity*, also referred to as risk; and (b) *positive adaptation*, which involves mastery of social competence and of "salient developmental tasks" (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p.858).

The vast majority of research addressing resilience has focused on children (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2009; Hass & Graydon, 2009; Obradovic et al., 2009). A broader concept, *family resilience* (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988, 1996), theorizes how families cope with stressful experiences and events. Family resilience reflects individual resilience in family units (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988) which have risk and protective processes that allow them to cope with stress. Families that have experienced a stressful event may be considered *resilient* in that they have effectively coped with such an experience. A definition of family resilience, drawn from the nursing literature, states: "family resilience is the successful coping of family

members under adversity that enables them to flourish with warmth, support and cohesion” (Black & Lobo, 2008, p. 33). Patterson (2002) provided a model—the family adjustment and adaptation response model (FAAR)—of family resilience that describes family adjustment following a stressful event. The model suggests that there are three levels of meanings that influence family adjustment: how the family views the demand of the situation and their capabilities; how the family views its identity as a family unit; and, finally how the family views the external world.

Because a family unit comprises two or more people (Patterson, 2002), this model of family resilience should be considered when we explore dissolution of the couple relationship. If applied to parenting relationships after divorce, the FAAR model suggests that there are many influences affecting successful adjustment or transition from an intimate couple relationship to one based solely on parenting. Such influences would include how the couple views their ability to adjust to the new situation, how they view their strengths, whether they are able to successfully redefine their identity as a family, and how they view the world outside the family.

Ungar (2008) critiques risk and resilience theorists who focus on children’s personal characteristics that contribute to resiliency while not emphasizing the role of ecological factors such as culture and the person-environment fit. Other theorists have suggested that several elements contribute to resilience, including: individual characteristics (temperament, competence, self-efficacy and self-esteem); family support; and a supportive person or agency outside the family (Atwool, 2006). Literature in the area of family resilience has identified necessary resources, including “social support from the health care team, their extended family, the community, and the workplace” (Coleman & Ganong, 2002, p. 101). Lastly, for other theorists “resiliency” includes personal characteristics of children, but the concept of *resilience*

refers to the overall process of adapting positively to adverse circumstances (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000).

Family resilience is thought to encompass two stages, *adjustment* and *adaptation* or “bouncing back” (McCubbin, McCubbin, Thompson, Han, & Allen, 1997). McCubbin et al. (1997) also identified family *protective* and family *recovery* factors such as family celebrations, family time, and family routines and traditions. Communication, time management, financial management, and personality compatibility were also identified as protective factors. A support system was identified as an important resource or protective factor for families with young children, teenagers, and young adults. Adjustment and adaptation continue to be desirable outcomes for separated as well as intact families.

Resilience theory has been explored with young adults with histories of physical abuse, emotional abuse, or sexual abuse. For example, in a study of 199 college students who had experienced physical abuse, emotional abuse, or sexual abuse, dispositional optimism was found to be one factor that mediated distress (and contributed to resilience; Brodhagen & Wise, 2008), because people with higher levels of optimism have lower levels of distress. A recent Canadian study (Pomrenke, 2007) examined how family and community interactions support and promote resilient behaviour in pre-teen children. Using grounded theory methods, findings from interviews with 12 Manitoba families revealed that children from high-conflict families demonstrated resilience when other supports, such as extended family and peers, were available. While risk and resilience theory has been explored in studies including youth in care (Atwool, 2006), child development (Masten, 2001; Niccols & Feldman, 2006), and violence against women (Dankoski et al., 2006), it has only recently been used to explore family dynamics (Pomrenke, 2007; Levine, 2009).

The current study of postdivorce parenting relationships entails an examination of factors that protect or create risk in the postdivorce parenting relationship. Parents who maintain a postdivorce parenting relationship respond in various ways—positively, negatively, or with conflicting strategies as they seek to co-parent with their former spouse. Yet marital or relationship separation is always an adverse, challenging event for parents and children alike. Risk and resilience theory may help provide a deeper understanding of postdivorce parenting as an adverse life experience.

To date, resilience theory has not been used to examine the postdivorce parenting relationship. However, resilience theory has been used to explore children's perception of parental separation. A recent Israeli study (Eldar-Avidan, Haj-Yahia, & Greenbaum, 2009) explored the perception of young adults regarding their parents' divorce. Using grounded theory, the researchers interviewed 22 young adults (20 to 25 years of age) in this retrospective study of their experiences surrounding their parents' divorce that had occurred before the participant turned 18. Analysis of the data suggested that participants were typified as vulnerable, survivors, or resilient depending upon their perception of the divorce experience and their current functioning. Those young adults typified as *resilient* had a more positive outlook, "accepted and understood parents' divorce as a means to an end of an unsatisfactory relationship" (Eldar-Avidan et al., 2009, p. 34), valued family relationships, and perceived their parents' divorce as an empowering transition. Those typified as *survivors* perceived the divorce as requiring significant adjustment, felt that the divorce was highly complex, recalled painful memories of the divorce but overall reported that the benefits of the divorce outweighed the loss. In contrast to their resilient peers, survivors did not view their custodial parent as an adequate support, although they were able to identify another support, such as a grandparent. Finally, those typified

as *vulnerable* perceived that the divorce caused damage to all of the whole family, including its family sub-systems. They perceived the divorce as a painful event that had negative implications on the rest of their lives. Those participants within the vulnerable category experienced significant feelings of loss regarding both parents, and viewed their parents as “failing to protect their children, lacking in responsibility, and focusing on their own needs” (Eldar-Avidan et al., 2009, p. 10). Their views of their parents and their personal functioning did not change in adulthood.

As part of the ecological framework, risk and resilience theory offers an important means of examining the factors that influence postdivorce parenting relationships. Because the study question asks what contributes to postdivorce parenting relationships, it is essential not only to identify such factors but also to examine the positive and negative interplay among them—namely, whether they act in a protective manner or create risk to a working postdivorce parenting relationship.

### **Conflict Theory**

Conflict theory is rooted in the work of sociologist Lewis Coser (1956), who brought together ideas of functionalists and social conflict theorists. For functionalists, society was viewed as an organism which, in order to maintain balance, must ensure that functional requirements are met for its survival. For Coser (1956), conflict was one such functional requirement—it served a function in society and was an inherent part of social relations. Most importantly, it was viewed as a natural part of human relationships and interactions (Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959). Drawing upon recent interpretations of Coser’s work (Nepstad, 2005), one may conclude that, according to this theory, conflict “acts as a ‘safety valve,’ releasing tension while preserving social relations” (p. 336). Nepstad (2005) argued that conflict was the product

of one group being more deprived than another group, regardless of the level of deprivation. Nepstad said that within groups, conflict strengthens the group relationship because it creates an “us versus them” mentality, distracting groups or societies from internal conflict. However, while external conflict has the ability to strengthen the group, internal conflict weakens the group because it damages the social bonds (Nepstad).

Decades ago, Coser’s (1956) conflict theory was applied to social issues, including the conflicting roles of women as mothers and labourers (Powers & Salvo, 1982), and to understanding of conflict within families (Rank & LeCroy, 1983; Saltzman Chafetz, 1981) and marriage (Vodde, 2001). Conflict has also been explored in relationship to couples and dating satisfaction (Meeks, Hendrick & Hendrick, 1998). Of interest to this study is Coser’s theory that conflict is more intense in close relationships than in distant relationships (Nepstad, 2005). The greater the degree of emotional involvement prior to the conflict, the greater the conflict’s intensity.

In her early study of conflict within families, Saltzman Chafetz (1981) argued that Coser’s (1956) theory was relevant to understanding family interaction, except in the area of violence. According to Saltzman Chafetz, because family violence is most often perpetrated by the male, it is better understood by theories of social control in which the violence can be understood as a strategy to maintain power over subordinates in the family. Conflict theory, however, has been used to understand mediation outcomes for divorced couples in Australia, wherein attachment and anger were predictive of behaviour during mediation and afterwards (Bickerdike & Littlefield, 2000).

More recently, Jeffries (2000) integrated the work of Coser (1956) and couples’ theorists (1994a, 1994b; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996;



Jacobson & Gottman, 1998; Levenson & Gottman, 1983, 1985; Gottman & Levenson, 1992, 2000) to explore theoretically how love can be used to reduce conflict within marriages.

Referencing Coser's (1956) theory that *realistic* conflicts are based upon genuine issues while *unrealistic* conflicts are the product of the need of one party to release tension, and Gottman's (1991) theory that heated conflict is not problematic if it allows active, non-defensive listening and problem-solving, Jeffries argued that the virtues of love (prudence, temperance, fortitude, justice, and charity) may be the best way to reduce conflict and sustain relationships. While maintaining these virtues is unlikely following divorce, the ideas proposed by Coser (1956) and Gottman (1991) may be applicable to understanding the dynamics occurring between parents following separation.

Researcher and theorist John Gottman (Gottman, 1999; Gottman & Driver, 2005; Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994) provided evidence that three domains—perception, physiology, and behaviour—“individually and together act as interactive thermostats in marriage” (Carrere, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000, p. 43). Gottman also suggested that perception, based upon cognition, contributes to an individual's tendency to draw upon negative or positive memories. The importance of understanding cognition was also discussed by Johnson (2007), who suggested that the importance of working *with* emotions during marital conflict, as opposed to immediately offering strategies to change them, is essential to reducing conflict in the couple relationship. She also indicated that her focus on emotions during times of couple conflict is consistent with that of Gottman's (1999) research in the area of marriage and satisfaction. Experts in the area of couples' research (Gottman, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1999; Gottman & Driver, 2005; Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Johnson, 2007; Johnson & Greenman, 2006) have considered the association between conflict resolution and

couple satisfaction. Gottman (1999) described perception as an important factor influencing a couple's interaction—individuals in happy marriages tended to perceive their spouse's negative behaviours as situational and alterable, whereas individuals in unhappy marriages perceived negative behaviours of their spouse as consistently problematic and internal to the partner.

Carrere et al. (2000) questioned whether “the manner in which spouses remember the past and their cognitive schema about their partner and marriage help in predicting the future stability of the marriage” (p. 43). Over a 4-year period, Carrere et al. drew on a sample of 130 newlywed couples. The couples were observed for a 24-hour period in a laboratory apartment. The observations, interviews, and follow-ups with participants at designated intervals suggested that “the perceptions newlywed spouses have about their partner and their marriage predict the stability of the marriage with 87 percent accuracy at the 4–6 year point and 81 percent accuracy at the 7–9 year point” (Carrere et al., p. 52). While this study specifically addressed newlywed couples, it provides a basis for questioning whether spousal perception at the end of the marital relationship predicts how parents will function in the postdivorce couple relationship.

Research has provided evidence of the link between parental conflict comprising incidents of verbal or physical aggression between parents, and the negative impact on child functioning, including behavioural issues and depression (Jenkins, Park, & Peterson-Badali, 1997; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Radovanovic, 1993; Rogers, 2004). The problems associated with parental conflict following divorce are outlined in the following chapter; from a theoretical perspective, conflict theory offers a significant contribution to understanding behaviour in the postdivorce parental relationship.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the researcher presented the theories of (a) ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); (b) risk and resilience theory (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1987); and (c) conflict theory (Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959) as the framework used to inform this exploratory research of postdivorce parenting relationships. This grounded theory study applied a person-in-context, ecological approach to examining the factors that parents experience as they engage in a postdivorce parenting relationship and, more importantly, how these factors impede or support working dynamics within this relationship. This theoretical framework has also drawn upon key couples' and clinical researchers (Gottman, 1993, 1994a, 1994b; Gottman & Driver, 2005; Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Johnson, 2003) to better understand how participants may interpret their experiences.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory was used as a framework to situate the postdivorce parenting relationship in the larger social context. Within the ecological framework, risk and reliance theory was used to recognize how the factors influencing the postdivorce parenting relationship might offer protection or risk to developing a working relationship. Conflict theory assisted in understanding conflict as a natural part of the relationship. In conjunction with the couples' theorists (Gottman, 1993, 1994a, 1994b; Gottman & Driver, 2005; Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Johnson, 2007; Johnson & Greenman, 2006), conflict theory assisted in understanding how some couples effectively solve disagreements while others remain entrenched in conflictual dynamics. Risk and protective factors were explored from the perspective of parents in an effort to better understand the psychosocial experiences of postdivorce parents as they establish "working" or "not working" parenting relationships.

## CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, literature and research addressing postdivorce parenting is outlined as it relates to the current study of a psychosocial exploration of postdivorce parenting relationships. The chapter is divided into four subsections: (a) children and divorce; (b) parenting after divorce; (c) high-conflict parenting relationships after divorce; and (d) utilizing couples' research to inform study of postdivorce parenting relationships. The chapter concludes with ways in which the current study will contribute to the literature base and development of social work knowledge.

Statistics Canada estimated that 38 percent of Canadian couples divorce before their 30th wedding anniversary and an unknown number of couples separate but never divorce (Ambert, 2005). According to one report by Canadian researchers on postseparation parenting (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004), while most separated parents are able to “work through their anger, disappointment and loss in a timely manner and establish healthy interpersonal relationships with others,” (p. 2) approximately one-quarter to one-third experience difficulty with this process. The challenges resulting from divorce are even more complex when there are children from the union. Over one-half of women and one third of men report experiencing ongoing anger with their former partner years after separation (Feeney & Monin, 2008; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). It is estimated that 10 percent of separated parents never work through their feelings to the extent considered necessary in order to establish healthy interactions with their ex-partners in their postmarital relationships (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004; Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson, 1997).

Currently, an understanding of how the relationship between parents after they divorce influences their ability to parent is limited. For parents, the transition from marriage to divorce is

a complex process that is influenced by a number of internal and external factors. The interplay between these internal and external factors may affect the dynamics of the postdivorce parenting relationship. To better understand these dynamics, the researcher was informed by two separate bodies of research: couples' research and postdivorce parenting research. Consideration of both areas of research was essential to this study because parenting in a cooperative manner following dissolution of the couple's relationship is difficult for many parents. Further, negative feelings about the other parent may be redirected to issues involving the children such as matters related to custody and access (Birnbaum, Fidler, & Kavassalis, 2008; Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999).

### **Children and Divorce**

The nature of the marital relationship plays a role in the socialization of children (Davies, Cummings, & Winter, 2004). In some situations marital separation provides relief from conflict for some parents and children. However, the association between heightened conflict after separation and problems with children's adjustment has been repeatedly demonstrated (Garber, 2004; Gottman & Katz, 1989; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Boyd & Rhoades, 2004). When children are exposed to marital discord, they are more vulnerable to experiencing emotional, behavioural and coping difficulties (Cummings, 1994; Morrison & Coiro, 1999; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Unfortunately, when the conflict continues following separation and parents are unable to communicate effectively and rather engage in dissension, the emotional and developmental needs of the children continue to be placed at risk (Butler, Scanlon, Robinson, Douglas, & Murch, 2003; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Rogers, 2004). Understanding what fuels or moderates this conflict or lack of cooperation after separation or divorce is key to providing social work support to parents and children during and following divorce.

## **The Consequences of Divorce for Children**

The state of the postdivorce parenting relationship has direct implications for the children of the union (Butler et al., 2003; Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen, & Booth, 2000; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). How dire these consequences are continues to be debated (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Nonetheless, the number of children affected by divorce is significant. From the 69 600 divorces in Canada in 2004 (Statistics Canada, 2006). While there is no exact number available on the number of Canadian children affected by parental divorce, Canadian researchers (Wu, Hou & Schimmele, 2008) report that only 65 percent of Canadian children live with both biological parents; 18 percent of children live in a single-parent family. Of this 18 percent, approximately one-half live in a single-family home because of parental divorce.

While not all children of divorce experience difficulty in adulthood, some research suggests that the consequences of divorce for children and youth may extend beyond childhood into adult functioning. For example, Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) conducted a longitudinal study using structured clinical interviews with 131 children from divorced families. The study, conducted over a 25-year period, began when the children were between the ages of 3 and 18. At the 10-year follow-up, participants between the ages of 11 and 29 described ongoing distress; half of the participants were living through a second parental divorce. At the 25-year follow-up point, 93 participants (73 percent of the original sample) were interviewed. Now adults, the participants ranged in age from 28 to 43. Data from this original group were compared to a control group of peers from intact families at the 25-year interview point. Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) reported that, when compared to children who had grown up in intact families, adult children of divorce experienced difficulty forming loving couples' relationships, experiencing

sexual intimacy, and making a commitment to marriage and parenthood. These negative effects were present even though all of the participants had had access to both parents and none of their parents had engaged in custody or access disputes before the courts. These findings highlight the importance of considering the impact of parental marital dissolution on later adult functioning of the children. Based upon this research, Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) do not support the belief that when parents benefit from divorce, children benefit also; nor did they support the idea that children typically adjust to divorce over time.

Hetherington and Kelly (2002) utilized data (n=1400) from the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce (Hetherington, 1993), which was initiated in 1972. The purpose of the initial research was to examine how 72 preschoolers and their families had adapted to divorce at 2 months, 1 year, and finally at 2 years after the divorce. Seventy-two “non-divorced” families were used as a comparison group. When the parents from the divorced group began to remarry and the parents from the “non-divorced” group began to divorce, the researchers determined that this initial sample group should be followed longitudinally. At the 6-year point, the number of families in the study increased from 144 to 180, with an equal number of divorced and non-divorced. At the 11-year point, the number was increased to 300 families and at the 20-year point the number of families increased to 450. At the final point, 122 families of the initial 124 were still participating. Unfortunately, Hetherington and Kelly did not provide a detailed description of the methodology (Miller, 2003). What they did provide was a practical guide to coping with divorce and parenting, based upon their long-term experience as researchers. In contrast to findings from Wallerstein and Lewis (2004), who suggested that there are long-term, ongoing consequences of divorce for children, Hetherington and Kelly suggested that most children adjust well to divorce. Hetherington and Kelly also concluded that divorce can even be a positive

adjustment for children, who are now moving to a better situation. While Hetherington and Kelly acknowledged that parental divorce can have a negative effect on children because of the stress it creates, they suggest that these risks can be offset by protective factors including positive parenting and family supports (including grandparents and peers) as well as by personal characteristics of the child.

### **Parenting After Divorce**

Research addresses factors that support child adjustment after divorce, as opposed to factors that impede positive child adjustment. One of the factors that influences children's adjustment after divorce, is their parents' postdivorce adjustment (Feeney & Monin, 2008; Garber, 2004; Kelly, 2005; Kelly & Emery, 2003). A positive postdivorce adjustment contributes to the ability of parents to respond appropriately to their children, despite the adults' psychological needs that may intensify during separation (Page & Bretherton, 2003). Clearly, the ability to focus on parenting in the midst of managing one's own needs following divorce is a challenging task.

In addition to problems in postdivorce parental adjustment, research has addressed a number of other factors that can impede children's successful adjustment to their parents' divorce (Cashmore, Parkinson, & Taylor, 2008; Davies et al., 2004), such as inconsistent parenting (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1979; Nair & Murray, 2005), decreased socioeconomic status (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998), and parental remarriage (Dunn, 2002; Hetherington, 1989). Other factors that affect the adjustment of children following divorce include "extrafamilial stresses, social and economic disadvantage, and the physical and psychological health of the custodial parent" (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999, p. 134).



### **Positive Child Outcomes: Making Postdivorce Parenting Relationships Work**

In addition to factors that may be problematic for children following divorce, factors that support successful adjustment have been identified, such as parental warmth toward children (Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008) and high quality parenting from the mother (Hetherington et al., 1998; Martinez & Forgatch, 2002). The postdivorce relationship is very important for parents and children and cooperation between parents following divorce is associated with positive outcomes for parents and children. Parents who cooperated after divorce felt more supported in their postdivorce parental roles (Camara & Resnick, 1989), and reported healthier postdivorce adjustment (Camara & Resnick, 1989), and increased satisfaction following separation (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005). Cooperation between the parents offsets problematic attachment patterns between ex-spouses that may make it difficult for parents to disengage following divorce (Ehrenberg, Hunter, & Elterman, 1996; Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989). The children of parents who cooperated displayed fewer behaviour problems and had more positive sibling relationships (MacKinnon, 1989).

A 2008 longitudinal study (Wu et al., 2008) that analyzed five waves of data from Canada's National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (1994–2003; Statistics Canada, 2008) yielded results indicating that separation alone did not have a significant effect on children's behaviours. Data collection began in 1995 and 1996 and included children aged 0 to 11 years. Following the initial wave of data collection, parents were asked to complete surveys about their children at 2-year intervals. Children who were 10 years of age and older also completed a survey. Wu and colleagues (2008) used data from the questionnaires to determine how parental separation affected children's behaviours, and compared the results with behaviours of children who remained living in families comprising married biological parents.

The researchers concluded that living in a married biological family was not a clear advantage for children and that cohabitation dissolution had no significant effect on children's behaviours. Findings indicated that, in the absence of conflict, differences in behavioural issues were more attributable to variables such as household demographics, low-income status, family dysfunction, and parental nurturance. Such findings supported the notion that problems in child functioning following divorce may be attributed to the stress resulting from the change in circumstances rather than the divorce itself (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

### **Cooperative Postdivorce Parenting Relationships**

Mutual respect, support, and healthy patterns of communication are indicative of a cooperative parenting relationship (Macie & Stolberg, 2003). Although factors contributing to healthy, functioning, cooperative parenting relationships after divorce have received less attention than those contributing to the adjustment of children, cooperative parenting factors have been explored to some extent (Baum & Schnit, 2003; Bonach & Sales, 2002; Cohn, Cowan, Cowan, & Pearson, 1992; Madden-Derdich et al., 1999; Mikulincer & Florian, 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; 2005; Miller, Anderson, & Keala, 2004). For example, Bonach and Sales (2002) investigated how premarital issues were related to the postdivorce parenting relationship. They investigated forgiveness as a mediating factor between causal attributions, severity of judgments, and the quality of co-parenting relationships. Surveys were sent to 585 separated or divorced parents who had attended a brief educational seminar. The final sample consisted of 135 separate "couples." Findings suggested that the extent to which the cause for the separation was attributed to the former partner was negatively correlated with cooperation in the postdivorce parenting relationship. In contrast, ongoing mutual support after divorce between parents in the coparenting role was positively correlated with increased cooperation (Bonach & Sales, 2002).

The more severely one partner regarded the other's pre-separation "offences," the lower the cooperation in the postdivorce parenting relationship. Finally, the more forgiveness reported by participants, the better the postdivorce parenting relationship.

Research has also suggested that healthy, positive parenting relationships after divorce may rest on the ability of parents to adjust to the new situation (Madden-Derdich et al., 1999). Redefining roles and the purpose of the relationship requires both parties to grieve the loss of the marriage and spousal relationship in order to build respect for the new parenting relationship. Thus, the literature addressing postdivorce parental adjustment has suggested that parents entering coparenting arrangements should have the capacity to set boundaries between postdivorce family groups, to reduce behaviours consistent with conflict, and to create two separate, nonenmeshed families (Garber, 2004; Madden-Derdich et al., 1999). Parents who cooperated following separation reported positive feelings about the support they received from the other parent, and reported healthier postdivorce adjustment (Camara & Resnick, 1989) and greater overall satisfaction (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005).

Since the majority of couples seem to attain at least some level of cooperative parental interaction (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004), we may assume that most parents possess some of the characteristics that allow them to minimize litigation, sufficiently resolve anger and trust-related issues, and generally engage in behaviours that are child-focused in nature. There have been efforts to identify characteristics that impede this ability. For example, Ehrenberg and colleagues (1996) compared 16 "ex-couples" who were able to agree on parenting issues following separation with 16 "ex-couples" who disagreed on parenting issues following separation. Findings suggested that ex-spouses who were unable to agree on issues associated with postdivorce parenting were more narcissistic, less able to take on another person's perspective,

less able to focus on the feelings and needs of others, more self-oriented, less child-oriented, and more self-important than the ex-spouses who were able to agree on postdivorce parenting issues. Parents who were able to cooperate were generally less narcissistic, less interpersonally vulnerable and, therefore, better prepared to deal with intensely emotional situations (Ehrenberg et al., 1996).

### **Attribution and Postdivorce Parenting Relationships**

There appears to be an absence of North American studies on postdivorce parenting and satisfaction in the research. However, an Israeli study (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005) of 49 parents examined factors related to parental satisfaction following separation. The researchers explored four factors potentially related to satisfaction—attachment style; parenting style; perception of own parents' parenting; and the ex-spouse's assessment of the other parent's parenting—by having participants, recruited by court social workers, complete the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew, 1991). Participants then answered a question related to satisfaction (on a 10-point scale) and a question related to how they believed the other parent viewed their parenting (on a 3-point scale). Findings indicated that men and women attributed responsibility for satisfaction differently; satisfaction for women was anchored in themselves and how they felt about and behaved toward their child, while the men's satisfaction was anchored in their perception of their current partner. With respect to the women, the less dismissing their attachment style, the greater the centrality of children in her life and the higher the level of satisfaction. For men, higher education, perception of their own mothers as less overprotective, and perception of their former wives' assessment that they were good parents were positively correlated with satisfaction. The researchers concluded that it is important to men that their ex-spouses perceive their parenting as positive, because women who disapprove of their ex-spouses'

parenting may put up barriers to access or affect their children's attitude toward their fathers. Overall, attachment style contributed less to satisfaction than the researchers had anticipated.

Additional factors that affect postdivorce adjustment have been identified, including the role of attribution when people report the reasons for the divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003). Amato and Previti (2003) analyzed a sample of data from a 17-year longitudinal study (1980 and 1997) of marital instability over the life course (Booth, Amato, & Johnson, 1998). Original data were generated through telephone interviews with 208 married persons. Participants were followed using telephone interviews at designated intervals (1980, 1983, 1988, 1992, 1997) over a 17-year period. Over time some of the participants, who were married during the earlier interviews, divorced. Using information from the divorced participants, Amato and Previti (2003) analyzed data from 208 individuals (not couples) to determine how the precipitators of the divorce affected postdivorce adjustment. The most reported reasons for divorce were infidelity, incompatibility, alcohol or drug use, growing apart, personality problems, lack of communication, and physical or mental abuse. Men and women reported different experiences. Women typically reported that their husband's behaviour led to the divorce and men, more often than women, reported that they did not know the reasons for the divorce. More men than women reported problems in communication.

In addition to findings related to the reasons for divorce and postdivorce adjustment, Amato and Previti (2003) found that people tended to view the cause of the divorce as the responsibility of their former partner rather than their own responsibility. Because the interviewers did not directly ask about responsibility, the researchers coded people's attributions from their open-ended responses. The findings suggested that individuals who viewed themselves as responsible also reported the strongest attachment to their former partner and that

some even hoped for reconciliation. People who blamed themselves, their former spouse, or external causes were less well-adjusted following divorce than those who viewed the divorce as resulting from the relationship itself. Those who viewed the divorce as resulting from external causes (e.g., work schedules) had the most difficulty with adjustment. Because the cause of the divorce was attributed to external sources, the researchers suggested that people remained invested in a belief that the marriage could have continued and therefore struggled with adjustment. When people blamed the relationship, both people seemed responsible (albeit with irreconcilable differences) and adjustment was positive. This may relate to the absence of regret for their own actions or hostility toward the former spouse. Amato and Previti concluded:

Attributions that avoid blame and define the divorce as an unfortunate but unavoidable event are likely to generate the fewest negative emotions, and hence, best facilitate adjustment. Of course, it also is possible that people who adjust well to divorce tend to adopt attributions that blame the relationship rather than a particular person or set of circumstances. Although it is not possible to disentangle the direction of effects in this study, the two processes may reinforce one another. (p. 624)

### **Creating Risk to Children: Obstacles to Positive Postdivorce Parenting Relationships**

Little attention has been paid to understanding the complex dynamics of the postdivorce parental relationship, despite recognition that the functioning of this relationship is associated with outcomes for children. The children of divorced parents experience problems not because of the divorce itself, but because of the ongoing conflict between the parents that often accompanies divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991; Ferrera, 2003). Such conflict can have severe consequences, including loss of connection to one parent and to that parent's extended family (Ferrera, 2003). In those cases in which parental disputes continue during and after the custody arrangements are made, there is a correlation between shared parenting arrangements and risks for children, including externalizing behaviours and depression (Butler et al., 2003; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Boyd & Rhoades, 2004; Rogers, 2004). The studies are consistent in finding that the

adjustment of parents after divorce, and their levels of conflict or cooperation, are central to children's adjustment and coping (Davies et al., 2004; Feinberg, Kan, & Hetherington, 2007; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Because children benefit from parental cooperation and are negatively affected by parental discord, a good-quality coparenting relationship is one that is more often cooperative than competitive (Fishel & Scanzoni, 1989; Toews & McKenry, 2001), and increased cooperation is positively correlated with mutual support between the parents (Bonach & Sales, 2002).

Cooperation between parents after divorce has been explored to some extent. For example, mothers' support of fathers' relationship with the children has been identified as key to involvement of fathers following separation (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000). In contrast, the concept of mothers' "gatekeeping" of the children's relationship with fathers has been defined as the "mothers' preferences or attempt to restrict or exclude the fathers from child care or involvement with the children" (Fagan & Barnett, 2003, p. 1021). A qualitative study was conducted in which 83 mothers from various U.S. states in rural areas were interviewed (Sano, Richards, & Zvonkovic, 2008). Participants were recruited from agencies servicing low-income families. Four major themes emerged related to sources of tension between the parents: concern regarding child support, frustration due to lack of father-child contact, distrust in father's parenting skills, and concern for child's safety. The researchers argued that previous research failed to account for the mothers' voices and had been biased toward the fathers' perspective. In this study, the researchers concluded that few mothers intentionally acted as gatekeepers and that gatekeeping needs to be interpreted in the context of how the parents negotiated with the fathers. Most mothers expressed a desire for their children to have positive contact with their fathers, and

there did not appear to be a link between failure to receive child support and a motivation to control the father-child relationship. Mothers who intentionally acted as gatekeepers expressed worry for their children's safety and therefore attempted to control the relationship as an effort to protect their children. Mothers also assigned various symbolic meanings to the fathers' actions. For example, when fathers failed to maintain contact with the children, mothers interpreted this as the fathers not caring, which resulted in the mothers worrying about their children. Because the fathers were not interviewed, the researchers suggested that fathers may assume that mothers are gatekeeping without understanding the intention of the mothers' behaviours. This suggests the need for additional research allowing fathers to have a voice.

The parental relationship has been identified as a powerful force in stabilizing children's adjustment, regardless of other factors, which can be "mediated or moderated by family relationships, especially by the quality of parenting" (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999, p. 134). Consequently, evidence suggest that it is not the dissolution of the marriage that creates the greatest distress for children but rather the parents' failure to continue to provide the elements of family that created stability and security for the child (Ahrons, 1994; Amato, 2000; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

### **High-Conflict Parenting Relationships after Divorce**

Most individuals cope well with their divorce, and demonstrate personal growth and increased life satisfaction after a period of emotional upheaval (Amato, 2000; Hawkins & Booth, 2005; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Sbarra & Emery, 2005, 2008). Unfortunately, in other cases, divorce does not alleviate the conflict, and negative dynamics may continue between the parties (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2002). Statistics indicate that two-thirds of divorcing couples are able to make custody and access arrangements without



entering family court (Statistics Canada, 2002), but for the remaining one-third, coming to an agreement can be a stressful and exhausting process. The greatest concern relates to whether this lack of resolution is accompanied by high conflict in the parental relationship, because this poses significant risk to children.

High-conflict in the postdivorce parental relationship may be viewed as occurring on a continuum, ranging from continual disagreements with the former spouse to overtly aggressive behaviours. Several studies that addressed the problem of highly contentious divorces indicated that continued unresolved conflict between parents after divorce undermines the ability of parents to coparent cooperatively (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Bonach & Sales, 2002; Camara & Resnic, 1989). Without ensuring that contact is minimized (Birnbaum et al., 2008), in circumstances where parents are entrenched in conflict-ridden interactions, coparenting arrangements risk children's exposure to parental discord and are associated with negative outcomes for children (Amato & Keith, 1991; Ferrera, 2003; Turkat, 2002).

Over the long term children benefit from maintaining a relationship with both parents (Birnbaum & Alaggia, 2006; Thompson & Amato, 1999). However, when anger and animosity is carried over into custody and access disputes, these may be described as high-conflict cases. Several factors characterize high-conflict cases, including "high rates of litigation and relitigation, high degrees of anger and distrust, intermittent verbal and/or physical aggression, difficulty focusing on their children's needs as distinct from their own, and chronic difficulty coparenting and communicating about their children after divorce" (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004, p. 86). In some situations one parent may attempt to undermine the child's relationship with the other parent by speaking negatively about the other parent in the presence of the child or by engaging in conflict with the other parent in the presence of the child (Hetherington & Kelly,

2002). While the concept of high-conflict is not generally defined in the literature, it tends to refer to “persistent conflict between parents following separation and divorce” (Kelly & Emery, 2003, p. 352).

The body of research on high-conflict divorce has addressed the implications of divorce for children who are exposed to persistent conflict (Jenkins, Park, & Peterson-Badali, 1997; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Lee, 1997; Rogers, 2004), and is consistent in finding that the welfare of children depends on parents’ ability to resolve their differences or at least limit their children’s exposure to the conflict. The research findings suggest that parents who are able to maintain a pattern of interaction that is perceived as positive are less likely to create stress for their children. The findings also suggest that the ability to demonstrate conflict-free interaction between divorced parents rests on the ability of parents to self-regulate their emotions in times of stress (Ferrera, 2003). Parents must therefore be able to control their own emotions in the interests of their children’s needs. When parents are swept up in their own emotional instability, child-focused decision-making and associated behaviours are less likely to result (Hetherington, 1988; Katz & Gottman, 1997). Research (Emery, 1994; Emery & Sbarra, 2002; Sbarra & Emery, 2005) has suggested that parents may engage in custody disputes as a way of contesting the end of the marital relationship and thereby maintaining contact with the spouse.

### **Intimate Partner Violence as Related to Postdivorce Parenting**

Within high-conflict custody disputes, reports of preseparation or postseparation violence by one or both parties are not unusual (Bala, Mitnick, Trocme, & Houston, 2007; Johnston, Lee, Olesen, & Walters, 2005). Bow and Boxer (2003) suggested that approximately 37 percent of custody evaluations presented with allegations of interpersonal violence. Assessing these allegations is one of the most difficult aspects of child custody evaluation (Gould, Martindale, &

Eidman, 2007). A thorough clinical assessment is critical because statistics indicate that in the United States, 75 percent of battered women seen in emergency rooms are seen following separation from the abuser (Cuthbert et al., 2002). Canadian statistics addressing the frequency of interpersonal violence following separation could not be located.

The label of *high-conflict* is used broadly and is not limited to situations involving intimate partner violence (IPV).<sup>1</sup> As indicated, literature suggests that cases of intimate partner violence should be considered separately from high-conflict cases because the definition of high conflict does not encompass the dynamics of domestic violence, which includes acts of emotional, sexual, or physical violence aimed to increase control of the partner (see Jaffe & Crooks, 2004; Jaffe & Geffner, 1998; Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks & Bala, 2008; Jaffe, Lemon, & Poisson, 2003; Johnston, 2006).

Different types of intimate partner violence may occur in postdivorce relationships (Hardesty, Khaw, Chung, & Martin, 2008). Findings of Hardesty and colleagues (2008) emerged from analysis of in-depth interviews with 25 women who had been separated for a minimum of two years and who reported at least two incidents of intimate partner violence prior to separation. Criteria included having at least one child less than 18 years of age living with them at the time of the interview. Women were recruited through a review of court records and through flyers posted in the community. Using grounded theory methods, analysis resulted in emergence of the core concept of *differentiation*, referring to fathers' ability to differentiate their role as a father after divorce from their role as a spouse prior to divorce. Based upon the women's reports, fathers were categorized into three types: (a) poorly differentiated former husbands ( $n=11$ ),

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of discussion, this author uses the term *intimate partner violence* (IPV) (Hardesty, Khaw, Chung & Martin, 2008; Wolfe, Crooks, Chiodo & Jaffe, 2009) although it has also been discussed using the term *domestic violence* (Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks & Bala, 2008) and *intimate partner aggression violence* (IPAV) (English, Graham, Newton, Lewis, Thompson, Kotch, & Weisbart, 2009).

described as having unclear separation and parental and spousal roles; (b) well-differentiated husbands ( $n=7$ ), described as having clear separation and parental spousal roles; and (c) absent fathers ( $n=7$ ), with no coparental relationship with the participant or no relationship with the child.

Hardesty and colleagues (2008) argue that studies classifying violence as high-conflict fail to capture the dynamics of intimate partner violence. They suggest that when men are unable to differentiate between the parenting role and spousal role, violence may be understood as *intimate terrorism*. In these cases, men may attempt to control their former partners because they do not separate themselves from the pre-separation role of abusive partner. In contrast, *situational couple violence* appears in cases where men are able to differentiate between the parenting role and spousal role. In these cases, episodes of violence occur in specific situations but do not include a general pattern of control (such as in the case of intimate terrorism). Both intimate terrorism and situational couple violence can occur before, during and after separation. The researchers report that in cases of situational couple violence, women do not describe fear of their former partner and they were able to negotiate clear boundaries to minimize conflict following separation. Hence, differentiating types of violence following divorce is important in understanding the risks to women after separation as well as in creating parenting plans that will best meet the needs of women and children.

The research (Hardesty et. al, 2008) built upon the work of Johnson and Ferraro (2000) that also identified two types of intimate partner violence: *intimate terrorism* and *situational couple violence*. The first type, intimate terrorism, is an exertion of control by one partner over the other; the second, situational couple violence, occurs in the context of an argument with no attempt to exert control over the other partner (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). This differentiation

between types supports an increased understanding of violence in postdivorce parenting relationships.

### **Allegations of Child Maltreatment**

While allegations of child emotional abuse are most common during custody disputes (Trocme & Bala, 2005), allegations of physical and sexual child abuse are less frequent. Findings from the 1998 Child Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse (Trocme & Bala, 2005) suggested that intentionally false allegations of child maltreatment remain relatively low in Canada. Intentionally false allegations, described as “intentional fabrications that are made in the hope of manipulating the legal system, or are made to seek revenge against an estranged former partner, or may be the product of the emotional disturbance of the reporter” (p. 1335), were reported as more commonly made by noncustodial fathers than mothers. Trocme and Bala (2005) summarized previous findings indicating that rates of false allegations made during custody disputes range from 4.7 percent (Faller & DeVoe, 1995) to 23 percent (Bala & Schuman, 2000). With the exception of the 23 percent rate (Bala & Schuman, 2000), which included intentionally false allegations of physical and sexual abuse, all of the other studies examined intentionally false allegations of sexual abuse alone. Other studies have demonstrated a range of statistics on intentionally false allegations, from 9 to 15 percent (Brown, Frederico, Hewitt, & Sheehan, 1998; Faller, 1991; Thoennes & Tjaden, 1990).

### **Parental Alienation Syndrome**

Amidst allegations made by one parent against another during child custody disputes may be an accusation that one parent is intentionally disrupting the relationship between the child and the other parent. Psychological labels such as *parental alienation syndrome* (Gardner, 1985) suggest that one parent may create an alliance with his or her child to the detriment of the other

parent. The phenomenon was first explored by Kelly and Wallerstein (1976) and later by Gardner (1987), who suggested that parental alienation syndrome could be diagnosed on the basis of three components: (a) the child has an obsessive hatred toward one parent; (b) the vengeful parent brainwashes the child against the other parent; and (c) false allegations of abuse are present. Parental alienation syndrome (Gardner, 1987) refers to “a child’s unreasonable rejection of one parent due to the influence of the other parent combined with the child’s own contributions” (Stahl, 2003, p. 20). According to Gardner, the responsibility for the alienation rests with the parent with whom the child is aligned (Johnston & Kelly, 2004; Stahl, 2003). The model for understanding parental alienation syndrome is one that depicts a single cause and a single effect; that is, the behaviour of one parent results in the child’s rejection of the other parent (Johnston & Kelly, 2004; Stahl, 2003).

Some experts in postdivorce parenting have expressed concern about the use of the label *parental alienation syndrome* (Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Johnston & Kelly, 2004; Stahl, 2003). Kelly and Johnston (2001) suggested that a full understanding of a child’s rejection of a parent requires a comprehensive assessment of a number of variables. Such variables should include factors within the marriage and parental separation, the age and developmental level of the child, the psychological vulnerability of the child, the behaviour and personalities of both parents, sibling dynamics, the remarriage situation, and the adversarial context of the custody-litigation context itself (Kelly & Johnston, 2001, p. 623). Bala, Hunt and McCarney (2009) warned against the use of a single cause-and-effect model to understand how a child rejects a parent and suggested that the label is unfairly biased against women.

## **Utilizing Couples' Research to Inform Study of Postdivorce Parenting Relationships**

Greater understanding of postdivorce parental adjustment is essential since it plays such a significant role in the adjustment of children after divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Nair & Murray, 2005). Couples' research speaks to the dynamics within the adult relationship and as such may assist to better understand the experience of adults with each other during and following marital dissolution.

Gottman's (1999) research of 677 couples encompassed seven longitudinal studies (Gottman, 1994a, 1994b; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996; Jacobson & Gottman, 1998; Levenson & Gottman, 1983, 1985) and captured findings from across the life course, ranging from newlywed couples to aging couples. The studies were conducted at the University of Washington where Gottman constructed an "apartment laboratory" to allow observation of couples for periods of 24 hours at one time. Couples were monitored as they engaged in discussions about areas of disagreement about "enjoyable topics." Physiological responses were measured as couples watched videotapes of their interactions and were asked to identify what they were thinking and feeling. Interviews were conducted to determine spouses' perceptions of their marital history, their parents' marital history, their philosophies of being married, and their comfort level with basic emotions. The research also sought to determine goals, dreams, and symbols that guided "their search for meaning" (p. 27). Gottman (1999) identified factors that distinguish stable and happy couples from unhappy and subsequently divorcing couples, as well as from stable but unhappy couples.

Gottman's (1999) discussion of the "core triad of balance" (p. 33) has not been extended beyond marital relationships, but may provide insight into how the balance between positivity

and negativity affects postdivorce parenting dynamics. Gottman considered the core triad of balance critical to understanding the positivity and negativity of couples' relationships. Building on the concept of homeostasis, in which every system aims to maintain balance, Gottman suggested that every marriage establishes a "stable steady state" (p. 33), or balance, that is tolerable or reasonable for the couple. Each marriage develops this balance depending upon the "positivity and negativity in the couple's interactions" (p. 33). These interactions are influenced by three linked domains: interactive behaviour, perception, and physiology. Interactive behavior refers to the way people communicate verbally and nonverbally. Perception refers to how individuals cognitively process events and experiences, and physiology refers to how the body responds to emergency situations and calms itself during stressful situations. Gottman concluded that for any relationship to function well, the stable, steady state must contain "a very large balance of positivity versus negativity in perception and behavior; in the physiological domain, there must be a state of calm and well-being versus a state of mobilization for flight/fight, subjective upset, vigilance, or danger" (p. 35).

With respect to marital relationships that are not functioning well, Gottman (1999) suggested that not all negatives are equally problematic. He termed negative behaviours that are the most corrosive to marital functioning *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*: criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. For Gottman, while criticism, defensiveness, and stonewalling were important barriers to communication and positive marital functioning, contempt was the single most accurate predictor of divorce. Contempt was not found in any of the stable, happy marriages. When Gottman discussed the domain of perception, he described a "fundamental attribution error" (p. 71) as present in distressed couple relationships. This attribution error resulted in each spouse attributing the marital problems to "a defective character



trait of the partner” (p. 71). In contrast, nondistressed couples used attribution to minimize the impact of their spouse’s negative interactions and maximize the results of those positive interactions.

Research that addresses the coping styles of husbands and wives has contributed to an understanding of dyadic coping in intimate relationships. As in the case of Gottman’s (1999) findings, Bodenmann and Cina’s (2005) research with 70 couples is informative for a study of postdivorce parenting relationships in that it provides insight into how couples cope with stressors. While divorced parents are no longer in the couple relationship they once were, their ongoing parental relationship requires them to cope with stressors unique to this dyadic relationship, such as making important decisions regarding their child, supporting their child and negotiating financial matters. The current study addresses postdivorce parenting relationships, whereas Bodenmann and Cina did not require participants to have children. Nevertheless, their findings are relevant to understanding postdivorce adjustment and therefore postdivorce parenting relationships. Bodenmann and Cina recruited 70 couples (either married or cohabitating) through community newspaper advertisements; 62 couples remained in the study group 5 years later. During the follow-up at the 5-year interview, 61 percent were married and 26 percent of the original group had divorced. The participants were asked to complete questionnaires independently from their partner about stress, individual and dyadic coping, and relationship satisfaction. At the 5-year point, the participants were asked to repeat this process and to complete questionnaires pertaining to the current marital status of the relationship, any changes in the relationship, and any problematic issues that had occurred in the relationship during the 5-year period.

Findings have suggested that couples cope with stress in different ways. Dyadic coping is defined as the efforts of one or both partners to engage in a stress management process that is aimed at either creating or restoring prior physical, psychological, or social homeostasis within each of the partners individually and within the couple as a unit. According to Bodenmann and Cina (2005), the stress caused by various situations may be brought into the relationship by one of the partners (for example, work-related stress) or result from a joint experience (for example, the illness of a child). Depending upon the origin of the stress, different types of responses are triggered. The response may be a common response, in situations where coping occurs jointly, or a supportive response, where one partner supports the other. Supportive dyadic coping refers to use of empathy, expression of solidarity in the relationship, and offering comforting words. There are also cases of what the researchers refer to as “delegated” dyadic coping, whereby one partner relies on the other to reduce the level of stress (Bodenmann & Cina, 2005). Common dyadic coping involves joint problem solving, joint information seeking, and spending relaxing time together.

In contrast to coping strategies identified as positive are those identified as negative, including hostile dyadic coping (support is accompanied by negative behaviours such as sarcasm or mocking), ambivalent dyadic coping (support is given but viewed as unnecessary), and superficial dyadic coping (support that lacks empathy).

Based upon the analysis of the questionnaire data and the types of coping, Bodenmann and Cina (2005) identified three groups of couples: stable-satisfied; stable-distressed; and, separated/divorced. The researchers considered the roles of stress, individual coping, and dyadic coping at first measurement (t1) and at 5 years (t2). The findings (the score based upon an average of the male and female score within the couple relationship) suggested that couples

categorized as “stable-satisfied” were more emotionally focused in their dyadic coping, had less stress during their leisure time, and expressed significantly less relationship stress than did the stable-distressed couples and the separated/divorce couples. General stress, stress during free time, and work-related stress were all predictors of divorce at the 5-year period. Of relevance to a study of postdivorce parenting relationships was Bodenmann and Cina’s findings “of the great importance of interpersonal coping in stressful situations within the realm of marriage and close relationships” (p. 84). As Bodenmann and Cina stated:

Dyadic coping may significantly contribute to the building and maintenance of a strong feeling of “we-ness” within the couple by creating a cognitive internal working model of the relationship as being helpful, supportive and an enriching, reliable resource, which strengthens the feelings of trust experienced within the relationship and the partner. (p. 85)

The findings yielded strong evidence that communication and problem-solving competencies are not only important predictors for problems in the marital dyad and resulting marital dissolution, but are also predictors for relationship satisfaction (Bodenmann & Cina, 2005). The findings also suggested that both individual and dyadic coping play an important role in marital quality and stability. This insight could be helpful in the process of understanding the interactions of divorced parents, who must continue to function within a relationship that requires sharing responsibility at least on some level, while managing the demands placed upon them as individuals as the result of the marital dissolution. For the relationship to be satisfactory to the couple, the participants must not only cope well individually but also cope well as a dyad.

Satisfaction or happiness has been explored in the couples’ literature. According to recent research, only one-third of married persons in the United States reported being “very happy” in their relationships. Findings suggest that those who are not happy in their marriages are more likely to seek mental health services and to experience physical health problems (Snyder,

Heyman, & Haynes, 2005). In contrast to the positive correlation between positive communication and marital satisfaction (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005), couples' unhappiness or distress is characterized by negative communication patterns, lengthy periods of negative behaviours, and fewer positive nonverbal cues (such as smiling or positive touching) within the relationship (Snyder et al., 2005; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). Since these have been identified as factors that undermine marital satisfaction, it seems reasonable that, when such behaviours continue following divorce, the quality of the postdivorce parenting relationship will also be negatively affected. Further, negative communication patterns, consistently negative behaviours toward the former spouse, and less positive nonverbal cues are often described by parents engaged in unhappy postdivorce parenting relationships.

Redefining parenting relationship roles after divorce poses difficulty for some parents. Some evidence has suggested that, following separation, men have greater difficulty with redefinition of roles than women (Baum, 2006). The process of successful redefinition has been found to rest on the ability of both to mourn the loss of the relationship and accept the need for ongoing contact with the former spouse. As described by Baum (2006),

Redefinition of the parental role and identity after divorce entails separating one's role and identity as a parent from one's role and identity as a spouse—that is, creating a new parental identity without the ex-spouse as a main point of reference. (p. 247)

This process of defining new roles, which is based solely on a parental relationship rather than on a primarily spousal relationship, has been identified as essential to cooperative parenting (Emery, 1994; Ferrera, 2003).

Several factors within the marital relationship have implications for the perceived quality of the postdivorce parental relationship. Education (Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1990), family income (Arendell, 1997), the number and age of the children (Buchanan, Maccoby, &

Dorbusch, 1991; Dudley, 1991), the children's attachment types (Masheter, 1991), and the length of the marital relationship (Bloom & Kindle, 1985) have been found to influence interaction within the postdivorce relationship. For many separating couples, difficulties or stressors influencing the health of their relationship exist prior to any decision made by either or both of them to dissolve the relationship. Some of these stressors and factors, such as the reason for the separation, have been identified as influencing coping and individual health following separation (Sakraida, 2008). Separation and divorce are emotionally charged, often conflict-evoking times for many parents, and the separation process may have implications for how divorced people view the feasibility of positive interaction with their former spouse. When children are involved, this separation process can be highly stressful, as divorced parents are required to maintain contact with their former spouse, either directly or indirectly. For divorced parents, the year immediately following divorce has been identified as an important time in which to negotiate and redefine roles within the family system (Madden-Derdich et al., 1999). Such changes "require a shift in closeness and distance in areas such as affectionate, emotional support, and child rearing decisions" (Madden-Derdich et al., 1999, p. 589).

Other significant influences that affect the quality of the postdivorce relationship have been identified, such as the passage of time (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). Remarriage by one or both parents is another; it has been identified as an event that negatively influences father-child contact but that has no effect on mother-child contact (Stephens, 1996). Some research has suggested that former spouses are unlikely to develop postdivorce friendships if one of them remarries, possibly because such a friendship may have a negative effect on the new marriage (Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999). When couples separate, men and women have been reported to experience different psychological and physical journeys from marriage to divorce (Gottman,

1994; Gottman & Notarius, 2002). Thus gender must be considered in examining the relevant factors influencing the postdivorce parenting relationship.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has explored the postdivorce parenting research and the couples' research to inform a study of postdivorce parenting relationships. The transition from a spousal relationship to one directed solely by the need to parent collaboratively is complex and challenging. The complexities involved in drawing distinctions between parents who make this transition successfully and parents who become entrenched in conflict have not been fully addressed in the scholarly literature. While several factors present during the marriage, at the time of separation, and following divorce have been identified as influencing the success or quality of parents' collaboration postdivorce, and some personality characteristics have been explored as they relate to postdivorce parental functioning, findings from couples' research have not been integrated to inform study of postdivorce parenting relationships.

This chapter establishes a foundation for further exploration of the factors that parents perceive as influencing postdivorce parenting relationships. It also provides a rationale for examining postdivorce parenting relationships because the adjustment of parents after divorce, their levels of conflict or cooperation, and their ability to shield children from problems in the parenting relationship, are central to children's adjustment and coping (Davies et al., 2004; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Understanding the postdivorce parenting relationship is essential to improve postdivorce conditions for children and parents. A grounded theory, qualitative design was deemed the most suitable approach to this research, due to the goal of understanding the complexity of postdivorce parenting relationships. This interpretive design allowed the researcher to tap the lived, rich experiences of parents, capturing factors that influence the postdivorce parenting relationship.

In a chronological manner, this chapter outlines the steps of the research process. In keeping with grounded theory, data were collected and analyzed in an iterative fashion; for the purposes of clarity however, the information is presented in a linear fashion. The sample, the interview guide, the interview process, and the analysis of data are described in detail. A review of trustworthiness is provided, followed by an outline of the ethics review process. The primary question addressed by the research was: What contributes to postdivorce parenting relationships?

### **Qualitative Research Design**

The aim of this study was to facilitate a better understanding of what contributes to the postdivorce parenting dyad “working” or “not working”. The study is informed by (a) ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); (b) risk and resilience theory (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1987); and (c) conflict theory (Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959). Each of these theories has much to offer individually, in guiding exploration of postdivorce parenting relationships; together, they offer a comprehensive approach to such exploration. In addition, this study builds upon previous research and theory in the couples’ and postdivorce parenting literature.

Qualitative methodology was selected for this study because it is concerned with “interpretation of subjective meaning, description of social context and the privilege of lay knowledge” (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002, p. 723). It was considered most

suitable because the aim of this study was to capture the subjective experiences of individuals in postdivorce parenting relationships. Retrospective reports of such subjective experiences of parents were lacking in the research literature. A qualitative methodology approach therefore allowed the researcher to listen, probe, and explore each unique experience.

In the field of couples' research (Morse, 2003) attention has not been paid to postdivorce parenting relationships. Courts, mental health professionals, and the public are becoming increasingly aware of the detrimental effects of this lack of information, particularly on the public court system and on the welfare of children (CBC Television, 2009). For example, although only a small proportion of separated parents engage in prolonged disputes, this group has been identified as consuming a disproportionate amount of family court resources through trials and repeated litigation (Johnston, 2000; Severson, Smith, Ortega & Pettus, 2004). This study sought to address this void—thereby informing social work practice—through exploring the lived experience of parents engaged in postdivorce parenting relationships.

This researcher followed grounded theory guidelines described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Drisko (1997), and Charmaz (2006), including: identifying relationships among initial codes; reducing and refocusing codes; seeking nonconfirming data; and ensuring saturation when codes covered both old and new data. Grounded theory is an interpretive process that allows theory to emerge through the discovery of patterns and themes (Fossey et al., 2002). This study followed this process. Data on the subjective experiences of divorced parents were gathered systemically and analyzed as the research proceeded. As data collection and analysis occur concurrently in this approach, the research evolved to include what was known and what was emerging as unknown throughout the process (Morse, Barret, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002; Wells, 1995). In the grounded theory approach, “sampling, data collection, analysis and



interpretation are related to each other in a cyclical (iterative) manner, rather than following one after another in a stepwise sequence” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 726); changes in the interview guide reflected this evolution. For example, when the concept of “moving forward” emerged from participants, the researcher incorporated the question “What does moving forward mean to you?” into subsequent interviews.

The researcher ensured (a) *trustworthiness*: she captured the local perspectives of the participants, and remained committed to close to the data through interpretation and analysis (Drisko, 1997). The researcher also adhered to guidelines by (b) *placing meanings in context*: she linked similarities and showed conflicting views with external interpretations (Charmaz, 2006; Drisko, 1997). By placing the data in context, she enables the reader to assess the transferability of findings and make their own assessment of her interpretations. The researcher also followed the guideline of (c) *confirmability*: she identified sameness as well as diverse information. Confirmability was ensured through the use of an audit trail and member-checking. For member-checking, the researcher asked three participants whether the emerging findings fit with their experience. Member checks with participants in the study also assisted in ensuring that the data were not being forced to fit a certain theory. Finally, the researcher ensured (d) *completeness and saturation*: during the collection process, for example, she asked participants to say more about their experience; and she determined when the coding themes had been saturated.

The researcher remained conscious of potential bias through discussing emerging themes and findings with social work colleagues and with the dissertation committee, to challenge any preconceived notions she might have. These discussions also assisted in enriching the findings as the researcher returned to the raw data to ask questions and explore themes and sub-themes. Raw

data captures the stories and voices of the participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), allowing readers to determine whether their interpretation of the data is congruent with that of the researcher.

Grounded theory seeks to know not only where a concept is evident or supported, but also where it is not. Therefore, the researcher regularly reexamined the data for exceptions or negative cases. For example, most of the participants described counselling as a positive resource but, in revisiting the data, one mother spoke of the counselling resource in negative terms.

### **Review of Cultural Categories (Self-Review)**

This section is segmented from the dissertation and is written the first-person. Consistent with an interpretive approach to research, I will provide an introduction of myself and a self-review. My goal was to ensure that the words of the participants were in the forefront of the findings regardless of whether their experiences fit with any preconceived notions or theories I held. Therefore, throughout the study process, I needed to be mindful of potential bias arising out of my experiences as a clinician. I have worked extensively with divorced parents; I knew that I needed to be aware of my two roles, researcher and clinician. I identified such potential bias during the early stages of the study. Grounded theory methodology assisted me with maintaining this awareness, since it states that the researcher need not be uninformed when entering into grounded theory, but rather can clearly declare any biases and predispositions (Drisko, 2000). McCracken's (1988) cultural review process also informed this mode of self-inquiry. It allowed me to use my own knowledge and experience as strengths in the research rather than as facets to be eliminated. As an interpreter of the data, it was important for me, as a researcher, to ensure a commitment to continually being conscious of my beliefs and feelings. Using a journal supported this awareness and process.

While the cultural review continued throughout the research process, it had a clear beginning. In the “preresearch stage” (Finlay, 2002), I explored my motivations and interest in the topic of postdivorce parenting relationships, in an effort to identify where my subjectivity might influence the direction of the study (Finlay, 2002; Fossey et al., 2002). I had never experienced divorce or separation, either as an adult or as a child. I have 12 years of clinical experience with families who were in the midst of separation and divorce however, as counsellor, mediator, and custody evaluator. Being in the position of a professional involved with families during these difficult times, rather than in situations where postdivorce parenting relationships were positive and successful, might have led me to hold preconceived notions about such relationships. Two such beliefs I identified, rooted in clinical experience, were that positive relationships are based upon the ability to communicate, and that early injuries to the relationship created long-standing problems.

I have addressed potential risk for bias by creating transparency. I have used thick description in the data collection stage (e.g., providing descriptions of the sample, documentation of participant reports, and interpretation by the researcher of these experiences [Ponterotto, 2006]). Each dissertation committee member read and discussed the data with the researcher a number of times. Further, I also practised reflective analysis, writing memos following interviews with study participants (Finlay, 2002; and see Appendix E). For example, following an interview with one male participant, I reflected on my feelings and interpretations of what the participant had described, as opposed to what he had stated during the interview. In this field note, I wrote, “This participant was very articulate. Despite the participant not directly acknowledging the level of his anger toward his ex-spouse, he did so in an indirect fashion. He referred to her as ‘stubborn’ and ‘stupid’ but his lengthy responses seemed to mask the intensity

of his anger.” Writing field notes was essential to me because they allowed time for self-reflection, to identify my responses, and supported increased focus on meanings and themes.

Purposeful sampling helped challenge my views (Fossey et al., 2002). For example, it ensured that participants with both positive and negative postdivorce parenting relationships were included in the study, as were participants with differing parenting arrangements (e.g., participant having sole custody with access to the other parent, joint custody with participant the primary caregiver, other parent having sole custody with participant having access).

### **Ethics**

The study received approval from the University of Toronto Health Sciences 1 Research Ethics Board. Consent was given by the participants. The consent form (Appendix A) and the consent to audiotape and transcription (Appendix D) indicated that the participants could withdraw from the study at any time with no consequence. All participants consented to participation and recording and transcription. Demographic information was collected through a self-administered demographic information form (Appendix B) completed by the participants prior to the interview. All participants were given a \$5.00 gift card from Tim Hortons as a small token of gratitude for giving their time.

### **The Sample**

Twenty parents participated in this study. Of the 20, 15 were women and five were men. The majority of the participants were between 35 and 40 years of age; only three were under 35. Half of the participants were parents of two children, seven participants had one child, two participants had three, and the remaining participant had four. All participants identified as Caucasian, which is representative of the particular community from which the sample was

selected. One limitation of this sample was that the number of women far outweighed the number of men.

Inclusion criteria required that participants shared parenting of one or more children with former spouses with whom they had had marital or common-law relationships. In order to ensure a wide range of experiences, there were no limitations with respect to the type of custody and access arrangements between the participants and their former spouses. Participants were required to be English-speaking and to reside in a particular Ontario community that included both rural and urban areas. To ensure that the research captured multiple perspectives, no constraints were placed on the length of time since the couples had separated or on the age of children. These differences were captured, however, in the demographic information (see Table 1).

The participants self-identified as sharing parenting with their former spouses. They reported various arrangements in terms of time-sharing and decision-making. Thirteen parents identified a joint custody arrangement regarding decision-making, although the majority of the mothers had actual physical custody of these children. Four of the fathers identified a joint custody arrangement that included joint decision-making and shared parenting time. One father reported that his former partner had sole custody of the children but said he shared equal time in parenting. The sole participant who identified her custody arrangement as “other” reported that her partner was able to have access but had chosen to have no contact with their child. Participants reported being separated<sup>1</sup> from their former spouses for periods ranging from 1 year to 18 years.

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<sup>1</sup> “Separated” refers to the point in time that the participant identified the marital relationship ending.

The parents who participated in this study offered their experiences for examination and analysis, with their words providing the data that this study analyzed. Interviews were conducted at the researcher' office and lasted between 1 to 1.5 hours.

Table 1

*Study Participants*

Participant #	Gender	Age	Period of Time since Separation	Number of children	Current Custody Arrangement			
					Joint	Sole with access to the other parent	Access with the other parent having sole custody	Other
1	Female	29	4 years	2	X			
2	Female	41	4 years	2	X			
3	Female	49	3 years	2	X			
4	Male	34	7 years	1	X			
5	Male	44	7 years	2			X	
6	Male	47	1 year 10 months	2	X			
7	Female	37	8 years	1		X		
8	Female	39	15 years	2		X		
9	Female	32	11 months	1	X			
10	Female	44	3 years	1	X			
11	Female	45	17 years	1		X		
12	Female <sup>2</sup>	39	3 months	1		X		
13	Female	39	4 years	2	X			
14	Female	56	18 years	4				X
15	Female	47	6 years	2	X			
16	Female	44	8 years	3		X		
17	Female	43	3 years 6 months	1	X			
18	Male	44	8 years	3	X			

<sup>2</sup> Participant #12 was unable to read and reported cognitive and learning challenges. Interview questions were modified to accommodate these needs and support the participant in sharing her lived experience.

19	Male	44	1 year	2	X			
20	Female	41	12 years	2	X			

Both systematic and theoretical sampling methods (Fossey et al., 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were used in recruiting the 20 participants. To develop theoretical categories throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2006), the researcher used theoretical sampling in which, as categories developed throughout the research process, participants were consulted to explore the relevance of the categories. For example, when the theme of “quick resolution” emerged from participant experiences, the researcher further explored the relevance of this category with subsequent participants and sought out participants who described a positive recovery soon after their separation from their former partner.

Because the goal was to recruit a broad range of parents from the community, a variety of recruitment methods was employed. An introductory letter was sent to local lawyers, therapists, and child advocates. Telephone calls were made and letters were sent to human resources departments of large employers in the area. Following an introductory telephone call to the organization director or administrative staff, a letter explaining the study along with posters were sent to interested organizations. Community centres were provided with an introductory letter and posters, for their employees and for parents and children utilizing the facility. Interested individuals were asked to contact the researcher to schedule a meeting time most convenient for them. Approximately halfway through the data collection process, a local newspaper published an article about this research.

During the initial telephone contact with prospective participants, the researcher explained the purpose of the study. With the exception of one woman who lived outside of the

designated geographical area and one woman who was rescheduled three times, all parents who initially contacted the researcher participated in the study.

Initial sampling attempted to collect a broad range of participant experiences to inform the data and, as themes emerged, more purposeful sampling was conducted to ensure representation of divergent perspectives. As concepts evolved through data collection, participants were selected using purposeful sampling, to ensure that participants were included who were best able to inform the research (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Fossey et al., 2002). For example, when it became apparent that more women than men had been recruited, after consulting with the research supervisor, efforts were made to reach out to men. Colleagues were contacted who informed men who met the criteria about the study. No preset number of participants was identified. Rather, as no new data or patterns emerged through coding, saturation was achieved at 20 participants (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Fossey et al., 2002). Although the number of women participants was greater than the number of men, saturation of themes was achieved because no new themes emerged through analysis. The data collection began in February 2008 and was completed in September 2008.

### **Interview Guide**

In-depth interviews were felt to offer the best opportunity to access information about individual experiences (Charmaz, 2006). According to Charmaz (2006), in a grounded theory study the interviewer should ask “nonjudgmental questions to invite detailed discussion of a topic” (p. 26). In the current study, such questions in the interview guide included: “How would you describe your current parenting relationship with your children’s other parent?” and “What led to your separation?” As previously noted (see page 47), grounded theory was followed, resulting in modifications to the interview guide (see Appendix C) throughout the process.



The researcher adhered to Charmaz's (2006) guideline in developing the interview guide, which was reviewed and discussed with members of the dissertation committee. As participants raised new issues in the interviews, and data were collected and analyzed, new ideas emerged. Subsequent interviews were adapted (by adding probes) to incorporate new issues that required further exploration. The interview used open-ended questions to encourage conversation between participant and interviewer and guide the content and discussion of themes that emerged. Such questions allowed participants to use their own language to describe their experiences. Questions included: "How would you describe your relationship with your child's other parent?" and "Do you feel that you can address your concerns with your former spouse?" An example of a probe was "Can you tell me more about that?" Participants were also asked to elaborate when clarification was required. The researcher structured questions to allow for narrative answers. As themes emerged through data analysis, the researcher included additional questions. For example, when the theme MOVING ON began to emerge through the data collection, the researcher incorporated open-ended questions so as to gain further information about it.

### **Interview Process**

An individual interview was conducted with each participant, and the interviews were conducted in the order in which participants had contacted the researcher. Throughout, the researcher discussed challenges in the interview process with trusted colleagues, the research supervisor, and the committee.

The researcher's years of clinical work with individuals were invaluable during the interview process. She understood that recounting experiences with former partners could possibly trigger upsetting emotions for participants, such as anger or sadness. Her years of experience in working with people who are often very sad and express their feelings in various

ways, including crying, enabled her to feel comfortable with feelings that surfaced. For example, one woman began crying as she described the problems in her relationship with her former spouse and spoke of her regrets about ending the relationship. The researcher allowed the woman to proceed with expressing her feelings and regain her composure. In another example, a woman who described herself as “slow” wished to participate in the study. Accordingly, because she had worked with clients who had a range of cognitive skills, the researcher adjusted her questions and language to help the participant tell her story. The researcher listened attentively and probed when necessary.

### **Interview Transcription**

All participants provided informed consent and agreed to allow their interviews to be tape-recorded and transcribed. The names and any potentially identifiable information were removed and fictitious names were used, to ensure confidentiality of the participants and the community. Digital recordings were transcribed verbatim. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher and an assistant (10 were transcribed by the assistant). Each interview was reviewed by the researcher so she could immerse herself in the data, reflect on responses to the questions she asked, and develop alternative ways to ask questions (Charmaz, 2006). She read the transcripts several times and revisited them frequently. She listened to recorded data carefully, because she understood the importance of not making assumptions about issues or participants. She made notes in the margins of interviews when she reviewed them. Transcripts were then imported into QSR-NVivo 8 data management software in order to conduct data analysis.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to a fair and ethical process through which the findings of the research can closely represent the experiences of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985;

Padgett, 1998). Trustworthiness is obtained by checking for and remaining conscious of potential researcher bias, respondent bias, and reactivity (that is, the influence that the presence of the researcher has on the naturalism of the setting; Padgett, 1998). In this study, the interviews took place in the researcher's clinical office. To ensure trustworthiness in this study, the following methods were adhered to: audit trail, triangulation, external check, and member check.

**Audit trail.** The researcher's preconceptions are important to consider in any qualitative study. To verify the content or process of the research, various records may be used. In this study, the researcher maintained an audit trail of interviews, audio tapes and transcriptions, receipts for Tim Hortons certificates, a newspaper article on the study, and notes that indicated thoughts and decisions regarding analysis. To ensure the trustworthiness of the interviews, to keep biases in check (Creswell, 1998; Padgett, 1998), and to note ideas that required further consideration, the researcher wrote memos following each interview. Memo-writing, "the pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing draft papers" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 72), was perceived as an essential part of the data collection process. An example of such a memo can be found in Appendix E.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation refers to the use of two or more sources about one subject to achieve a comprehensive understanding (Padgett, 1998). The use of more than one theory to inform a study ensures that the data are viewed from different perspectives and therefore challenge biases; theoretical triangulation was used to inform this study. As set out in chapter 2, this study was informed by (a) ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); (b) risk and resilience theory (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1987); and (c) conflict theory (Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959). Because triangulation aims to support completeness (i.e., a holistic view of the phenomenon; Curtin & Fossey, 2007; Farmer, Robinson, Elliott & Eyles, 2006), the use of

multiple theories helped ensure a multiple-perspective understanding of postdivorce parenting relationships. Further triangulation in this study was also achieved by comparing the interview material with couples' and postdivorce parenting literature (Amato & Keith, 1991; Emery, 1982; Johnston, 1994; Kelly, 1993; Lee, 1997; Radovanovic, 1993).

**External Check on the Inquiry Process.** To ensure that her interpretations would be challenged or supported, the researcher engaged regularly in peer debriefings with colleagues who worked with divorced individuals. She participated in this external checking throughout the collection and data analysis process. She also met and consulted regularly with her dissertation supervisor.

**Member check.** Member checking was conducted with some of the participants to ensure that the evolving themes were credible (based on the participants' experience) and trustworthy, and to challenge any potential bias. Two in-person meetings and one telephone interview were conducted with three participants. Sample questions asked of the participants in this process were: "I am finding that people view 'working' or 'not working' relationships' as the result of the behaviour of the former spouse; does this fit for you?" and "I am finding that people move through phases of transition following separation, with only some parents achieving a 'working' relationship. Does that fit for you?" In the case of one participant, the researcher asked, "If you felt that your spouse was meeting financial obligations for your children, would that improve your parenting relationship with him?" In this case, the participant answered "No," and then explained that her relationship with him was, from her perspective, nonexistent. The researcher discussed emerging themes to inquire whether they were credible, that is in support of or contrary to the participants' experience. Participants could review the summary of themes to

ensure that any potential bias could be challenged. All participants involved in member checking indicated that the emerging information fit with their experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher identified and coded categories and emerging themes using the qualitative data analysis software N\*Vivo (Richards, 1999). Data were analyzed with the understanding that the individual knew more about the subject material than the researcher.

### **Coding**

The researcher adhered to coding guidelines for grounded theory practice as identified by Charmaz (2006) and Drisko (1997). Coding refers to categorizing (i.e., labelling pieces of data with a short name to account for that information; Charmaz, 2006). Such codes help sort the data for analysis. In qualitative research, codes are created by what emerges from the data rather than application of preconceived categories or codes to the data (Charmaz, 2006). According to Charmaz (2006), analysis of data requires at least two phases: open and focused coding. Open coding is described as “the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties or dimensions are discovered in the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p 102). The goal of open coding is “to remain open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by your readings of the data” (p. 46). In this study, a multistage approach was used in the data analysis. Using open coding, the researcher examined the words of the participants. She conducted a close initial reading of the data, read the interview transcript, listened to the recording of the interview, and reread the interview. Interviews were reread and revisited as themes were identified.

In open coding, data were identified as related without concern for the number of codes. Following this stage, the research progressed to focused coding. Focused coding entails identifying and developing salient categories from the open codes. Charmaz (2006) warned that

the move from open to focused coding is not always a linear process. The researcher may need to return to the initial data to gain a better understanding of the information. In this study, coding was reviewed throughout the process. Moving back and forth between open and focused coding, some codes were eliminated, some smaller categories were added to larger categories, and some larger categories were subdivided. Thus, the researcher ensured that the codes remained close to the original data. The codes then evolved into more abstract themes in accordance with grounded theory research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Coding searched for dimensionality, intensity, or variety. That is, the researcher sought to capture the richness of the data by searching not only for words or concepts that appeared frequently but also for those experiences that amounted to exceptions.

The researcher used axial coding, the purpose of which is to scientifically label and make links between categories, to relate subcategories to their categories (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). While using axial coding increases risk of limiting the codes that can be constructed, it provides an analytical framework for the data analysis. The researcher returned to the text and reviewed it thoroughly. Text was converted into concepts which “specify the dimensions of a larger category” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 61). According to Charmaz (2006), “memo-writing provides a space to become actively engaged with your materials, to develop your ideas, and to fine-tune your subsequent data-gathering” (p. 72). Throughout all of the phases of coding, memo-writing was used to focus and analyze ideas about codes.

## CHAPTER 5:

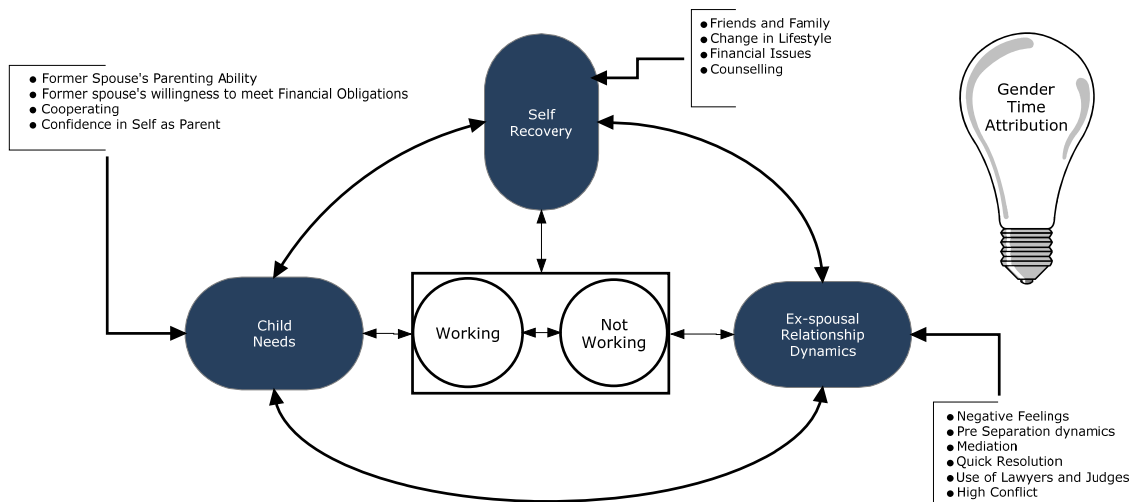
### FINDINGS

The experience of parenting after divorce involves a complex relationship with the former spouse. A conceptual model (Figure 1) is included to guide the reader through this complexity and the themes that emerged; “the visual image of a diagram may suggest the content and direction of the analysis as well as its form” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 115). This visual diagram represents the three major themes—SELF RECOVERY, EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, and CHILD NEEDS—that emerged through analysis of the participants’ descriptions of their experience of their postdivorce parenting relationship. The circle represents the central unifying theme of “working or not working” dynamics of the postdivorce parenting relationship. As indicated by the arrows, the same relationship may work at one point and not work at another time. Also depicted in the conceptual model are the metathemes of GENDER, TIME, and ATTRIBUTION, illustrated as a “light bulb” because the interplay among the themes is interpreted in the context of these metathemes.

Working from the ground up, the researcher began the process of data analysis. As advised by Charmaz (2006), following the early stages of coding, categories were developed based upon the relationships between codes; categories are words that capture “common themes and patterns in several codes” (p. 91). By examining codes as categories, the researcher “scrutinized and developed” (Charmaz, p. 71) the codes to determine which relationships best represented what was emerging from the data. Some of these codes became conceptual categories, from which the visual diagram and themes resulted.

The next step in the data analysis process was to set out the resulting themes and metathemes that emerged from participants’ descriptions of their experiences in postdivorce parenting relationships. The three separate but interacting major themes were SELF RECOVERY,

EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, and CHILD NEEDS. Analysis of the themes was then situated within three metathemes: GENDER, TIME, and ATTRIBUTION. At the most abstract level, the central unifying theme, “working or not working,” as it relates to the postdivorce parenting relationship, encompassed the themes and metathemes. Many parents described the relationship as “working” at one point in time and “not working” at another, indicating that the postdivorce parenting relationships were not static. The interaction among the themes contributed to the state of this relationship at any one point in time. This chapter lays the groundwork to address the research question: What contributes to postdivorce parenting relationships?



*Figure 1.* Conceptual model: Overview of themes, metathemes and central unifying theme associated with postdivorce parenting relationships.

## Process of Data Analysis

### Initial Codes

A first effort at open coding using line-by-line analysis generated initial codes; these were composed of participants' original words or descriptive statements, to remain close to the data (Charmaz, 2006). For instance, some parents described their experiences of parenting after



divorce using words such as “struggle,” “anger,” “repulse,” and “hate.” Other parents used words such as “forgive,” “support,” and “work.” Initial open coding resulted in 78 categories which for the most part directly used the words of the participants and were thus “in vivo.” The categories based upon relationships between the codes were developed through a comprehensive reading of the transcripts and included feelings about their previous partners, their own and their former spouses’ parenting abilities, perceptions of what their children felt, and descriptions of the relationship dynamics.

### **Categories**

Qualitative methods are essentially inductive. That is, theories emerge through the data analysis; analysis does not test pre-set explanatory theories (Padgett, 1998). In this study, categories emerged through the data analysis as relationships among codes became broader. Using categories allows analysis to occur at a more abstract level than when working with initial codes (Charmaz, 2006). For example, an initial text “wants more time with her dad” (#17) was categorized as “child wants time with other parent.” Text from another interview read, “some things will make them (the children) sad” (#19). This was categorized as “child sadness.” Another segment from an interview read, “My youngest son says sometimes his brain gets confused and like they (the children) have adapted but they don’t like it” (#2). This was initially coded as “child confused by situation.” As the categories moved further from the data, these categories, along with others, were grouped into the category of “child feelings following separation” and subsequently into the more abstract category “child feelings.”

The ideas that emerged from the data became more conceptual and abstract as the researcher pursued her analysis. Initially she was concerned about the number of categories and worried about the seeming lack of connection among them, but as the process continued relationships appeared clearer. Guided by the recommendations of Charmaz (2006), some of the

initial codes took the form of theoretical categories because these best represented the relationships within the codes. Initial categories were grouped into yet more conceptual categories. For example, the researcher identified relationships between the initial categories of “no communication” and “feeling blamed by partner.” These were then organized into one conceptual category, “problematic relationship dynamics.” As data collection and analysis continued, categories were “filled out” (Charmaz, p. 72) by adding codes within existing categories, new categories were created, and other categories renamed as the researcher stayed as close to the participants’ words as possible.

After consulting with the dissertation supervisor, the researcher examined which categories contained more data and which contained less. Through a process of constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) in which categories were grouped, renamed, and regrouped, similarities as well as exceptions emerged. The further the researcher moved from the words of the participants, the more abstract the categories that she developed. For example, the categories of *sadness*, *anger*, and *frustration* were grouped and named as *negative feelings*. In this case, selective sampling was implemented to challenge emerging concepts and test the connections among the categories. To provide an alternative perspective on those with negative feelings, the researcher therefore had to actively seek out parents with positive postdivorce parenting experiences.

The researcher became conscious of ensuring that the data were not forced into a model. As a result of discussions with the dissertation supervisor, she returned to the original transcripts and reflected on the words of the participants, in keeping with Charmaz’s (2006) suggestion to consider “what lurks in the background of your analysis” (p. 172). Throughout this process, another level of understanding emerged whereby the words of the participants (the raw data)

needed to be analyzed in the context of who was telling the story and under what circumstances the story was being told—the context.

### **Dimensions of Categories**

Charmaz (2006) described how categories are “filled out” as they are grouped. Smaller categories were grouped with larger categories and some of the categories were subdivided. Through this grouping process, the researcher began to identify *dimensions* within the categories. By using data to “dimensionalize” (Creswell, 1998, p. 57) the possibilities of a category or property, additional information surfaces, adding depth to the category. In grounded theory, within the researcher looks for *properties* which are subcategories to show dimensions, or extreme possibilities within each category (Creswell, 1998). For example, when the researcher started asking how categories related to one another, more abstract relationships were identified. All participants, in some manner, described the dynamics of their postdivorce parenting relationship as multidimensional. Through the process of analyzing the data, it became clear that all parents, men and women, identified dimensions within a category as either helpful or problematic to their recovery.

The same dimension of a category could be either protective or a potential risk to the postdivorce parenting relationship, depending upon the interaction with and among other dimensions. For example, mediation was described as supporting settlement of separation related matters in the short term, and therefore could be considered protective to the postdivorce parenting relationship. Mediation was also identified as not helpful however, in resolving conflict over the long term and therefore, over the long-term, posed potential risk. Some dimensions were described as either providing a protective role or as posing risk. In adjusting to changes in their lifestyle following separation, for instance, participants consistently referred to their own independence or strength as helpful; therefore, independence was always described as

protective to the postdivorce parenting relationship. In contrast, financial issues were consistently described as impeding the postdivorce parenting relationship and therefore were always identified as posing risk. All participants also discussed the role that family or friends played as a resource to them in their recovery after separation. The result was that the researcher categorized family and friends as resources to people in their self recovery following separation.

All the men and eleven of the women in the study described anger or frustration toward their former spouses following separation. These negative feelings continued for some of these parents long after the divorce was finalized (for one participant 17 years). Negative feelings then became a dimension of the category of EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, because such feelings were consistently linked to how participants viewed their former spouses and the parenting relationship with their former spouses.

In addition to capturing similarities in the data, dimensions of categories also described exceptions to the experiences described by other participants. For example, although only one participant identified spirituality as a resource after separation, the initial code of spirituality could still be captured as a dimension within the category entitled “What parents say about self recovery after separation.” Including exceptions in the groupings is essential to the grounded theory approach and was essential to the researcher’s commitment to exploring the richness of the data.

Through this process, in the end 14 categories were formed from the initial 78. These categories and their dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) follow (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Categories and Dimensions Groupings*

Category	Dimensions
Ex-spousal Relationship Dynamics	Lack of communication, ability to communicate, distrust, trust in former spouse as parent, feeling blamed, feeling supported, inability to make decisions, ability to make decisions, support, personal ability, blames other parent for problems in relationship
Adapting to changes in lifestyle	Resources, friends, family, spirituality, mental health, independence, financial issues
What parents say about parenting with their former spouse	Problems with decision-making, lack of judgement by other parent, poor parenting, failure to spend time with child, trust in other parent with child, financial support, spending time with other parent, receptive to needs of other parent, cooperating
Child's Feelings	Placed in middle of parenting relationship, child awareness of problems, doesn't like other parent, sadness, feels loved by both parents, wants time with other parent
Negative Feelings	Anger, sadness, frustration, resentment
High Conflict	Physical confrontation with new partner, bullying, police involvement, emotional abuse
Access Schedules	Feelings of inequality, does not meet child's emotional needs, lack of investment by other parent, shared responsibility, other parent places child as priority by spending time
Mediation	Resolves issues related to custody and finances in the short-term, return to court or problems over long-term not solved
Use of Lawyers and Judges	Dissatisfaction, expensive, poor advice, good support, use of legal process to resolve matters
Counselling	Learning new strategies, feeling better about self, positive support for self, positive support for child needs, finding the right counsellor
Role of New Partners	Places new relationship over children, feeling replaced as parent, physical conflict with former spouse's new partner, better behaviour than former spouse, support from new partner, new partner treats children well

*(table continues)*

Table 2. (continued)

Perception of Self in Parenting Relationship	Supports child's relationship with other parent, attempts to communicate regardless of spouse's behaviour, desire for working relationship, open and willing to negotiate
Perception of Self as a Parent	Successful, better since separation, places child needs as primary, attuned to emotional needs of child
Preseparation Relationship	Controlling, emotionally abusive, conflict, addiction issues, difference in parenting styles, equal, easy, team, similar parenting style

### **The Results: Three Themes**

As the researcher continued to use the constant comparison method, links among categories emerged. Upon reflection and examination, themes were identified as intersecting the categories. The three main themes were: SELF RECOVERY, EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, and CHILD NEEDS. They were central to the results of this study, and are outlined briefly in this section. To provide adequate representation for all participants, each theme was seen as capturing a multitude of perspectives (Creswell, 1998). Following an introduction, the themes, properties, and metathemes are examined closely in an integrated manner as they are related to the central unifying theme—"working or not working."

#### **Definition of Themes and Properties**

Themes refer to the description of patterns across the data (Charmaz, 2006). Three themes were identified through the analysis of the categories. Importantly, the interaction among the three themes emerged as explaining whether the postdivorce parenting relationship was "working" or "not working." To understand the relevance of these themes in examining the postdivorce parenting relationship, it is necessary to explore the themes' properties (Creswell, 1998). Creswell (1998) suggested that properties represent multiple perspectives on the themes (p. 151). According to Creswell (1998), "Overall, this is the process of reducing the database to a

small set of themes or categories that characterize the process of action being explored in the grounded theory study” (p. 151).

Following the process described by Creswell (1998), in this study the category of adapting to changes in lifestyle related to the theme of SELF RECOVERY— how participants recovered following divorce. Other categories were also captured within the theme of SELF RECOVERY and became the theme’s properties, including friends and family, independence, financial issues, and spirituality. The theme of EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS emerged as the researcher identified the relationships among the dimensions of negative feelings, pre-separation relationship, perception of self in postdivorce parenting relationship, counselling, mediation, use of lawyers and judges, and high conflict. These dimensions then became the theme’s properties. The third theme, CHILD NEEDS, captured the relationship among the categories of perception of self as a parent, access schedules, and child feelings. Again, these categories became the theme’s properties.

Each theme was multidimensional and encompassed the properties associated with the postdivorce parenting relationship experience. As well, the themes were linked, through interplay among their properties. Interaction between and among the three main themes explained the shifting dynamics of the postdivorce parenting relationship. Whether the postdivorce parenting relationship was “working or not working” was the result of the properties within each theme— SELF RECOVERY, EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, and CHILD NEEDS— and the interaction amongst all three. For example, negative feelings (a property of SELF RECOVERY) could only be understood in the context of the other properties such as financial issues, family and friends, and engagement with professional resources. Similarly, the theme of SELF RECOVERY had to be understood within the context of the other themes of EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS and CHILD NEEDS. Participants emphasized that the postdivorce parenting relationship was complex

and, depending upon the interaction of themes and properties within the themes, the postdivorce parenting relationship was either “working” or “not working” and was not static—it shifted over time.

### **Metathemes**

Metathemes refer to “themes at a higher level of abstraction than the original emergent themes” (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2002, p. 375). As the researcher examined the dynamics and complexity of the interplay among the themes, she found that three metathemes were influential in how this process occurred: GENDER, TIME, and ATTRIBUTION. The metathemes allowed the researcher to move from simply reporting the data to integrating the findings in a way that told the story of the participants (Charmaz, 2006). These also provided a framework within which to analyze the data at a more abstract level. The metathemes will be addressed when they appear in the themes and, for the purposes of definition and clarity, are introduced below.

**Gender.** GENDER refers to the differences in how men and women in the study described their postdivorce parenting relationship. This metatheme emerged across the three main themes and within their properties, influencing how the postdivorce parenting relationship was described by participants. Analysis suggested that some of the properties showed more gender differences than others.

Within SELF RECOVERY, gender differences emerged in the emphasis the women gave to the importance of the support they received from friends and family following separation. They consistently identified friends and family as their primary support. Although the men also acknowledged receiving such support, all of them emphasized the important role as primary resource that their new partners played in providing emotional support. The influence of the metatheme was also seen in how gender influenced where men and women found confidence following separation. The women found increased confidence in their ability to adapt to their



new lifestyle, in terms of finances, housing, and finding employment, whereas the men reported increased confidence in their parenting ability.

The metatheme GENDER was illustrated within the theme EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS. The men and women appeared to find different roots for negative feelings toward their former spouses. Men expressed anger and frustration toward their former spouses for placing financial pressures on them during the separation, and for undermining and disrespecting their role as a parent. Women did not focus on how their former spouse treated them, but rather on how the former spouse treated their child(ren). While they expressed dislike and anger toward their former spouses, they typically described this anger as rooted in their ex-spouse's failure to be a good parent to their child(ren).

All of the men talked about issues within the CHILD NEEDS theme differently than did the women. Typically, the men described their former partners as good parents whereas, in contrast, the women who reported "not working" postdivorce parenting relationships described their former partners as not good parents. The greatest concern reported by the men in terms of their former spouses' parenting was that their former partners did not value the father-child relationship. In contrast, women described their former partners as failing to be good parents, either because they were absent or through an inability to parent. Women's concerns about their former partners' parenting fell along a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum, some women described their former spouses as inconsiderate of the child's emotional needs, such as lack of awareness about how a parental schedule affected the child, while at the other end of the spectrum, other women described their former spouses' behaviour as bordering on child abuse.

**Time.** TIME emerged as a metatheme through participants' discussion. Time was not described by any of the participants as solving problems in and of itself, but with the passing of time, some participants said they formed new relationships (which were consistently described in

positive terms), obtained employment, found adequate housing, and resolved financial and custody matters. Across the three main themes, time was seen to influence relationships in shifting from “not working” to “working” or, in the case of some participants, from problematic to increasingly more problematic.

Within SELF RECOVERY, women discussed the importance of resources of both formal and informal resources, as they gained independence and worked through feelings associated with separation. For most of the women, self recovery was not immediate and time was required to adjust to separation.

Time also appeared within EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, specifically with regard to dispute resolution. Participants described mediation as beneficial in the short term but not in the long term. Mediation was described as offering resolution and relief from conflict when parents engaged in the process shortly after separation. As the needs of the relationship changed, however, the mediated agreement was described as no longer a helpful tool and participants reported being unable to successfully use it with their former partners.

Some participants described how time negatively influenced their postdivorce parenting relationship. While not all parents made reference to time, they sometimes described intense anger toward their former spouse despite having been separated for “years.” Some reported that their attempts to communicate became more difficult over the years whereas others described improvement in communication. For participants with working relationships, time, in conjunction with other supportive properties, allowed the relationship to improve. For example, some mothers described improvements in their relationships with their former partners as time progressed.

Resolution of anger, together with acceptance of the current situation, also appeared to be supported by the passing of time for some mothers now able to describe their relationship as

“working.” While none of the fathers described a “working” postdivorce parenting relationship, one father stated that he felt there was some improvement in addressing his concerns with his former spouse although he continued to report significant problems in the overall relationship.

Although the metatheme of TIME did not emerge as clearly in the CHILD NEEDS theme as it did in the themes of SELF RECOVERY and EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, it was most clear in situations where parents reported a “not working” relationship. In these “not working” cases, some participants reported that the relationship “deteriorated” because there were more experiences of the other parent not meeting the needs of the children—mothers perceived child needs were not met because of their former spouses’ poor parenting, while fathers perceived child needs were not met because of the former spouses’ lack of support for the father-child relationship. Time gave an opportunity for both the men and the women to notice the inadequacies of the former spouse. For example, one father indicated that, while he was better able to address some concerns with his former spouse, overall the relationship continued to be “not working,” even after 8 years of divorce. He saw at different points in time his ex-spouse demonstrated an inability or unwillingness to support his relationship with their child. As an example, he had had to “fight” for extra time with his daughter, in a lengthy custody and access battle. Most recently, he found a similar lack of support for the father-child relationship in how his ex-spouse allowed his daughter to call her step-father “Daddy.”

When the researcher comprehensively considered all three of the main themes in the context of time, it became evident that the postdivorce parenting relationship is continually in process. There is no fixed outcome to the relationship because there are different needs at different times. Further, whether the postdivorce parenting relationship is “working” or “not working” at any one point in time is dependent upon any number of properties and the interaction among them. Based on the experiences of these mothers and fathers, separated for 1

to 18 years, time passing does not on its own ensure attainment of a working relationship with the former spouse. For example, while some participants described an increased ability to “forgive” (#14) their former partner as time progressed, and several parents described an improved ability to communicate about the children, others described ongoing, and at times heightened, feelings of animosity toward the other parent for several years following divorce. While time may heal some feelings for those with working parenting relationships, for those parents with “not working” postdivorce parenting relationships, the passage of time did not change the problematic dynamics of the relationship and occasionally made them worsened them.

**Attribution.** As a metatheme, ATTRIBUTION meant where participants located responsibility for problems or successes within the postdivorce parenting relationship. Attribution has been discussed in research on how people perceive the causes of their divorce and how this attribution affects personal adjustment, attachment to a spouse, and general appraisals of life (Amato & Previti, 2003); it has not been investigated in relation to parenting and divorce. Attribution entails people observing behaviour and making sense of events or situations through a reflective process, determining internal or external responsibility for the consequences (Weiner, 1980, 1985, 1992). In the context of how the postdivorce parenting relationship is affected, internal attribution refers to attributing responsibility for the relationship to the self, and external attribution refers to attributing responsibility to the former spouse. In both kinds of attribution, one may be referring to whether the attribution is related to responsibility for the problem or to responsibility for the solution (Amato & Previti, 2003; Brickman et al., 1992).

When the concept of attribution emerged in this study, it helped provide an understanding about the gulf between “working” and “not working” postdivorce parenting relationships.

Attribution style was seemingly influential in whether a relationship was described as “working” or “not working” because it was clearly associated with how participants described the postdivorce parenting relationship. Parents who described “working” relationships attributed the success of the relationship to both internal and external causes, including themselves, their former spouses, and the interplay between the properties. “Working” dynamics were described by women who also described an ability to share responsibility for managing issues within the postdivorce parenting relationship. In contrast, those with “not working” relationships attributed the problems in the relationship to their former spouses, and perceived themselves as having little control over the dynamics of the parenting relationship. Such an externalization of responsibility resulted in a “nothing works” perspective with regard to their efforts to change or improve the relationship.

The metatheme of *ATTRIBUTION* intersected the theme of *SELF RECOVERY*, specifically within the property of negative feelings. When the study participants reported adapting to a new lifestyle following divorce, some men expressed anger toward their former spouses for financial demands and, in effect, appeared to blame their former spouse for the financial repercussions of the divorce. Women, on the other hand, attributed the need for changes in lifestyle to the divorce itself and did not express negative feelings toward their former spouses although, for many of the women, the divorce resulted in a level of financial hardship not reported by any of the men. The women said that they shared responsibility for the repercussions of divorce with their former spouses.

Within *EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS*, all of the participants, men and women, expressed a desire to achieve a “working” postdivorce parenting relationship, and they all characterized themselves as making significant efforts to develop and maintain a positive relationship with their former spouse. Participants who achieved a “working” relationship

described having accepted their former spouses' behaviours and personal qualities, and credited shared responsibility for the functioning of the relationship. In contrast, those with "not working" relationships continued to struggle with issues they attributed to the responsibility of former spouses. In postdivorce parenting relationships, how one participant perceived the behaviours and/or personality of the former spouse appeared to be associated with the development of a "working" or "not working" parenting relationship.

In "not working" relationships, respondents felt they put their own feelings aside when communicating with their ex-spouses, regardless of whether the ex-spouses reciprocated. Some women and men externally attributed responsibility for the failure of the parenting relationship to their former spouses' personality or unwillingness to improve the dynamics. For example, one mother explained how she and her ex-spouse continued to battle using e-mail as their only mode of communication. She described equal fault for initial problems with communication but attributed responsibility to her former partner for not working with her to improve the situation. Hence, a dysfunctional pattern of communication was perpetuated and matters remained unsolved. Respondents who described "working" postdivorce parenting relationships placed greater emphasis on "we" and "mutual respect" (#10) than "the other" when discussing successful parenting relationships.

In CHILD NEEDS, the final theme, some participants attributed full responsibility to the former spouses for not meeting the child's needs. All of the men and women, in "working" and "not working" relationships, believed that their children's needs were being met by them, despite negative behaviour demonstrated by their ex-spouses. Some women in "not working" relationships found that their child's needs were not being met, and they assigned responsibility for this to the former spouses' behaviour. For example, one woman explained that she believed

her children's needs were not being met because the children reported that they felt their father was always "mad" at her (their mother).

None of the women perceived themselves as impeding their former spouses' role as a parent; they therefore attributed responsibility for problems in the father-child relationship to the father's inability or unwillingness to meet their child's needs. Similarly, all of the men in this study viewed themselves as good parents. They attributed responsibility for child needs not being met to their former spouses, because they perceived their former spouses as failing to support the father-child relationship.

### **Central Unifying Theme: "Working or Not Working"**

The central unifying theme, "working or not working," encompasses the three themes (SELF RECOVERY, EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, and CHILD NEEDS) and the three metathemes (GENDER, TIME, and ATTRIBUTION). As described by participants, the postdivorce parenting relationship was constantly susceptible to influence from one or more of the main themes. Whether a relationship is "working" or "not working" is due to a process involving the three themes and their interaction with the three metathemes. Depending upon how the themes interacted (the role of gender, the time of the interaction, and how the parent attributed responsibility for dynamics) the relationship was either "working" or "not working". As indicated, these relationships were not static but shifted as a result of the interplay among the themes, metathemes, and the properties of the themes. The themes and properties that emerged from the initial categories appear in Figure 2.

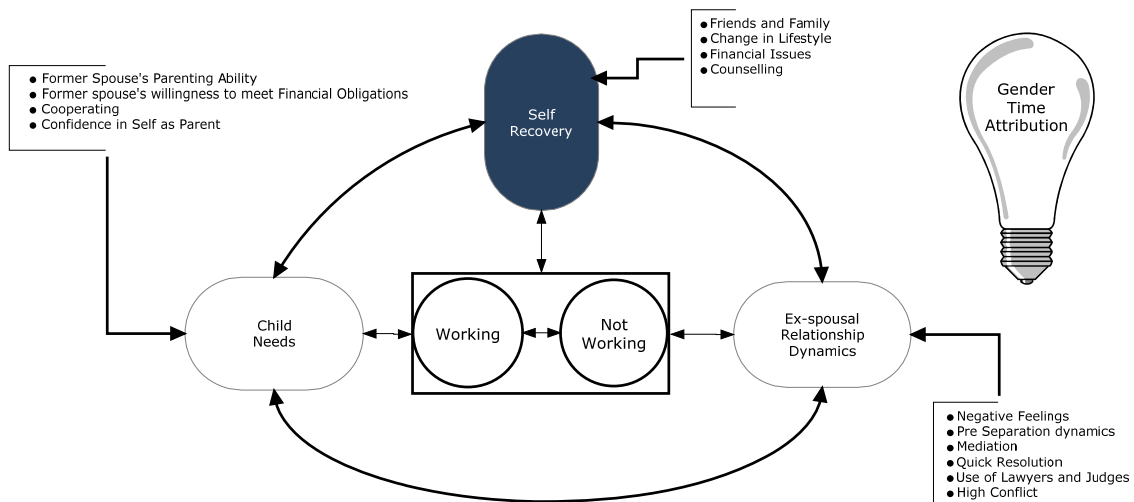


*Figure 2.* Summary of grouping of categories, themes and central unifying theme.

The three main themes that emerged from the data will next be reviewed and supported by quotations from interviews. While the themes must be considered as intersecting with one another, they will be presented linearly for clarity. As will be discussed, the metathemes were influential in how men and women discussed their experiences. At the most abstract level, the central unifying theme, “working or not working,” encompassed all the themes and metathemes.



## Theme I: SELF RECOVERY



*Figure 3.* Conceptual model: Overview of themes, metathemes, and central unifying theme associated with postdivorce parenting relationship dynamics.

The first main theme is SELF RECOVERY. Figure 3 depicts the conceptual model with emphasis on the main theme of self recovery. The supporting quotations provide the reader with information and details related to the theme of self recovery and the properties parents described as either supporting or impeding recovery. This theme evolved directly through the data analysis and captured how participants described their responses to the adverse circumstances often associated with separation. Gender differences were apparent throughout the theme and, as can be seen in the quotations, were most evident when parents discussed the importance of friends and family. Participants typically described the importance of supportive resources. These included friends and family, adapting to a new lifestyle, and counselling as important to self recovery after separation. One mother described spirituality as important to her self recovery. Participants also described risks to this recovery process, which included financial strain and negative feelings.

SELF RECOVERY was described by both the men and the women as essential following separation whether they developed a “working” postdivorce parenting relationship with their former spouse or not. According to the men and women, recovery was challenged to varying degrees early in the process by the stress that often followed dissolution of couple relationships. For example, when men and women discussed obstacles to their recovery of self, they often spoke of financial hardships as a direct consequence of the separation, and negative feelings (often associated with finances as well as other issues). Without resources to mitigate the stresses or hardships resulting from separation, some women described feelings of depression that impeded their ability to meet their own physical and psychological needs. For women, the themes of SELF RECOVERY, EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, and CHILD NEEDS, did not occur in isolation from one another; for example, lack of self recovery was described as impeding their ability to meet the needs of their children or improve dynamics in the ex-spousal relationship. In contrast, men did not describe their own self recovery as influencing ex-spousal relationship dynamics or child needs; they appeared to view their recovery as independent from other areas of their life.

One mother explained:

*I was really struggling with my own stuff and it was really hard for the kids too. So, really neither of us was fit to be a parent. That sounds terrible but really, seriously, it has been a struggle. (#15)*

There were exceptions to the importance of self recovery. Mothers reported a range of experiences, from no need for recovery to a lengthy process at which point they were able to function positively following the separation from their former spouse. Some mothers described positive feelings immediately at the point of separation and did not identify personal hardships related to the separation from the former partner. Other mothers described a process through which they felt they recovered quickly from the separation and were functioning as well as, if not

better than, prior to the separation. Although some mothers and fathers did not find the separation from their former partner stressful, they required support to manage the consequences of establishing two separate households for their children.

One father reported that his emotional distress following separation resulted in criminal charges because he continued to return to the matrimonial home following separation and, from his perspective, his wife unnecessarily contacted the police. For most men, however, self recovery typically referred to managing aspects of the separation associated with finances, and having to find appropriate venues for access visits. All of the men expressed ongoing feelings of frustration and anger toward their former spouse but did not appear to believe these negative feelings impeded their self recovery, or their ability to engage appropriately in the ex-spousal relationship, or their ability to meet their children's needs. Rather, they attributed responsibility for problems with the ex-spousal relationship or in meeting child needs to their former spouse. While some women expressed an awareness that their own difficulty with self recovery interacted with other themes, such as the ex-spousal relationship dynamics or child needs, men expressed a belief that, if not for their former spouse, and regardless of the presence or absence of other properties, such as family and friends, they would be able to effectively meet the needs of their children and manage the ex-spousal relationship dynamics. Men appeared to compartmentalize each of the themes and did not describe them as acting in an integrated manner, while women described the relationship through a perspective whereby one theme influenced or was influenced by the remaining two themes.

### **Properties of Self Recovery Theme**

**Friends and family.** Every participant described the support they received from friends and family as essential to their recovery. Gender differences, however, emerged with respect to the form of support that was identified as most helpful. While all participants described some

type of support from friends and family, men reported that their new partners constituted their primary resource for emotional support. While some women described receiving no support from family, all women indicated that they received informal support from at least one friend.

All of the participants identified at least one person of significance—whether a friend or a family member—that supported them in a positive manner following separation. Several men and women reflected on how their friends and family offered what they called a safety net as they moved from being in a couple relationship to being separated, which included financial and emotional support.

In terms of financial support, some female participants described relying on friends and family for housing after separation; one mother reported that she moved into an apartment that her father owned (#20), and another relayed that she stayed with friends (#2). One mother indicated that she moved in temporarily with a friend:

*I had a friend, she started working with me. . . . She was basically a brand new friend and said if you need a place to stay then come stay with me and I did. I had (one child). (My second child) wasn't born yet but I slept on her couch for a couple of weeks and then I was on welfare, got an apartment, moved with (my child) and she helped me move. (#1)*

When women described this need for financial support they did not express anger toward their former spouse; rather, they described this period of financial instability as a consequence of the separation rather than as the fault of their former spouse.

None of the men reported moving in with family or friends following separation, although some reported receiving financial support from family. Similar to reports from other male respondents, one father explained how his family provided financial support following separation from his wife. Unlike women who viewed financial hardships as a result of the separation, the men tended to view financial hardships as the responsibility of their former spouse:

*A week later she went down to Florida for a vacation, took all the family money. I looked after the children for two weeks while she was in Florida and basically when she came home she said 'Thanks for looking after the children. Now get out of my house and you'll hear from my lawyer'. (#18)*

In addition to offering a financial bridge during separation, women described friends and family as offering important emotional support:

*Wonderful friends and family. I should say I've been going out with the same group of girls for 15 years every Thursday night. We used to go out after work. . . . Now we go out at 6:00, have dinner and we're home by Survivor. . . . We've seen each other at the best of times; we've seen each other at the worst of times. The six of us know each other inside and out. They are brutally honest but supportive and we're all the same way. (#17)*

This mother suggested that the emotional support she received from friends assisted in her coping with frightening actions by her ex-spouse which occurred at the point of separation:

*There was one friend that really helped me. Like, he had a gun in the house and she helped me take the gun and have it destroyed. Once he was drinking and had the gun. He could have killed himself. I started to realize that it was a really risky situation. He could kill me and the kids. She helped me. (#16)*

Even new friends provided support during times of crisis:

*One of them was a friend who wasn't a friend before. In crisis she was amazing. It is a funny thing, how closely intimate you become with someone, an acquaintance, when you are in a crisis. (#2)*

Gender differences emerged most clearly with respect to the issue of emotional support from new partners. Men did not describe friends and family as offering emotional support but did identify their current partner as the primary support that assisted them in emotionally coping with their postdivorce parenting relationship. One father's view of his current partner as a primary support reflected the views of the other men:

*My wife. Absolutely my wife. She is an amazing person and we work amazing together. We communicate very well and we love each other very much. She's a huge support to me because I don't think she understands my pain but she feels it and she's sympathetic, empathetic too. You know she'll drive (my child); she loves (my child) so she supports that very much. She shares in the frustrations that I go through with that so she is my biggest support I would say. (#4)*

Another father described the emotional support he receives from his current partner:

*I have developed a decent relationship with my girlfriend; it's difficult to move on although it's been almost a year. I rely on her to vent and talk. (#19)*

Women did not describe their new partner as their primary emotional support although some reported that their new partner was part of their support system. One mother said:

*I'm lucky I have a really close family, my mom and dad, sister, and I have (a new partner) who (my child) just adores and he just loves her to death. He has a daughter of his own who is out east so he's been through it and he is respectful of (my ex-spouse) which is great. He didn't have that privilege so if she calls him Daddy he corrects her nicely, that kind of thing. He knows the boundaries. (#9)*

**Change in lifestyle.** Also within the theme of SELF RECOVERY is the property of adapting to change in lifestyle. This property emerged from grouping the categories of “redefinition” and “independence” reported by many women following separation. Change in lifestyle referred to the changes that accompany separation that required adjustment. Women typically reported that adjusting to their life after separation was part of their self recovery; some obtained appropriate housing or employment, and others addressed negative feelings. Gender differences were identified within this property, because men did not describe difficulties adapting to their new lifestyle. Men typically reported that they embraced their new role as a separated parent, developed new relationships, and quickly adjusted to financial changes. While men did not describe a change in lifestyle, when changes were necessary due to division of assets between the spouses, some of the men described feeling resentful of their former spouse. Again, the metatheme ATTRIBUTION emerged as men attributed responsibility for any negative change in their lifestyle to their former spouse. The women in this study for the most part described adapting to their new lifestyle to be difficult but empowering. The men however, typically described this adjustment as a negative experience, due to the financial pressures placed upon them by their former spouse. For example, one man reported that he had to rely on financial support from family members because he was required to “pay (his former spouse) out \$80,000” (#17) and because she had had him legally removed the matrimonial home.

Men emphasized a reliance on self as they discussed their adaptation to their postdivorce lifestyle; however this reliance on self was not discovered through the separation process but rather something about which they said they had always been aware. Men did not describe worrying about their financial future, as they reported either having adequate income or confidence that they could reestablish their financial stability. One father stated:

*My kids showed up and gave me the motivation to earn the extra to get to where I was before the divorce. As far as buying a new home, vehicle, you know the toys in the driveway and carrying on with my life. I am a lot better off now than I ever was. (#17)*

In contrast, many female participants reported discovering their inner strength or independence as they adjusted to the financial and personal demands following separation, because these adjustments were so significant. Many women reported that they had to find adequate employment and housing, and adjust to not being a stay-at-home parent. This concept of change in lifestyle was linked to self recovery because, when mothers referred to their own “strength,” “independence,” and “redefinition,” they utilized these words to explain how they rebuilt by relying mostly on themselves to overcome obstacles. While all described beginning this process at the point of separation, the interplay with other properties and time determined how successful participants felt they had adapted. For example, for those mothers who had not worked outside of the home prior to their separation, finding appropriate work to create an income and suitable housing was an essential part of the property of change in lifestyle, and was also associated with the property of financial issues.

Several mothers described conquering changes and demands that resulted from separation. As explained by one mother, it was necessary to expand her life, in a work capacity as well as socially, in order to adjust to the separation. She stated:

*I think the big change was prior to the separation; I was defined by my children because I was a stay-at-home mom. I only worked 2 days a week and that was my world; which is part of the reason it was so emotionally devastating, all that stuff because that was how I defined myself. So, over a period of time I re-defined myself. . . . I never worked full-time*

*and I never did things with friends prior to the separation. I was isolated but appeared normal and happy. I think it was over time and people and support and a decent job and volunteering and focusing on my kids which are a part of my life. They're not 150 percent. They aren't my whole life. I don't want to sound like they aren't important because they are. (#2)*

Another mother described how she adapted to lifestyle changes resulting from separation through self-reflection. This same mother had described lack of income and financial hardship following divorce but expressed her belief that her inner strength allowed her to adapt to her new situation and associated lifestyle. She explained:

*I guess I found myself, found the strength that I had and I just went from there. Maybe the first couple of months, I thought "this is hard" but after that it was never an issue. (#7)*

While all of the men and women in this study described the need for psychological recovery following separation, the men described less need to adapt to lifestyle changes following separation. All of the men described themselves as self-sufficient and autonomous prior to separation and, therefore, did not view the divorce as requiring significant adjustments to their lifestyle. One father expressed confidence in his adjustment following separation:

*I supported me (after the separation). I mean, emotionally my family was there . . . but at the end of the day, it still came back to me as far as that responsibility. And that's the way it's sort of always been. I'm kind of independent that way. (#4)*

**Financial issues.** Men and women provided different descriptions of how financial issues were associated with their change in lifestyle. The properties of financial issues and change in lifestyle were grouped within the theme of self recovery. Although financial issues were intertwined with all participants' assessment of their self recovery, gender differences were apparent. In contrast to male participants who described a temporary period in which they had to locate suitable housing, female participants typically reported that their achievement of financial stability was a lengthier process. As noted earlier, some women reported the need to acquire full-time employment and housing, and to gain financial independence from their former spouse. Nonetheless, most women described relief and appeared to feel positive about facing adverse



financial circumstances associated with the divorce. In contrast, while men did not describe having to find stable employment following separation and, for the most part, reported either having the education necessary to gain employment or already having a reasonable income, they expressed more resentment towards their former spouse than their female counterparts regarding the financial issues associated with separation and divorce.

Some women worried that their former spouses would not meet financial obligations even though the former spouse had a much higher income than the participant. Such worries resulted in the women being cautious as to how they approached issues in the parenting relationship or agreeing to custody orders that they did not feel were in the best interest of the children (e.g., agreeing to the children spending equal time with their ex-spouse although they did not believe this was in the best interest of the children) because they worried that their former spouse would not meet their financial obligations for the children.

All of the men and women in the study clearly conveyed that psychological recovery did not occur in isolation from financial stressors. Unresolved financial issues from the marital relationship or (in the case of women) poverty resulting from divorce were often identified as obstacles to psychological recovery. Because of the financial repercussions of divorce, women described struggling with instability due to inadequate financial arrangements, lack of suitable housing, reliance on social assistance (which was in contrast to their financial situation prior to separation), and little or no communication with the former spouse to resolve the financial issues.

One participant stated:

*I was homeless 50 percent of the time for 2 years; I had no place to live. I had a job; my job was dealing with the homelessness programs in town. I am on the phone with my counsellor, crying. He said, What are you doing? I said, I got on my shoes so I can go to the arena and go to the gym but I have no place to stay and I can't use our homelessness program. (#2)*

Women made frequent reference to financial stress. Lack of work created situations whereby women struggled to create stability for themselves and their children following separation. One mother stated:

*I actually left town because I couldn't work. After I left I got a job to work around his schedule because I was like "little boys need their daddy". . . . I couldn't work as many hours so I couldn't pay my rent so I went to live with my parents. They live 12 hours away. (#1)*

Another mother reported that she was "waiting for" (assisted housing) (#8) at the time of the interview, although she had not lived in public housing prior to her separation. She reported that she had been able to afford housing with her former spouse prior to the separation but was staying with family until a publicly funded residence became available.

The researcher reviewed data in search of reports from divorced parents who described their financial assets as a resource. Although some of these parents advised that they found the financial resources of family members to be a support following separation, none identified their own finances as a resource that was available to assist in recovery.

**Counselling.** Most participants—men and women—who reported accessing counselling described it as a positive psychological support; and some participants considered access to counselling as valuable in their self recovery. Some participants indicated that counselling assisted them in learning new skills and behaviours to cope with feelings associated with their separation. There were no gender differences that emerged in this property.

The following quotations from mothers and fathers highlight how counselling acted as a positive resource in their recovery. One father stated:

*I didn't have the skills for any of this stuff. I had some friends who went through divorce and I went to counselling. I see a lady in town here (counsellor) and I see her every 6 weeks or so. I didn't have the skills at the time. I was definitely screwed up; we both were. (#6)*

Similarly, a mother described how counselling assisted her through the separation process:

*Actually, I used a counselling program and they were great. . . . They were great in the beginning. They helped us in mediation and talking around parenting and, because my son had ADD, I've got four of them and three with ADD, ADHD, so it was a real stress. They helped with counselling one on one, sent us to other counselling for my son, and I also got into therapy so they helped me to understand that. I also got involved with another parenting group and did some parenting courses there. (#14)*

And another father said:

*On the professional side my work has a counselling plan which I can see people and work things out. I am trying to use the resources available to me. My personality is that I have to say things and get them off my chest, I have to empty myself out because there is so much going on in the world that I just can't keep it all in; I have to get rid of it. . . . I think I have decent resources around me. (#19)*

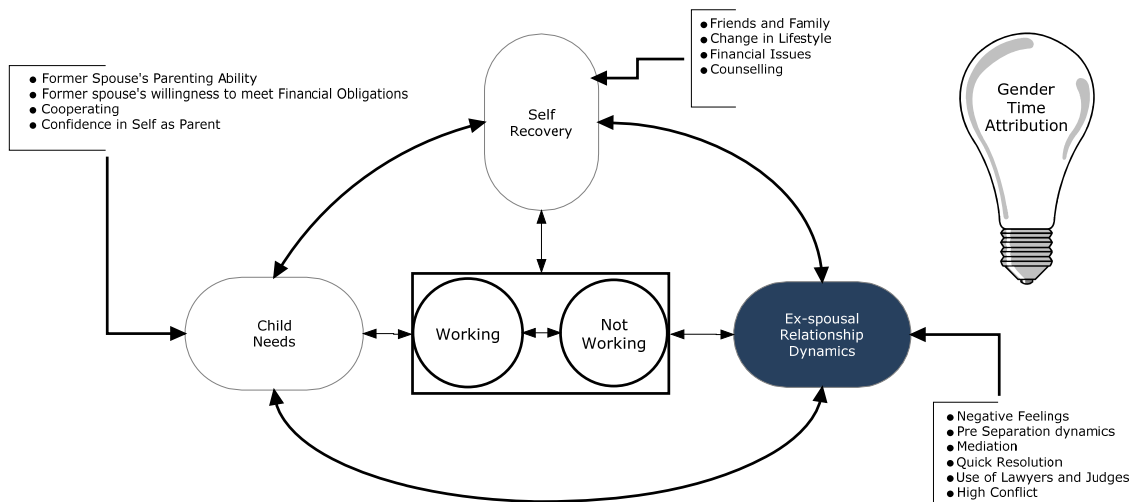
Although counselling was reported as a positive support, there were examples of negative counselling experiences. For example, one mother reported positive feelings about counselling for herself and her children but emphasized the need to find the right counsellor and explained that she had initially had a negative experience with counselling. Her comments referred to counselling as a resource and, importantly, highlighted the persistence necessary to find the support that would best meet her needs:

*The first counsellor for the kids was crappy, so it was kind of like if at first you don't succeed try, try again. Now the kids have a really good counsellor. Things could be better, the resources are not as good as they can be and I work in social services and I didn't even know where to go for help. I went to the wrong places in the beginning it took me a while to get to the right place. (#2)*

Another negative example of the counselling experience was described by one mother:

*I went to see a therapist once and she didn't call me back. She was going to put me on medication and I was like I don't think that is necessary and she didn't call me back. . . . I just feel like that wasn't the kind of situation that needed medicating. Chemical imbalance, yes, but random life change probably not something you need to medicate. (#1)*

## Theme II: EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS



*Figure 4.* Conceptual model: Overview of themes, metathemes, and central unifying theme associated with postdivorce parenting relationship dynamics.

The second main theme is EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS. All participants described a number of areas that relate to ex-spousal relationship dynamics following divorce, including negative feelings, pre-separation dynamics, the limited short-term success of mediation, effectiveness of lawyers and judges, quick resolution of separation issues, and high conflict. All participants who described their relationship as “not working” attributed responsibility for problems in the ex-spousal relationship to the former partner. Gender differences emerged, however, when delving into why participants with “not working” postdivorce parenting relationships attributed responsibility for problems to the former spouse. Women attributed problems in the ex-spousal relationship to concern that the other parent was not ensuring that the children’s needs were met. Men attributed responsibility for problems in the ex-spousal relationship to their former spouse’s personality, behaviour, or refusal to support the paternal relationship.

The metatheme ATTRIBUTION was most apparent within the main theme of EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS. All participants who described their relationship as “not working” attributed responsibility for the negative dynamics of the ex-spousal relationship to the behaviour or personality of the former partner, while those with “working” postdivorce parenting relationships attributed shared responsibility for the relationship dynamics. Preseparation dynamics that were characterized by feelings of anger and disrespect emerged as challenging the postdivorce parenting relationship. Through examination of the EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS theme and associated properties, the emphasis on the “other” as being responsible for problems in the postdivorce parenting relationship emerged as central to understanding the dynamics. Parents with “working” relationships, in contrast to those with “not working” relationships, focused more on “we” (internal and external responsibility) rather than “other” (external) in describing the functioning of the relationship.

Because of the complexity of these issues and differing experiences of the participants, properties within the postdivorce relationship dynamics (i.e., preseparation dynamics, legal process, mediation) could not be dichotomized into having a protective function or posing risk. All of these properties either hindered or helped depending upon the unifying theme of time and other properties. For example, time was relevant to understanding the usefulness of mediation in resolving conflict over the short term, and quick resolution of a parenting plan and financial settlement was described as helpful by parents. Ex-spouses who resolved issues related to the separation quickly, either through mediation or on their own, indicated that they believed this fostered improved dynamics in their ex-spousal relationship. Over the long term however, men and women who had used mediation to quickly resolve issues consistently reported that the agreement was not followed consistently and did not resolve problems related to the ex-spousal

relationship. Most of the participants identified the use of lawyers and judges as an undesirable and, in some but not all cases, necessary resource.

### **Properties of Ex-spousal Relationship Dynamics Theme**

**Negative Feelings.** All participants described how negative feelings impeded a positive postdivorce parenting relationship; however, gender differences in these feelings were apparent in the theme of EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS. The women described how their negative feelings impeded all three themes of SELF RECOVERY, EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, and CHILD NEEDS. They said that these negative feelings not only affected how they perceived their relationship with their former spouse, but also influenced their ability to meet their children's needs. At times, the women also described their negative feelings as a product of the dysfunction of the postdivorce parenting relationship and the difficulties of divorce.

The men did not view their negative feelings as their responsibility, because they felt that the feelings were in response to their former spouse. Typically, they depicted their anger toward their former spouse as resulting from her behaviour. They did not describe their own negative feelings toward their former spouse as impeding their SELF RECOVERY, ability to engage appropriately in the EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, or to effectively meet CHILD NEEDS.

Overall, men expressed anger about their relationship with their former spouse because of the nature of the parenting relationship while women expressed sadness and anger about their former spouse because of the nature of the father-child relationship. In analysis of the data, men's anger and frustration toward the former spouse emerged as rooted in feeling that their former spouse was to blame for problems in the postdivorce parenting relationship, current financial difficulties, and other issues related to the separation and subsequent divorce. All the men expressed frustration with their former spouse because they felt that their former spouse

overlooked, minimized, or devalued their paternal role. One man expressed frustration with his former partner's ongoing "meddling" in his life, as he put it. Another man said:

*Right now I don't have a lot of love for her. I think that she has turned vicious and vindictive. . . . I don't know what her goal is because of this pending case conference. I don't know if she is trying to discredit my abilities as a parent or what but I think that is where she is. I don't think it's healthy; I don't think it's healthy for me. I don't think it's good for her but it's her business. (#19)*

For some of the fathers, negative feelings manifested into aggressive behaviours. For example, one father reported a physical confrontation with his ex-spouse's new partner. Another father reported that he was charged with criminal harassment after arriving at his former partner's home and asking to speak with her boyfriend. Given the aggression and high level of conflict in these incidents reported by these fathers, the researcher, in consultation with the dissertation committee, grouped these experiences under the property of high conflict (please see high conflict section on page 102).

Men attributed responsibility for their frustration to their former spouse's behaviour, personality, or judgement. In contrast, while some women expressed deep feelings of anger toward their former spouse, this anger was typically attached to a belief that the former spouse was not meeting their child's needs. Although some women reported that they did not "like" their former spouse, they emphasized that such negative feelings resulted from how the former partner treated the child and was not a product of the adult relationship. Men did not describe feelings other than frustration or anger when discussing their former spouse. In addition to feelings of anger however, women described feelings of sadness and loss following the separation, and worry that the divorce would negatively affect their children. There appeared to be a clear dichotomy between men and women in where the negative feelings were rooted.

The interactions among the properties within each theme seemed to contribute to negative feelings, such as financial problems. The interactions among the properties could also contribute to alleviating negative feelings, such as when friends or family provided increased support.

**Preseparation dynamics.** The second property of the EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS theme was preseparation dynamics, which referred to the marital dynamics prior to and following separation. In general, preseparation dynamics were reflected postdivorce. As summarized by one mother:

*I think it's very difficult to come from an unbalanced [relationship] to balanced. You're not together anymore and you didn't have a good relationship to begin with, then it's very difficult to go to have a good relationship. (#1)*

Specifically, dynamics that were described as *controlling* before the couple separated continued to be problematic following separation. Women who described their former spouses as controlling prior to separation described feeling that their former spouses harboured anger toward them following separation. Some suggested that, although the spousal relationship had ended, their former husbands seemed angry because of their decreased control in the postdivorce parenting relationship. One mother put it this way:

*The further away I got from being married to him the more clearly I was able to see things that I was doing that weren't very healthy. . . . I went through a period, shortly after we separated, where he was emailing me three or four times a day to complain and tell me things he didn't like. He is a very controlling person, so I had to eliminate that. (#2)*

The experiences of several mothers and fathers suggested that following separation, it was necessary to redefine the roles and dynamics that had existed in the marital relationship to be more conducive to a relationship based solely on parenting. For example, parents described purposefully limiting their interactions with their spouses to issues involving the children, rather than to aspects of the relationship related to their marriage. Some parents found this process easier than others. Those who described the transition as challenging reported adapting to the



new situation in which two individuals were parenting a child separately (ideally with the same goal, but not always) rather than as a couple parenting as a team. According to participants this required learning how to communicate differently with someone with whom they had had a long-term, intimate relationship. One parent indicated that this required her to learn “how to disengage” (#2) from her former partner. She indicated:

*I am emotionally detached from him now so I treat it very much like a business relationship and I don't mean it to sound harsh but we have this job, we have these two amazing kids we have to raise to the best of our ability. So I have learned, through counselling, how to emotionally disengage so I am not making emotional decisions and I am not getting sucked into the negative patterns we had for 15 years. (#2)*

Others described letting go of pre-separation dynamics in order to maintain the postdivorce parenting relationship. Some mothers referred to “emotional detachment” (#2) or no longer being “attached” (#20) to their former spouse. This appeared to allow increased focus on children, friends, and supports in their lives. One mother said:

*I call him to communicate with him about what they need. . . . I feel nothing. He has nothing to do with me. I have accepted who he is. . . . My only relationship with him is about the kids. It has nothing to do with me. . . . There is no discussion. I call him to keep communication going between him and the kids. (#16)*

**Mediation.** There were no gender differences in participants’ descriptions of their experiences with mediation. Because they felt unable to communicate directly with their former spouse, many participants sought out a third party (mediator) to assist in negotiating an agreement. Men and women both reported having used mediation as a resource to resolve issues in the postdivorce parenting relationship. Most participants described the mediation process as a positive experience and a helpful resource. For example, one mother said:

*When we made the decision to separate, we went through a mediation service. . . . It was a wonderful process, it kept legal out of it and we had a wonderful mediator to really work through what was best, or what we felt was best, for our child. (#10)*

Despite positive experiences with mediation, however, all of the parents who used mediation reported that the original agreement did not solve issues over the long term. The following participant stated that she enjoyed the process but was unhappy with the outcome:

*It (the parenting relationship) is not at all what I had hoped it would be or what I had planned for it to be. . . . It's hard to get any sort of resolution. Whenever there is any behavioural issue or anything else that I'm having or he is having, he won't meet with me or talk with me. There is no dialogue at all (despite) it being built into our separation agreement which is very thick—somewhat of a novel. We were hoping to cover all the bases in terms of communication [but] communication is virtually nil. (#10)*

Even when an agreement had been successfully mediated several participants described ongoing disputes, which surfaced at a later time around issues such as child support, access, and parenting decisions. These participants reported having to contact lawyers or engage in court processes when the situation changed or when they became frustrated because the other party had not met the obligations stated in the mediated agreement. As illustrated by the statements of one father:

*We went through mediation to set up a separation agreement which went through to divorce. So through him both of us came to the table with what we were looking for and what we wanted and we were able to come to an understanding, joint custody at the time.... I had high hopes in the beginning and it is at the point now where I stated she has some pretty severe drug problems...I am presently going back court. I am looking for whether I am going to try and get more access or get my children away from her. (#17)*

Similar to the female participant, this father found that while seemingly more positive and less expensive than the adversarial process, settlement of issues through mediation did not result in longer-term resolution of custody issues.

Participants' experiences with mediation differed. Some parents did not describe mediation positively at any point. For example, one mother stated: "I had crappy mediation, horrible mediation." (#2) Most participants reported a positive process but unsustainable outcome and others reported that, although the agreement remained in place, they continued to have a "not working" postdivorce parenting relationship. The researcher reviewed data to find a story involving successful longer-term mediation results, but could find none in this sample.

TIME therefore emerged as a metatheme because, over time, what appeared to be successfully mediated agreements were not sustainable. All participants who engaged in the mediation process continued to describe difficulties in the postdivorce parenting relationship, and some advised that they were accessing the adversarial process to remedy these difficulties.

Similarly, ATTRIBUTION also crossed through the property of mediation. Both men and women negatively attributed responsibility for problems in adhering to the mediated agreement to their former spouse. The specifics differed however, as women reported that the problems resulted because of their former spouse's poor parenting, where men typically described problems as resulting from their former spouse's inability or unwillingness to engage appropriately in the ex-spousal relationship.

**Quick resolution following separation.** The property of quick resolution following separation referred to the timeliness of settling custody and access disputes and parenting issues following dissolution of the couple relationship. Those parents who described "working" postdivorce parenting relationships with their former spouses not only attributed a shared responsibility for maintaining their positive relationships following separation, but also reported a willingness and/or an ability by them and their former spouses to quickly resolve matters associated with divorce. The metatheme of ATTRIBUTION emerged to differentiate how some people resolved matters quickly from others who remained embroiled in conflict. In the case of quick resolution, there was a willingness or perception by the parent that responsibility for making the postdivorce parenting relationship "work" was shared by both parties. In contrast, those with ongoing or lengthy conflicts or failures to resolve custody and access matters negatively attributed responsibility for problems in the ex-spousal relationship dynamics to the former spouse. The following quotations are examples of how parents with "working"

relationships described shared responsibility with their former spouse for maintaining positive dynamics in the postdivorce parenting relationship.

*I don't think we messed around. I really think that was part of it. We did sit and talk for hours and weeks but really I made it up in my head that things were probably done and from there to there it was probably two months. We didn't mess around and fight and bring up dirty laundry. We talked about what was broken and it couldn't be fixed and looked where to go from there kind of thing. (#9)*

Similarly, here emphasis was placed on the joint decision to problem-solve instead of fighting:

*We always try to put the children first, so even though we didn't agree on how to handle the marriage, even though we couldn't put it back together again, we were always able to set that part aside and we never used them as pawns. We never tried to make them uncomfortable with the situation, we never played them against each other, so that has helped a lot. We tried to be bigger about that so that they wouldn't suffer, because they had no control over what was happening, they had no choice. I guess in that respect we tried to make it as easy on them as it could be in a tough situation. (#13)*

While these quotations illustrate particular parents' situations, participants' interviews suggested that, in general, those with "working" postdivorce parenting relationships approached the divorce pragmatically, with the clear goal of establishing a functioning postdivorce parenting relationship. They reported that that they did not wish the problematic preseparation dynamics to continue, and remained focused on their child's needs. Several other properties were present that could not be captured in these brief quotations. These parents had supportive family and friends as resources, did not describe financial hardship following separation, and described a sense of forgiveness toward their former spouse. While personality issues were not assessed in this study, both women in "working" relationships presented as assertive and confident. Both women also described a commitment to supporting their former partner in being a parent to their children. Both women also reported that their former partners were willing to settle issues and they did not engage in a custody dispute.

In contrast to those who were able to resolve matters quickly, other parents described lengthy, contentious processes. Despite the presence of his family and friends as supports, this father described a lengthy battle to resolve custody and access issues:

*The contract that we have now is a court-appointed contract or separation agreement, I guess. It took 4-1/2 years to draw in design and get agreed by both parties because I had to fight. I literally had to fight to see my daughter. (#4)*

Another mother described an inability to resolve issues quickly:

*We tried mediation and counselling, and that was right at the time that I was realizing that I didn't have to do everything that he asks. It was kind of dramatic, the whole thing, and I just wanted to calm everything down so that is when I agreed to everything 50/50. I thought we could sort through it when everything calmed down, and that never happened. (#2)*

Quick resolution appeared to rest on the willingness and/or ability of both parties to settle issues. Certainly, no participant stated that they did not want to resolve matters in a timely manner; however, responsibility for failure to resolve custody and access issues quickly was attributed to the former spouse and his/her inability or unwillingness to cooperate. In contrast, those with “working” postdivorce parenting relationships described a shared responsibility for the success. The metatheme of **ATTRIBUTION** created a dichotomy between those who resolved issues in a timely manner and those who remained embroiled in a long-term dispute.

**Use of lawyers and judges.** Some participants reported accessing the legal system to resolve financial matters as well as custody and access issues. Despite not wanting to, men and women sought out these resources when they felt that they had no choice, because attempts to resolve matters between the parties or with a mediator had been unsuccessful. Few participants who accessed the legal system described this as a positive experience. Gender differences were identified in two areas—feelings regarding judges, and feelings regarding lawyers. The first gender difference emerged with respect to lawyers and judges as some men expressed feeling that judges favoured women regardless of the situation. One father said:

*The laws are so archaic. They don't believe men are capable of raising children and that's wrong. I know that there are some men that may be responsible for that but I'm not one of them and getting caught in that stereotype or that mix is frustrating for a dad who's not a bum; for someone who wants to be involved, wants to be there wants to be an influence. (#4)*

The women did not express the feeling that judges were inherently biased toward either themselves or their former partner. Nonetheless, women and men were equally displeased with their experiences with lawyers and judges. Women did not feel adequately represented by their lawyers and sometimes felt that judges failed to recognize the best interests of their children. With the exception of one participant, who described her lawyer as a “friend of a friend” on whom she could “lean,” female participants attributed their dissatisfaction with lawyers as reflecting either inadequate representation by their specific lawyer (#1) or the judge’s failure to resolve matters in the best interests of their children (#2, #4, #19). For those women who settled the matter in negotiations, some described feeling that they were not adequately represented by their lawyers, which resulted in them agreeing to parenting arrangements that they did not believe were in their children’s best interests. As one mother explained:

*If I had waited or talked to someone other than his lawyer I would have never agreed to joint custody. The judge would have never granted joint custody. I would have gotten full custody if I had talked to anyone other than his lawyer and if I had not just done what he told me to do. (#1)*

Most male respondents advised that they used lawyers as a resource following separation. One father stated that he was in the process of accessing a lawyer at the time of the interview because of a failed mediation agreement. Another father who was still involved with lawyers, remained hopeful that legal resolution would improve the ex-spousal relationship. He stated:

*There are times when we will need to sit down and discuss certain things and hopefully when we get this case conference behind us we can open these new doors. Once we're each put in our own sand box I think we will have a better set of guidelines to deal with certain situations. Once she knows what her rights are and her entitlements are and what mine are, I hope we will be able to bridge a little bit. (#19)*

**High conflict.** According to Johnston (1994), high conflict can be described as verbal and physical aggression, overt hostility, and distrust. She suggested that to best assess high conflict between parents following separation, three dimensions should be considered: First, the “domain dimension,” refers to a series of disputes over divorce-related issues, such as finances, child support or custody, and access. Second, the “tactics dimension,” refers to the ways in which people attempt to resolve disputes including avoidance, aggression, reasoning, or use of formal resources. Third, the “attitudinal dimension,” refers to the negative emotion or hostility conveyed or not conveyed within the relationship. All three dimensions were depicted by participants in this study as they discussed their experiences. A review of the literature on high conflict divorces suggests that, while the concept of high conflict is usually not defined, the term seemed to refer to “persistent conflict between parents following separation and divorce” (Kelly & Emery, 2003, p. 352).

There were significant differences in the way the men and women discussed aggression or violence in their postdivorce parenting relationship. Men who reported aggression self-identified as the perpetrators of aggression; however, they externalized responsibility for their behaviours to their former spouse or, in one case, the former spouse’s new partner. Some women described being victims of verbal abuse by their ex-spouse. All of the women who explained that verbal or physical violence had occurred prior to or following separation described the relationship as “not working.”

Many participants raised problems with communication as an area of difficulty in their ex-spousal relationship dynamics. What participants often described as problems in communication however, appeared to actually be an overt or subtle threat or provocative behaviour. Some women reported that their former spouses were unhappy with their more

assertive behaviours following divorce, which affected the parenting relationship. One mother stated:

*I think that his feelings about me have dramatically affected our postseparation parenting and it is something that I struggle with. The nature of the relationship when we were married—there were so many toxic things about it, so trying to break free of those, whereas my old pattern was just do 100 percent of what he wanted and that was the way we kept the peace, that was our parenting relationship. Our preseparation and our postseparation is more doing what's best and what is right for everyone and not just what is right for him. That creates a lot of problems postseparation. (#2)*

She added:

*It's good if I do everything his way. Then he is nicer with the kids, he's better. So that's the key thing and I think a lot of it has to do with, I don't think he has ever forgiven me for leaving, like I think there is all this unresolved crap 4 years later. (#3)*

One mother made reference to emotional abuse by her ex-husband prior to separation whereby he threatened to take the children from her. This threat, coupled with a history of emotional abuse by the ex-husband, resulted in her decision to not seek sole custody and rather to settle for a joint custody arrangement, despite feeling that joint custody would not meet the needs of the children. In retrospect, this mother recognized that the fear of losing her children, precipitated by threats from her former husband, influenced her decision not to seek child support:

*He said if I went after him for child support he would go after me for full custody. For some reason in my stupid little head I was like, I can't let that happen. I was afraid of fighting him in court because I [believed] I am stupid and worthless and a bad parent. If you had met me 4 years ago I am not the same person. I'm not even close to being the same person. I was this little mouse of a thing. I was a doormat, it was very easy for him to tell me what to do and I still listened even though I wasn't with him. I still did whatever I was told and I don't know why. I can't explain how I managed to leave physically and still be controlled. (#1)*

Similarly, another mother described the emotional abuse she endured in her marital relationship:

*I used to describe my heart and it was like you can't apologize for things over and over and continue to do them so it's like a little part of your heart gets burnt every day and finally it's burnt there is no repairing it. It was so far gone. There was so many things he said emotional abuse, I couldn't go back, I was done. I used to clean the house before he*



*came home. When the kids made a mess I was like, oh my God, it's my house they make a mess. (#20)*

Another mother reported:

*I think that when I lived with my parents when I was a teenager and then when I moved in with him I had people who were controlling, not in a bad way, but still overbearing. Then I went to my husband who was controlling and I was never my own person. (#7)*

Some mothers appear to “tune out” and thus not identify abusive or aggressive behaviour occurring postdivorce. Of these mothers, some reported that they accepted disrespectful behaviour from their former husbands because they had become accustomed to their anger. For example, while one mother did not frame her former partner’s behaviour as abusive, she indicated that friends had commented on his behaviour. She explained:

*I have had people at my house, like friends. . . . He will come and drop off the kids and he'll come into the entrance and he will leave. These people will say “oh my God! What the hell was his problem?” and I look up with this stunned look and “what do you mean? He was fine today; that was nothing.” He will stand there and just tear me apart and I don't even hear it anymore. (#1)*

Some men suggested that problematic behaviours on the part of their ex-spouses led to episodes of conflict. By attributing the conflict to their former spouse, they minimized their own responsibility for the conflict. One father said:

*I think that she knows that I don't have much use for her. I've got reasons . . . very good reasons. She had me charged a few years ago. It was just nonsense. . . . I don't know why I did it. . . . Stupid me gets in the truck and I drive over to the house and I park on the side of the road and I phone into the house and I say, “Can I talk to your friend?” She hung up the phone and dialled 911. From that, I got charged with criminal harassment. That was the third time that she had called the cops. First, time was during the day . . . the day that I left. . . . We separated about 6 weeks into it or something like that. I was staying the night. I slept on the couch and the kids were there. The next morning she phoned the police because I wouldn't leave or “something.” (#5)*

While this father described his aggressive behaviours, he continued to express anger toward his former spouse and a perception that his behaviour was justified. He reported being charged on a third occasion when his former spouse contacted the police. By referring to himself as “stupid” he portrayed his own behaviour as demonstrating poor judgement, based upon the

behaviour of his wife. He minimized his own behaviours, which supported his attributing responsibility to his ex-spouse for the resulting charges.

Another father also described an episode in which, following what he deemed to be provocation by his former spouse's partner, he threw the man to the ground. The respondent indicated that this episode was precipitated by his own frustration regarding the parenting arrangement but nevertheless stated that he is an "able communicator" (#4). This father described experiencing a "surreal" situation that he believed resulted from his former partner's unwillingness to cooperate with him and her disrespect of him as their child's father. While he feared being charged following the incident, he believed that his former wife was attempting to provoke him to behave aggressively in order to deny him access. He described the events that followed a verbal altercation with his ex-spouse's new partner during access exchange:

*At that point, I feel the adrenaline pumping. I was thinking, "Okay try and stay calm." . . . (My ex-wife's new husband) came out of the house and took (the child) . . . He said, "You're not taking one step further." I said, "I'm just dropping off the suitcase." I had my head down, I was going left, I was going right. He just kept going in front of me and I finally got to the stairs. I think he thought I was coming at him, and he jumped on me on the stairs. You know someone who is physically not nearly the same size, it was very easy to be able to spin him around and put him down on the ground and, at that point, it was awful, like I lost hearing, I lost myself. I was focused on that person and you know physically subduing him and it was surreal. All of a sudden I could finally hear (my girlfriend's) voice and everything started coming clear again. The only thing going through my mind was "Don't hit him; don't hit him." I didn't and I sat there. (#4)*

Another father described frustration with his former spouse's accusations that he was violent, which he felt were unwarranted. He stated:

*If we're in a conversation and it's disagreeable to her, the conversation ends. I become accused of badgering. I become accused of needing to seek help for my violent ways so I have to send back an email saying, 'I disagree with your statement about me badgering you or being bad tempered'. I have to refute it because it is one of the things I have seen over the last few months that every time there is a discussion and it is not going her way there is an ensuing email saying you need to seek help for your temper. (#19)*

Having examined the words of all of the male participants, a central belief emerged: fathers in this group were in a defensive role with their former spouses, both within formal

systems (such as the court) and within the ex-spousal parenting relationships. This defensive stance was illustrated by fathers' reports that they had to defend their role and their value as fathers in their postdivorce parenting relationships, and defend themselves from their former spouses' attempts to damage their lifestyle, either financially, as a parent, or through criminal charges. Men who reported engaging in conflict however, also recognized that such heightened levels of conflict could not continue. This recognition resulted in them limiting their contact with their former spouses in order to avoid opportunities for conflict.

### Theme III: CHILD NEEDS

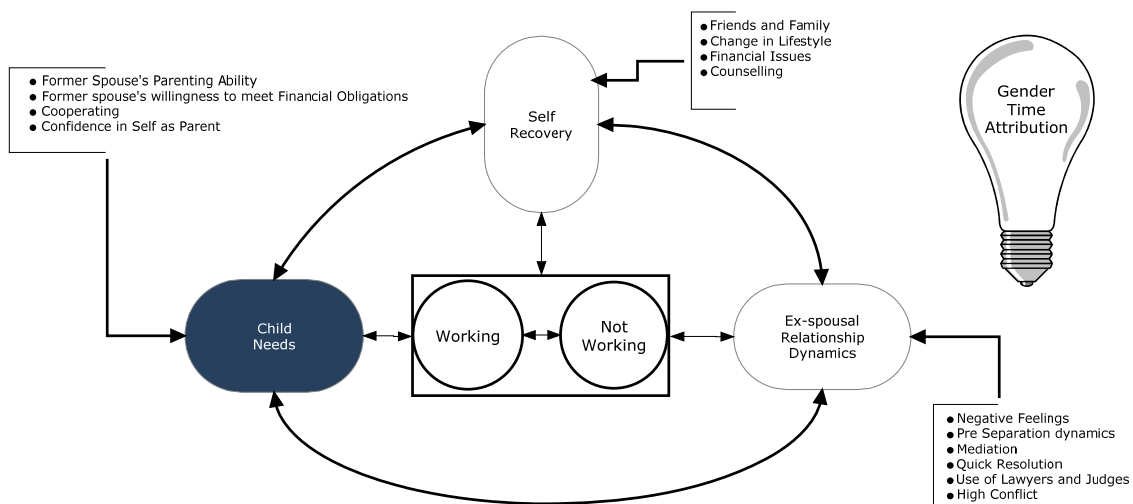


Figure 5. Conceptual model: Overview of themes, metathemes, and central unifying theme associated with postdivorce parenting relationship.

Gender differences were apparent as participants described their concerns regarding child needs. Female respondents frequently expressed a desire for their former partners to meet the needs of the child(ren). When mothers perceived their former spouses as failing to meet their child's physical or psychological needs, they expressed frustration and anger regarding the father-child relationship. In contrast, most men conveyed the belief that their former spouses were good parents. Some men, however, felt that by *not* supporting the child's relationship with them, their former spouses failed to consider the child's emotional needs. Both men and women

who described their parenting relationship as “not working” made reference to the belief that the other parents had failed to place the child’s needs above their own feelings or desires. Four properties emerged within the CHILD NEEDS theme: former spouse’s parenting ability; former spouse’s willingness to meet financial obligations; cooperating; and confidence in self as a parent.

Ensuring that children’s needs were met following divorce was identified as important by all parents. When parents perceived their former spouses as not consistently meeting the psychological needs of their children or failing to attune to the children’s feelings, they reported that their postdivorce parenting relationship was “not working.”

Mothers expressed anger when they perceived their ex-spouses as failing to place the children’s financial needs above their own desires. Even mothers who described a “working” parenting relationship with their former spouses indicated caution within the parenting relationship, because of fear that the former spouses could use their financial position against them through such means as withdrawing financial support or initiating court action. This caution may be rooted in a lack of trust in former spouses’ ability to place the needs of the child above their negative feelings in the ex-spousal relationship. Hence, due to concern for CHILD NEEDS, these mothers were cautious to not upset their former spouse.

When children’s needs were met, both men and women felt more positive about the postdivorce parenting relationship. In examining the words of the participants, however, gender differences emerged. Women focused on their former partners’ ability to parent while men focused on their own parenting.

### **Properties of Child Needs Theme**

**Former spouse’s parenting ability.** Issues regarding the ability of former spouses to meet their child’s psychological and emotional needs seemed to split along gender lines. While

some mothers expressed frustration regarding fathers' apparent unwillingness to place the children's needs as primary, most fathers described their former spouses as good parents, who wanted their children's needs to be primary. Fathers' main frustration was related to their former spouses' unwillingness to reinforce their role as fathers.

Some mothers stated the belief that their child suffered because of the fathers' lack of parenting ability or poor parental judgement. These mothers described their anger and frustration toward their former spouses as rooted in their former spouses' failure to place the children's needs as primary. Concerns ranged on a continuum from worry that the father was minimizing their child's feelings during access visits to the most extreme worry that the father was exposing their child to pornography. On one end of the continuum, mothers indicated that their former spouses demonstrated an unwillingness or inability to place the needs of the children as primary by not valuing their child's feelings. For example, one mother did not believe her former spouse considered the children's feelings, because he enforced a schedule that was contrary to the children's needs and desires. She stated:

*When the kids are with me and they want to call their dad, they call their dad whenever they want to. "I've got to call dad and ask him about this." "Go ahead call your dad." And when they are with him, they are only allowed to call me between 8:00 and 8:30. They can't call any other time and not every day. . . . I know my youngest one screams. They (the children) have kind of given up I think because when that was implemented for the first 3 months my youngest one would scream, his dad would grab the phone if he was 1 minute over. It was quite terrifying, that whole thing to them, and I think that those subtle things have sent messages. My kids have the belief that when they are with their dad, any kind of communication, and I know they are not allowed to talk about me to him. (#2)*

Another mother articulated her concerns as follows:

*Try to get any sort of consistency as far as parenting or disciplining, he just doesn't want to hear it and doesn't want to talk. He is still very angry 3 years later so it's not positive. (#10)*

Some mothers described feeling that the other parent simply showed poor judgement and could not place the children's needs as primary when in a caregiving role. For example, one mother stated:

*We had a falling out a few weeks back. He did go on a field trip with (our child) and that was wonderful. Unfortunately he didn't bring anything to eat so he ate her lunch and left her a snack. He ate her sandwich and banana and left her juice and a granola bar and I lost it on the phone that night. I couldn't contain myself, so right now we're at war. I would have gone hungry rather than eat my daughter's lunch or I would have eaten the granola bar or cheese string and given her the rest of the lunch if I was that hungry. (#17)*

Differences in parenting styles, perceived as an inability of former spouses to protect their child, also challenged the parenting relationship. As stated by one mother:

*He allowed (our daughter) to have . . . boys sleep over in a tent. I don't approve of that. That's not how I parent my daughter. . . . She is partying and drinking, smoking pot . . . or has. She tells me that she is doing this and I am not happy with this. I sit and try to have a conversation with him. . . . Well, if he had been living with me, with the drinking going on, she would have been grounded. (#15)*

Some mothers and fathers indicated that they did not believe their former spouses considered the children's needs when they directly or indirectly expressed negative feelings about their former spouses in the presence of the children. In doing so, they were seen as failing to respect the children's love for their other parent. One mother stated:

*He knows how much I mean to her and how much she means to me and yet he still thinks he should say nasty things to her about me. That hurts her and I just don't understand how he doesn't see that. (#7)*

Particularly worrisome were concerns due to behaviours that fit within the realm of abuse. At this extreme end of the continuum, one mother indicated that she was in the process of returning to court to address an array of concerns she had regarding her former spouse. She explained:

*I have some concerns about things that have been going on in his house: pornography on the computer that my daughter has seen; he bought her an adult black lace teddy; he said because she wanted it. Right now I'm worried. (#17)*

As well as concerns of inappropriate and/or abusive parenting, some mothers reported that their former spouses were absent from their children's lives. While fathers stated that they wanted to spend time with their children and be actively involved in parenting, some mothers expressed surprise, frustration, and lack of understanding about why their former spouses would not want to spend more time with their children, and concluded that this absence made them poor parents. One mother, for instance, said that the one thing that would improve her relationship with her former spouse would be to see increased investment by him in the children. Despite their best efforts to improve the father-child relationship, these mothers described their former spouses as unresponsive to their children. Some of these women described having "given up" on supporting a relationship between their child and the child's father. This "giving up" did not occur immediately following separation but, according to the participants, came after they recognized and accepted that they could not make their former partner be more active or involved as a parent. As stated by one mother:

*I want him to take (our child) every other weekend. He only wants her one weekend a month and 4 hours on a Thursday, so he keeps shortening it. I'm trying to get him to take her more because she wants to be with her dad. She wants to spend time with him. (#16)*

Another mother, with a now teenage daughter, expressed concern regarding how the lack of father-daughter relationship would affect her daughter as an adult. She stated:

*I thought he'd want to parent equally, I thought he'd want joint custody; I thought he'd want to pursue a relationship with his child. That's what I thought was going to happen. I guess I was naive. I assumed he'd want to have a relationship with his daughter, when we discussed the custody he didn't want joint custody and I was absolutely shocked. I thought all parents would want joint custody. It was more me being naive about his role in his daughter when he said he didn't want joint custody because he didn't want to be told when to take the child. I was shocked; I assumed all fathers wanted to be involved. It went downhill from there. (#11)*

Another mother explained:

*With (my child's) Grade 8 graduation, that just topped it all off. He is not sure if he can make it. That is a huge point in her life. That is just really irresponsible and it disappoints me. (#7)*

Another mother expressed her desire for her former spouse to take a more active role with the children. She stated:

*Well, I would like to see him do things differently, like spend more time with the kids . . . be invested. Like take them at Christmas and holidays. (#16)*

Some mothers viewed themselves as trying to encourage a relationship between child and father or as trying to protect the child from the father's poor parenting. Despite such perceived efforts, they viewed their former partners as undermining what should be a joint goal of parenting. The mothers acknowledged that their former spouses might believe that they are trying to meet the children's needs, but this did not match their assessment of the situation. These participants also recognized that issues in the parent-child relationship are not isolated from problems in the former couple relationship and the current way of relating. One mother said:

*I'm sure that he would say it is all my fault. He has voiced that opinion before that I was the reason that (our daughter) doesn't want to see him, that I am the reason that he is not involved. Phone calls I have made, you know, "she has lost a tooth," "do you want a report card," "she skinned her leg." I used to make all those phone calls and then I just stopped; he never made any back. (Our daughter) would call him, he wouldn't call back. . . . I am sure he would say that he doesn't have a parenting role but I think that he would blame that on me. . . . There is no communication with us at all and there is no communication between him and (our daughter) so there just can't be any parenting. He has no input what so ever and he has been given every opportunity to have it. (#7)*

Another participant echoed:

*Whenever I had a conflict with my daughter coming into her teens, I would ask for his help and he would say "That's between you and her. Keep me out of it." Or, "She is too much like my sister, I don't want to deal with that" and he would not support me. If anything came up, he would basically say "Ask your mother. Let your mother worry about it." Hence, why we're here. . . . He thinks he does what he thinks is best for them. It's a relationship where they are all living in the home. He is not really parenting; they are all just living together. (#3)*

With the exception of one father who reported that his estranged partner had substance abuse issues, most fathers did not express sentiments about wanting the other parent to invest more in the children, and in fact, described their former spouses as good parents. With the exception of the father who reported that his former partner had a substance abuse problem, the



fathers typically stated that, while their former spouses were good parents, their failure to support the father-child relationship resulted in not meeting their child's emotional needs. All the fathers emphasized their frustration with the lack of respect or support offered by their former spouses with respect to their relationship with the child. For example, one father described feeling hurt and disrespected in his role as a "dad" by his former partner's decision to support his daughter calling her step-father "dad." He explained:

*The thing that hurts most I would say is her calling him "Daddy." That hurts and (my ex-spouse) accepting that. Recently (my child) said that her last name was what his last name. That's tough. It cut deep and I'm thinking, "Why are they communicating this to her?" . . . I said (to my daughter), "Okay. Well you have the same last name as your mother. You have the same last name as your sister as she now has a sister. . . . You also have my last name in there too but you don't have his (step-father's) last name. You do understand that, right?" We had a conversation about that. . . . Being a proud father, it hurts. It hurts a lot. (#4)*

Another father suggested that his former spouse did not value his role as a parent, despite his view that she was a good mother who cared about the children:

*There is no question that the girls are happy with mom and the girls are happy with dad. We are not going to be together as a family again. . . . I wish that there was a way for her to accept that I am going to be there as a father. . . . I wish that she could see other examples and not just judge individually on what is good for her and the children. . . . We have a really great opportunity to do this we can co-parent a little bit better and not just rely on my needs are greater than your needs. (#19)*

**Former spouse's willingness to meet financial obligations.** Gender differences were noted when parents discussed financial issues involving their children. While fathers did not describe concerns regarding their former spouses' willingness to provide financially for their children, mothers identified their former spouses' seeming unwillingness to provide financially for the child as an indicator of a lack of investment in the child. Most mothers described frustration with the fathers who they perceived as focused on their own financial needs or desires rather than on their child(ren)'s needs. This frustration was most commonly illustrated by the

reports from the mothers of their former partners' reluctance to pay an adequate amount of child support or to meet financial obligations for the child. For example, one mother explained:

*I think the worst thing in the whole situation was (my ex-husband) using the kids as a weapon or tool, and it was all about money. . . . Three days before I married my current husband, my ex-husband phoned me. . . . He said, "So this will be the last one (check) because you're getting married on Saturday." I'm like, "Well I don't get alimony. I never got any alimony. So how can you say that?" He said, "Well you're getting married, I don't have to give you child support." I said, "(My husband) is not adopting the kids!" So . . . I did all the paperwork and had his wages garnisheed and I have always got my money through payment and responsibility. (#20)*

This mother emphasized that her former partner placed his desires above the financial needs of the children. She continued:

*It's not like a money issue. He has this brand new car, snowmobiles, trailer, brand new house. He has more stuff than my husband and I do but he pays me \$200 a month child support for (two children) and it's like he is giving me a bazillion dollars. What's \$200! They have shoes that are \$115, like jeepers! It's money, money has been the biggest issue and that's when he has used the kids. (#20)*

Another mother expressed feeling that her former partner refused to consider the financial needs of the children:

*My ex-husband is happy if everything is 50/50. Even though he makes three times as much money as me, anything financial if I pay for half, he is happy. (#2)*

Even mothers with "working" postdivorce parenting relationships discussed finances as a possible issue of contention. One mother explained:

*At first he wasn't paying child support and then we went through the family responsibility office. We now have an agreement but I have to call him to remind him as he is always three or four days late. (#16)*

And another:

*Mostly, yeah, I am always aware that, I mean (my former partner) makes about \$90,000 a year, I make around \$20,000; in the back of my head I am always worried that if I ever pissed him off he could always go for sole custody and I appreciate that I am the mom but he also makes more money than I do. I am careful and I don't want us to fight for her sake so I am careful. (#11)*

**Cooperating.** The importance of cooperation between former spouses in the postdivorce parenting relationship emerged in interviews with both mothers and fathers. Mothers typically reported a willingness to work with their former spouses in an effort to protect their children from negative aspects of the divorce. Mothers described their efforts to shield or protect their children from the potential consequences of problems in their relationship. Many mothers described concern that their former spouses were not acting in their child's best interest, and described their own efforts to protect the child from the negative dynamics of the adult relationship. Mothers reported trying to ensure that the children's needs were met despite recognition that this was not always successful. As described by one mother who clearly indicated that her relationship was "not working":

*She knows that right now Daddy and I can't be in the same room with each other but will talk on the computer if we need to and sometimes will talk on the phone but I have a no trespass order against him because he made some threats. . . . We fight too much and she knows we argue too much and she would to see us not argue and we try very hard not to argue when she's around. There has been occasions, yeah, we're human, we've argued and she's heard us and that sucks. (#17)*

Parents with "not working" postdivorce parenting relationships described trying to independently meet their children's needs. In contrast to participants who described "not working" postdivorce relationships, parents who described "working" relationships reported cooperating with their ex-spouse to ensure that the child's psychological needs were met. The following quotations illustrate how parents perceived themselves and their ex-spouses working together to meet the needs of their children:

*She is fine now. . . . We have even gone as far as, I got Dora sheets he has Diego, she has the same blankie at my house and his house that kind of thing to try and keep that consistency but now looking at school time she is either going to have to be with one of us all the time or switching back from week to week. (#9)*

Women reported how amicable relationships with their ex-spouses allowed them to send a positive message to their children:

*I think (the children) would say that we are friends. We have such little contact in front of them, just when he picks them up and I never say anything bad about their father. . . . Once I invited him to a gathering at our house. My spouse is always there and he is there. We all get along in an open way. The kids would see this. I don't think they would say there is anything wrong between us. They are very happy. (#16)*

Others reported how amicable feelings supported coparenting:

*Basically when I have a problem with (the children) or need help or anything, I just call him and he is there for them. . . . It's very important, I think split or together to communicate about the kids, so we've worked at it since we separated. (#8)*

This mother acknowledged how establishing a working parenting relationship required a resolution of anger toward her ex-spouse:

*It was difficult to communicate because there was a lot of anger there. It's gotten better over the years. We don't have a lot of communication now because of the age of the kids. When we do, it's friendlier and more adult, we don't have the anger. It took a lot of years to get there. (#14)*

Another mother described her working parenting relationship as “calm.” She elaborated:

*We have five children in total. When I met him he had two girls and together we had three boys. I maintain a relationship with both girls as if they were my own children. He lives in [another city]. He moved there after we separated. The kids are with me. I have full custody and he has access. We communicate for the kids. We've worked at it since we separated. (#16)*

In contrast to mothers who described improvements in their feelings toward their former spouses that allowed them to work together, other mothers reported that negative feelings continued. Despite these negative feelings, one mother described how she placed her children's needs as primary:

*We have this very bizarre arrangement where we have this schedule that no one understands and we just kind of make it work. We can't stand each other but we tolerate, well I tolerate him, and he lives to make my life miserable. We just do whatever it takes to not make them [the children] suffer for that. (#1)*

Gender differences were noted in this property. While all the women described working together *with* their former spouses in an effort to improve the situation for their children, the men reported that they did their best to meet their children's needs *despite* their former spouses. None

of the men described a “working” relationship in which they felt they worked together with their former spouses to meet their children’s needs. For example, one father stated how, despite his ex-spouse’s behaviour, he did his best to meet the needs of the children:

*[My ex-wife] made a lot of mistakes. . . . I handled myself calmly during this and never said anything bad in front of the children and she did the opposite. (#6)*

All fathers who described negative dynamics in the parental relationship reported feeling that their former spouses devalued their role as a parent. As explained by one father:

*I want to be able to open and freely with out prejudice discuss issues concerning the girls without fear of being beaten up on. I don’t get to express my concerns about the girls as freely as she is able to talk to me about it and that hurts me. It’s like walking on broken glass when I call her and I don’t want to live like that. I want to be a dad. (#19)*

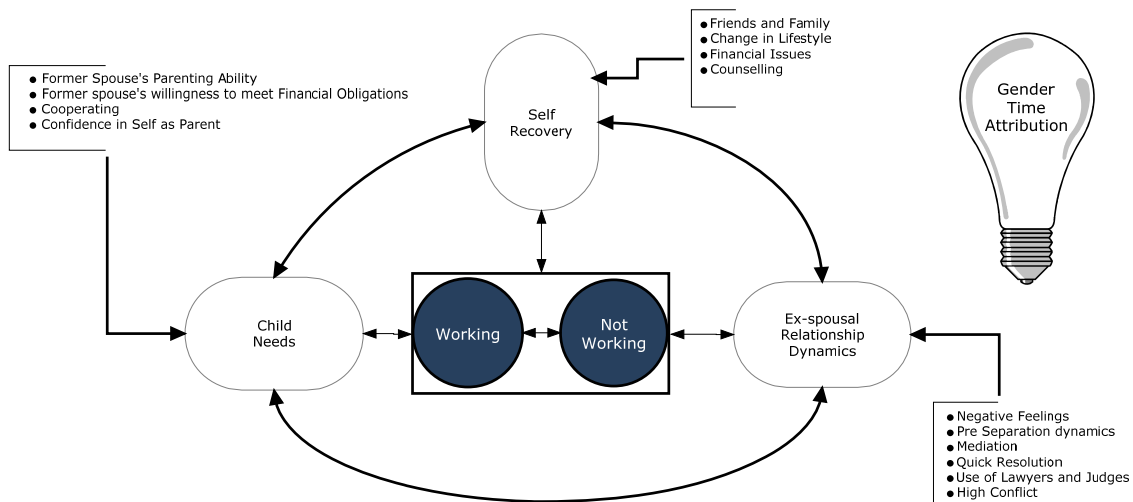
The researcher reviewed the data in search of fathers who described their former partner as supporting their role as a parent; however, no such cases emerged.

**Confidence in self as a parent.** Gender differences were identified in reports relating to confidence in self as a parent. Fathers reported gaining confidence in themselves as parents following separation. In contrast, while some mothers reported an increased confidence in their overall abilities following separation (as described in the SELF RECOVERY theme), the increased confidence did not extend to an increased confidence in their parenting. All of the mothers viewed themselves as the primary caregiver prior to separation and did not express concerns regarding their ability to parent independently.

One father described drawing strength from his role as a parent. He emphasized his decision to nurture this role in spite of the conflict in the parental relationship. He explained:

*One of the good things that can come out of this though is how good I felt taking the girls back to their mom on Sunday afternoon and I made it through the weekend. I did it, me, myself and I and the girls, we did it, we ate, we did dishes, we did laundry, we did homework, we went out and played in the snow, we played hockey, we did gymnastics, we did all these things and we did it alone, we did it ourselves, and that amount of confidence each week that goes by and each week that the girls come by and I am a little more comfortable going back and forth it’s enlightening and I think I have become closer to my girls. (#19)*

### Central Unifying Theme: “Working or Not Working”



*Figure 6.* Conceptual model: Overview of themes, metathemes, and central unifying theme associated with postdivorce parenting relationship dynamics.

While all participants indicated that they desired a “working” parenting relationship, the majority of participants described ongoing issues that left the postdivorce parenting relationship in a state, to varying degrees, of dysfunction. As previously indicated, themes that contributed to “working” or “not working” relationships were: SELF RECOVERY, EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, and CHILD NEEDS. Whether the relationship was “working” or “not working” appeared dependent upon the interaction among the themes, relevant properties within the themes, and the influence of the metathemes (GENDER, TIME, and ATTRIBUTION).

As the researcher delved deeper into the central theme of “working or not working,” she came to understand the properties of the themes as having either a protective role in the functioning of the postdivorce parenting relationship, or as posing a risk to its functioning. By re-examining the properties within the themes in this light, another layer in this research emerged. Not only did each individual property influence the postdivorce parenting relationship but the interplay among the properties could create a distinct experience for each participant. Risk and

protective properties shifted back and forth depending upon the interplay among them and the influence of gender, time, and attribution.

### **Risk versus Protective Properties**

While all participants reported a desire to attain a “working” postdivorce parenting relationship, many reported years of dysfunction following divorce, or indicated that they had resigned themselves to accept a relationship that simply did not and could not work. These participants who described a “not working” relationship reported ongoing problems in their relationship with their former spouses that prevented a “working” postdivorce parenting relationship from developing.

As the properties were examined, a dichotomy emerged in how participants described the properties—they either protected the relationship or created risk to it. The idea of risk versus protective properties materialized from the researcher’s question, “What is leading some people to have a parenting relationship with their ex-spouse that is “working” while others remain entrenched in negative dynamics?” From this question, the researcher returned to the properties within each of the three main themes and examined how they were discussed by the participants. Through revisiting the data, each of the properties was identified as creating risk of developing “not working” postdivorce parenting dynamics or as providing a protective role in the development of “working” postdivorce parenting dynamics; as well, depending upon the experience of the participant or the interplay among the properties, properties could function as both a protective factor and a risk factor. (See analysis in Table 3.)

Table 3

*Analysis of Properties as Related to Divergent Pathways*

Properties	Risk	Protective
Friends and Family		X
Change in Lifestyle	X	X
Financial Issues	X	
Counselling	X	X
Negative Feelings	X	
Pre-separation Dynamics	X	X
Mediation	X	X
Lawyers and Judges	X	X
Quick Resolution		X
High Conflict	X	
Former Spouse's Parenting Ability	X	X
Former Spouse's Willingness to Meet Financial Obligations	X	X
Cooperation	X	
Confidence in Self as a Parent		X

The finding that some of the same properties discussed by the participants might offer either protection or create risk for ex-spouses' parenting after divorce provided a deeper understanding of how properties contributed to the postdivorce parenting relationship. Not only did each of the properties contribute to the participants' experience but, when considered in their entirety, they seemed to offer insight into how "working" versus "not working" postdivorce parenting relationships developed.

**"Working" or "Not Working"**

Most women and all of the men described their postdivorce parenting relationship as "not working". Of interest is how, in retrospect, participants identified the properties that supported or impeded a "working" relationship. Similarly, although fewer in numbers, participants who reported having a "working" relationship with their child's other parent offered rich descriptions



about their perspectives on how they achieved this desired outcome. Participants also provided rich information as they described what was “not working” in their postdivorce parenting relationships. The interplay among the properties—risk and protection—appeared to create unique experiences for the mothers and fathers.

### **“Working” Relationships**

A significant gender difference emerged through analysis of the data analysis: only women described having a “working” relationship with former spouses. These women described having positive feelings relating to all three main themes (SELF RECOVERY, EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, and CHILD NEEDS). They emphasized forgiveness, effective communication, and positive feelings about their former spouse as a parent, as indicators that their postdivorce parenting relationship was “working.” Some mothers described a progression in the relationship toward more positive dynamics, while others reported that the relationship had worked immediately following separation. One woman who felt her parenting relationship was successful immediately following separation stated:

*We did sit and talk for hours and weeks but really I made it up in my head that things were probably done and from there to there it was probably 2 months. We didn't mess around and fight and bring up dirty laundry. We talked about what was broken and it couldn't be fixed and looked where to go from there. (#9)*

Women who reported resolving matters quickly, and who had a “working” postdivorce parenting arrangement also expressed trust for their former spouses from the time of separation, in meeting the needs of their children.

The following quotations illustrate how some mothers believed their parenting relationship with their ex-spouses improved as the relationship progressed, and how they were able to focus on the present rather than the past:

*I feel just fine towards him, I don't really have any animosity toward him. I know that he is a person who has gone through a really tough time on his own; it's too bad that it*

*affected the marriage. Everybody deserves a second chance. We have had our tough times but I have tried to put them behind us and just give him some benefit. (#13)*

Similarly:

*It has come along way, almost full circle I guess from when we could hardly agree on anything with the children. That was just so frustrating when really it was like black and white, day and night. It is really at a good place, everything seems more peaceful and even keel, a lot more enjoyment, I don't get worried, I don't stress. When we get together and meet with the children it doesn't bother me at all now. I'm still a little bit guarded because of his past behaviour but I try not to let that cut into each time I see him. I try to judge him by his behaviour at the present. (#13)*

Although some of the mothers who achieved a “working” postdivorce parenting relationship indicated that the relationship faced challenges, they identified protective properties that fostered functional dynamics in the parenting relationship. For example, some of these mothers discussed self recovery following divorce as they stabilized financially and adapted to life circumstances after separation. They believed their former spouses had the ability and willingness to parent effectively and to place the children’s needs as primary which was considered to foster the parenting relationship and thus can be seen as protective. This willingness to place their child’s needs first was also tied to ex-spousal relationship dynamics; their perception of former spouses meeting the child’s needs was accompanied by communication and positive feelings. These mothers typically appeared to have a “softer” or more forgiving view of their former spouse. (As noted above, none of the fathers described a “working” parenting relationship.)

All of the women who described a “working” parenting relationship identified communication as the most important property, in particular communication about the children’s needs, which they depicted as “easier” with both parties sharing, “listening better,” showing “mutual respect,” and “compromising and coming to solutions.”

Attaining a “working” parenting relationship came with many benefits. Participants described “working” relationships as encompassing a perception of “friendliness” (#8, #16), a

sense of “calm” (#16), and a decrease in “worry” (#13). They referred to focusing on the present state of the relationship without “judging” (#13) the former partners for past behaviour. They had empathy for their former partners’ experience. Anger and “animosity” were described as less prominent and former spouses were given “a second chance” within the parenting relationship.

### **“Not Working”**

In contrast to those with working relationships, all participants who described a “not working” postdivorce parenting relationship reported problems related to at least one of the three main themes. A significant finding was that responsibility for problems within the EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS theme was largely attributed to the behaviour or characteristics of the ex-spouse. In “not working” parenting relationships, participants accepted limited responsibility for negative dynamics. While participants viewed themselves as trying to improve the ex-spousal relationship through communication, these efforts were perceived to have failed, for which the former spouses were blamed. Mothers who described “not working” parenting relationships also reported problems because their child’s needs were not met, either because of a lack of investment in the child by their fathers or because of the fathers’ failure to meet financial expectations.

In contrast to those with “working” parenting relationships, parents who described “not working” relationships described feeling frustration, anger, and dislike for their former spouse, even years following the divorce. While they indicated that they desired a working relationship with their former spouses, they did not express hope that the dynamics would improve. One mother stated:

*I feel bad for him actually because he will never be happy. I actually think he is mentally ill, I am so careful what I say about him because I don’t want to sound like I am bitter because I am not, I am sad about some things but I don’t want to sound like an ex-spouse talking about her spouse that way. I don’t think he will ever be happy, I just think he has really low self-esteem I don’t know he is kind of like a dead person you know. (#2)*

As those with “working” relationships identified communication as the most important aspect of their postdivorce parenting relationship, those with “not working” parenting relationships identified communication as the element they desired most in their parenting relationship. One person indicated that increased respect would improve the relationship. The remainder of the participants believed that their relationship would improve if communication improved.

### **The Process of Developing Postdivorce Parenting Relationships**

Based upon their success within the three main themes, parents seemed to engage in a process through which they formed a “working” or “not working” postdivorce parenting relationship. The answer to the research question, “What contributes to postdivorce parenting relationships?” as it emerged through the research, lay in how, after separation, interactions occurred among the three main themes. The three metathemes were also influential throughout. Dynamics in the postdivorce parenting relationships could shift from negative to positive and back again, depending upon the interactions. Each of the properties within the three main themes might offer protection or create risk for ex-spouses’ parenting after divorce.

The complexities of postdivorce parenting relationships emerged as parents spoke of a number of feelings resulting from separation, ranging from relief to depression. They described how they coped with issues in their life outside their relationship with their former spouses (e.g., new relationships, career) while also managing issues associated with the postdivorce parenting relationship (e.g., communication, access schedules). Despite variances in descriptions provided by the participants, ongoing conflict was an obstacle to resolving feelings of anger or bitterness regarding former spouses. These feelings of frustration were most clearly illustrated by male participants who typically expressed resentment toward their former spouse for failing to make the postdivorce parenting relationship work, often by not supporting the father-child relationship.

Those mothers who described “working” parenting relationships described quickly resolving custody matters with their former partners and consciously making a decision to move forward with their individual goals while sharing parenting of their child(ren).

Given that many of the participants reported that their postdivorce parenting relationships were “not working,” the researcher examined how these parents felt they were functioning overall. The findings indicated that even when they were in “not working” postdivorce parenting relationships, participants typically reported that following divorce the rest of their life was positive. They reported positive relationships with new partners, success in their careers, financial stability, positive relationships with friends and family, and positive feelings about themselves and their accomplishments.

### **Chapter Summary**

The parents in this study described their postdivorce parenting experiences in diverse ways. From these experiences three main themes emerged —SELF RECOVERY, EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, and CHILD NEEDS. The interplay among these three main themes was situated within three metathemes—GENDER, TIME, and ATTRIBUTION. The central unifying theme of “working or not working” encompassed the three main themes and three metathemes.

The three main themes contained multiple properties (friends and family, change in lifestyle, financial issues, counselling, negative feelings, pre-separation dynamics, mediation, quick resolution following separation, lawyers and judges, high conflict, former spouse’s parenting ability, former spouse’s willingness to meet financial obligations, cooperating, and confidence in self as a parent). As the analysis moved to more abstract levels, these properties were examined as they interacted among the themes to support or impede a “working” postdivorce parenting relationship. Through examination of these properties, in the context of

“working” or “not working”, it was apparent these properties could be described as having either a protective function or as creating risk to the relationship, or as both.

From the participants’ words, it is clear that postdivorce parenting relationships are complex and continually in process. The importance of understanding the many systems and factors that come into play when parents separate (Braithwaite, McBride, & Schrodt, 2003) was brought to life through the words of the participants. Interview after interview demonstrated that a “working” postdivorce parenting relationship required success within the three main themes. The themes’ properties, including the availability of resources and supports, were also described as important.

Family and friends were identified as essential resources, not only in terms of offering emotional support but also because they provided an essential bridge during financial settlement. Some respondents reported using the homes of family members for access while others described staying with friends until they could find housing. Without the financial support of family or friends, some women described having to utilize social services despite never relying on this type of support prior to the separation. In terms of professional supports, most respondents who accessed counselling found it to be a helpful resource. Mediation was described as a positive process that assisted in quick resolution of issues following separation but one that was not maintained in the long term. The use of lawyers and judges, although not a desired resource by any of the participants, was sought when participants felt they had no other option.

The three metathemes, GENDER, TIME, and ATTRIBUTION, provided a deeper layer for this analysis. Gender emerged as key in understanding where men and women rooted their negative feelings toward their former spouses. Men typically attributed responsibility for their anger or frustration in the relationship to their former spouses’ lack of support or undermining of the father-child relationship. Women with “not working” parenting arrangements rooted their anger

or frustration in their ex-spouses' inability or unwillingness to meet the needs of the child. Gender was also evident in participant description of self recovery, in which women described greater obstacles related to housing, finances, and adapting to their new lifestyle. Despite describing fewer obstacles, men typically described more resentment toward their former spouses because of financial issues associated with the divorce whereas women described positive feelings of increased independence as they adapted to changes in lifestyle. Gender again crossed the theme of child needs, as men reported increased confidence in their parenting following separation while this was not expressed by women, possibly because women had identified as the primary caregiver prior to separation.

Time emerged as a metatheme across the three main themes. For some women, time assisted in improving the postdivorce parenting relationship because it allowed resolution of matters and gave the opportunity for more positive feelings, such as forgiveness, to develop. None of the men reported that time had created a "working" postdivorce parenting relationship; rather, all expressed anger and frustration regarding their former spouses years after divorce. Some parents, both men and women, advised that the relationship had deteriorated over time.

Attribution was the third metatheme that influenced all three main themes. The findings suggested that men and women who reported a "not working" postdivorce parenting relationship attributed responsibility for this failure to their former spouses. While they viewed themselves as having made efforts to establish a "working" relationship with their former spouses, problems with the other parents' behaviour, personality, or specific attributes, were identified as roadblocks to success. Most often this obstacle was framed by participants as failure to communicate adequately, although gender differences were apparent. Men believed that their ex-spouses did not communicate because they did not value the father-child relationship and women expressed their belief that their ex-spouses did not communicate because of anger in the ex-

spousal relationship. In contrast to those with “not working” parenting relationships, those who reported postdivorce parenting relationships as “working” described a shared responsibility for the success of the relationship.

### **Summary of Themes**

This chapter concludes with a table depicting the three main themes, the three metathemes, and the central unifying theme (“working or not working”) as they emerged from the data analysis (Table 4).

Table 4

*Summary of Findings Emerging from the Data Analysis*

<p>Self Recovery Related to Postdivorce Parenting Relationship Dynamics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends and Family</li> <li>• Change in Lifestyle</li> <li>• Financial Issues</li> <li>• Counselling</li> </ul>
<p>Ex-spousal Relationship Dynamics Related to Postdivorce Parenting Relationship Dynamics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative feelings</li> <li>• Preseparation dynamics</li> <li>• Mediation</li> <li>• Lawyers and Judges</li> <li>• Quick Resolution</li> <li>• High Conflict</li> </ul>
<p>Child Needs Related to Postdivorce Parenting Relationship Dynamics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Former Spouse’s Parenting Ability</li> <li>• Former Spouse’s Willingness to Meet Financial Obligations</li> <li>• Confidence in Self as Parent</li> <li>• Cooperating</li> </ul>
<p>Metathemes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender</li> <li>• Time</li> <li>• Attribution</li> </ul>
<p>Central Unifying Theme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Working” or “Not Working”</li> </ul>



## CHAPTER 6:

### DISCUSSION

Maintaining a parenting relationship after the dissolution of a marital relationship is a necessary and challenging undertaking. The complexity of postdivorce parenting relationships was brought to life by the participants in the current study who were experiencing parenting after separation or divorce from their former spouse. “Working” or “not working” was the unifying central theme that emerged from the data to describe the divergent experiences of parents engaged in postdivorce parenting relationships. According to the five fathers who participated, their parenting relationship was “not working”; of the 15 mothers, five described a “working” postdivorce parenting relationship, and 10 reported a “not working” relationship. The mothers who described their postdivorce parenting relationship as “working” reported positive feelings about their own self recovery, their ex-spousal relationship dynamics, and their child’s needs. While no fathers described success in all three of these areas, some reported that they felt positive about one or two of the areas. Similarly, the 10 mothers who described a “not working” relationship reported positive feelings within one or two of the areas, but the absence of success in the remaining area or areas seemed to result in the relationship “not working”.

This grounded theory study was guided by the broad question: : What contributes to postdivorce parenting relationships? The answer to this question emerged as complex, appearing to lie in the interactions among the themes that emerged (self recovery, ex-spousal relationship dynamics, and child needs) and metathemes (gender, time, and attribution). Within each main theme were several interacting properties, such as friends and family, change in lifestyle, financial issues, within the categories of protective resources and risk factors. The three metathemes—gender, time, and attribution—intersected the main themes and properties. The interplay among the properties, themes, and metathemes corresponds with the ecological

perspective. As a result of this overall interplay, the postdivorce parenting relationship emerged as either “working” or “not working” for the parents in this study, engaged in these arrangements.

Regardless of the state of their postdivorce parenting relationship, analysis revealed that all 20 participants wanted to have a “working” postdivorce parenting relationship with their former spouse. Nevertheless, many of the women and all of the men in this study reported that their postdivorce parenting relationship was “not working.” The divergent experiences depicted by participants allowed the researcher to gain insight into the challenges, obstacles, and supportive resources that parents found influential following separation and divorce.

The findings suggest that there are key differences in how the men and women experienced postdivorce parenting relationships. In this chapter, the researcher discusses the relevance of the findings and integrates relevant theory and research. The researcher suggests that, based upon findings of this study, the most suitable approach employs an (a) ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); (b) risk and resilience theory (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1987); and (c) conflict theory (Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959) to foster understanding of postdivorce parenting relationships. An ecological approach best supports understanding because it captures the interplay among the factors that influence the postdivorce parenting relationship. Risk and resilience theory emerged both when examining how parents described some factors as protective while others as creating risk to the relationship, and when they described developing a successful life after divorce despite having a “not working” postdivorce parenting relationship. Conflict theory is relevant when parents discussed the complexity of their relationships with their former spouses, such as when they discussed negative feelings as well as violence during access exchanges. These theories should be considered as informing this discussion and the conclusions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study’s

limitations, implications for future research, and relevance to the advancement of social work knowledge.

Based upon findings presented in the previous chapter, an understanding of what contributes to postdivorce parenting relationships must consider the following: (a) the postdivorce parenting relationship is highly complex and the development of a “working” or “not working” relationship is due to interactions among factors (friends and family, change in lifestyle, financial issues, counselling, negative feelings, pre-separation dynamics, mediation, quick resolution following separation, lawyers and judges, high conflict, former spouse’s parenting ability, former spouse’s willingness to meet financial obligations, cooperating and confidence in self as a parent), along with gender, time and attribution; (b) understanding couple’s research is essential to appreciating this complexity because, despite the couple relationship ending, former spouses remain a dyad because they are parents and some of the findings in the couple’s research may be applicable to postdivorce parenting relationships; (c) even when the postdivorce parenting relationship is “not working”, men and women describe other aspects of their lives as successful suggesting overall resilience in adapting despite adverse circumstances associated with their separation or divorce<sup>1</sup>.

### **Complexity of the Postdivorce Parenting Relationship**

The findings revealed that the postdivorce parenting relationship is highly complex. The ecological framework assists in understanding how the interplay among internal and external factors at various levels of the person’s system contributes to whether a postdivorce parenting relationship is “working” or “not working”. Risk and resilience theory (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1987) offers a theoretical framework to understand how protective resources and

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<sup>1</sup> In this discussion, separation refers to the point that the participant identifies the marital relationship as ending while divorce refers to the legal dissolution of the marriage.

risk factors may influence the postdivorce parenting relationship. The concept of resilience also informs understanding of how parents respond to the adverse circumstances associated with divorce. Gender emerged as an important consideration when examining how parents experienced and understood the postdivorce parenting relationship, particularly when examining postdivorce parenting relationships in terms of self recovery after separation, attribution of problems in the postdivorce parenting relationship, and parents' discussion of child needs. Conflict theory informs understanding of the complexity of relationships when aggression or violence is present. The findings illuminated that the passing of time may not improve postdivorce parenting relationships, with one parent for example, reported experiencing a "not working" parenting relationship even 17 years postdivorce.

Employing an ecological framework to postdivorce parenting relationships ensures that the experiences of men and women are not understood in isolation of the other factors and contexts in their lives. An ecological perspective provides a frame, comprising a reciprocal process that occurs between an individual and many other levels within a system, including the family, the community, and society. The participants discussed personal individual factors when they described their self confidence, their feelings, and how they, as individuals, managed the change in their lifestyle following separation. They also addressed the importance of family and friends as they coped with financial challenges and difficult feelings. The importance of friends and family for the individual following separation was notable. When parents referred to the community and society, they made reference to the role that professionals played in their life, including counsellors, mediators, and judges. They also described the impact of their financial and employment situation. How the community and society interacted with the individual emerged as dependent on a number of factors including gender, time, and attribution. Consistent with an ecological perspective, the findings suggest that certain individual factors, together with

relational and environmental factors as well as the interplay among all levels of the system, contribute to how this relationship develops and ultimately whether it is “working” or “not working”.

In addition to the ecological framework, findings suggest that risk and resilience theory (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1987) and conflict theory (Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959) contribute to understanding the complexity of postdivorce parenting relationships. For example, risk and resilience theory and conflict theory both inform understanding of the steps associated with shifting from a spousal relationship to one of parenting, learning how to differentiate these roles, and adjusting to life after separation and divorce. This complex process has been discussed in the literature (Hardesty, Khaw, Chung, & Martin, 2008). In the current study, findings reveal that certain factors, such as financial stress and negative feelings toward the former spouse, categorized as risk factors, impede the development of successful postdivorce parenting relationships. This research also brings to light the key factors that participants considered to be influencing the postdivorce parenting relationship: SELF RECOVERY, EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, and CHILD NEEDS, which in turn encompass multiple properties (friends and family, change in lifestyle, financial issues, counselling, negative feelings, pre-separation dynamics, mediation, quick resolution following separation, lawyers and judges, high conflict, former spouse’s parenting ability, former spouse’s willingness to meet financial obligations, cooperating and confidence in self as a parent). The findings of this study correspond with previous research (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999) which found that stress, financial problems, and psychological distress were risk factors to parenting after divorce. The findings of this study contribute to the research which addresses parenting after divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999) by showing that key factors may act as a protective resource or create risk to the postdivorce parenting relationship.

Conflict theory also emerged from the findings when parents described negative feelings, aggression and/or violence in the ex-spousal relationship. Such dynamics were clearly depicted by the participants as a risk factor to the parenting relationship. None of the parents in this study reported incidents of physical abuse prior to separation. Two of the mothers however, described emotional abuse prior to separation, and one mother described the emotional abuse as continuing during access exchange (i.e., that period when the child transfers from the care of one parent to the other). She also reported agreeing to a joint custody arrangement out of fear that her ex-husband would attempt to take the children from her. This corresponds to research showing that, in cases of violence, some mothers are influenced by fear when making decisions regarding custody and access (Hardesty et al., 2008). While this mother did not frame her husband's behaviour as violence, research (Hardesty et al., 2008) has differentiated types of violence, thus assisting in understanding the role of intimate partner violence in postseparation and postdivorce parenting relationships. Mothers who were able to leave an abusive relationship and develop some level of cooperation and respect in the postdivorce parenting relationship were likely to have experienced more situational violence prior to separation (Hardesty et al., 2008). Those who coped with violence of the intimate terrorism type (violence for the purpose of power and control) however, continued to deal with these behaviours following separation (Hardesty et al., 2008). Hence, the current findings correspond to Hardesty and colleague's (2008) findings in that when the mothers discussed frequent episodes of verbal abuse around non-specific issues, it seems that they were actually describing intimate partner violence, although they might not have identified it as such.

The complexity of the relationship is also depicted when loving parents describe exposing their children to problems in the postdivorce parenting relationship. Some of the parents in the current study drew their children into conflicts or exposed them to their own

negative feelings about their former spouse, without considering the impact upon the child. Other parents described relying upon their child(ren) to pass information to their former spouse, as a way of avoiding direct communication with the former spouse. While some parents described awareness that using the child to pass information between disputing parents might have negative implications for their child, they did not appear to find an alternative approach.

Even when parents did not describe using the child to pass information to the other parent, findings suggested that many parents were not equipped to deal with problems in communication or conflict, specifically during access exchanges. Custody evaluation experts have recommended that, in high-conflict postdivorce parenting relationships, conflict reduction strategies should be put in place to allow parents to disengage and parent in a parallel fashion (Birnbaum, Fidler, & Kavassalis, 2008). In effect, contact between the parents should be minimized. Findings in this study suggest that, for these participants, caution may not have been exercised in this area either through mediated plans or agreements, because parents described access exchanges as occurring in the home environment even when there had been a history of verbal aggression and physical altercations between the parents. Despite parents describing high-conflict relationships, none reported using a neutral location to facilitate access exchange. Parents also said that at times their children had been present during episodes of conflict at access exchange.

## **Gender**

### **Gender and Postdivorce Adjustment**

Differences in gender that emerged from this study, further contribute to the complexity of understanding postdivorce parenting relationships. Findings of this study suggest these men and women experience postdivorce parenting relationships differently. While both the men and the women described the financial stress associated with separation and divorce, the women

reported significantly more serious financial adjustments as a result of the marital dissolution. They had experienced homelessness, reliance on social assistance for housing, and unemployment, while the men described frustration with having to relinquish assets and future earnings. The findings also suggest that, while both men and women relied on family and friends following separation and divorce, the women placed greater emphasis on the importance of emotional support.

Research in the area of women and divorce supports the findings of the current study. Such research has found that while both men and women experience financial loss as a result of marital dissolution, the financial consequences of divorce for women are greater than for men (Bianchi, Subaiya, & Kahn, 1999; Gadalla, 2009; McManus & Diprete, 2001). Also consistent with research findings which have suggested that women experience more dire financial consequences from divorce than men, the women in this study reported that recovering from financial loss represented a significant step toward their self recovery. The Canadian “Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics” from 1998 to 2005 (Gadalla, 2009) found that women’s income dropped 30 percent in the year of marital dissolution and that the difference between male and female incomes remained statistically significant for three years post separation. By year four, women reported earning 85 percent of what their former spouse was earning. These findings (Gadalla, 2009) suggested that, for at least four years, women suffer greater negative financial consequences of divorce than their former husbands.

These differences were reported from a statistical standpoint (Gadalla, 2009); the voices of women actually represented by these statistics have been captured in the current qualitative study. The women also reported overcoming financial hardships however, obtaining homes and achieving fulfilling employment as part of their postdivorce recovery. While we see from the statistics (Gadalla, 2009) that such recovery generally occurs over a four year period, the trials



and tribulations of the women rebuilding financially after divorce were brought to life through the qualitative data.

Gender did not appear to affect the overall importance of resources for parents in their adjustment following divorce. Both men and women identified friends and family as an essential support following separation and divorce. While some men and women found professional supports such as counsellors, helpful following separation, family and friends were consistently recognized by all participants as their main source of support. The men described family and friends as providing a place to stay or to have visits with their children when their own accommodation was not child-appropriate. The women also reported that they valued the support of family and friends, for similar reasons.

While there was no gender difference in the importance of resources to men and women following separation and divorce, men and women utilized the supports available to them differently. Men utilized supports on a temporary basis for financial support or for a place to use for visits with their children. Typically, the men described their use of social supports as time-limited; for men, these supports offered a short-term solution for a problem which, over the long term, they felt they would manage independently. Men did not indicate the need to utilize friends and family for emotional support.

In contrast, the women emphasized the importance of the emotional support of friends, family, and acquaintances. They discussed emotional support in a manner consistent with how emotional support is defined in the literature: using and valuing comforting skills, and producing comforting messages (Kunkel & Burlison, 1999). Although some women were unable to identify close friends or supportive family members, they talked about acquaintances who stepped in to fill this supportive role. The women utilized these informal social networks in a variety of ways—for financial support, housing support, and ongoing emotional support and they

felt these informal supports were crucial to their postdivorce adjustment. These findings correspond to research suggesting that women value and give and receive more emotional support than their male counterparts (Lieber & Sandefur, 2002). Women also reported accessing these supports over the long term, even years following separation.

These findings that women placed more emphasis than men on the value of emotional support, are consistent with the literature (Burleson, 2002; Kunkel & Burleson, 1999), and correspond to research suggesting that women utilize the support of family and friends differently than men when they are coping with stress following divorce (Richmond & Christenson, 2000).

Lieber and Sandefur (2002) suggested that as divorce rates grow, friendships may be increasingly more important as a source of support. Using data from the “Wisconsin Longitudinal Study” (WLS, 2006) Lieber and Sandefur examined whether the exchange of social support with friends, neighbours, and coworkers varied for men and women and found that women relied on these supports for emotional reasons while men did not. Similarly, Richmond and Christensen (2000) studied coping strategies, physical health, and psychological health after divorce. Their findings revealed that women relied more on informal social supports (including friends, family, neighbours, and coworkers) after divorce than men. Further, women’s use of informal supports fostered physical and psychological health but did not have the same effects for men. These results are consistent with the findings in the current research suggesting that men fare well despite not accessing emotional support while women describe an association between receiving emotional support and their own postdivorce adjustment.

The findings of this study identify a clear dichotomy between the length of time women and men accessed informal supports. Women accessed short-term and long-term emotional support and men accessed temporary support. Whether these differences reflected the

relationships that women and men had established with friends and family prior to separation was not revealed in this study, although this would be an area for future consideration.

### **Gender and Confidence in Parenting after Divorce**

Fathers discussed gaining confidence in their parenting ability and in their relationship with their children as they spent more time with their children postdivorce. In contrast, all the mothers reported feeling confident in their parenting before separation and, with the exception of one mother, typically described having consistently positive relationships with their children before and after separation. Their parenting confidence appeared to remain constant, before and after separation.

While there is a lack of research that specifically addresses confidence in parenting after separation and divorce, research has suggested that fathers typically have a more difficult adjustment to the role of parenting independently than do mothers (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000). The findings of the current study do not highlight the stressors that fathers felt in parenting after divorce, with the exception of feeling stressed by the belief that their former partners were interfering with their relationship with their child. Rather, the findings suggest that parenting their children independently and developing increased confidence in their ability to parent were factors that relieved stress for fathers. These findings correspond to research that has highlighted the importance of fathers spending time with their children after divorce (Hetherington, Bridges & Insabella, 1998; King & Sobolewski, 2006). Results of this study reveal that both men and women believed that the father-child relationship is valuable. This belief has been supported by research that suggests that positive father-child relationships benefit fathers, mothers and, most importantly, their children (Hetherington et al., 1998; King & Sobolewski, 2006).

### **Couple's Research as Essential to Understanding the Postdivorce Parenting Relationship**

The ex-spousal relationship is a unique dyad not free from the dynamics of the former couple relationship. It is important to understand couple's research, such as that of Gottman (1994a, 1994b; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996; Jacobson & Gottman, 1998; Levenson & Gottman, 1983, 1985; Gottman & Levenson, 1992, 2000) to appreciate the complexity of the postdivorce parenting relationship. The findings of the current study indicate that while the couple relationship had dissolved through separation or divorce, the problematic dynamics of the relationship did not simply or automatically cease or improve. While some women reported a "working" relationship with their former spouse after divorce, men and the remaining women typically described ongoing problems that had existed before they separated. Some of the themes that emerged, such as attribution, have been identified and described in the couple's research and appear to play a role in the postdivorce parenting relationship.

Parents who recalled their marital relationship as largely negative tended to also report a "not working" postdivorce parenting relationship. In contrast, most of the women who described their postdivorce parenting relationship as "working" were also able to identify positive aspects of their marriage despite the divorce. The parents described problems in communication to be what contributed most to the "not working" dynamics in their postdivorce parenting relationship. Although the participants' catch-all term for many problems in the relationship was "communication," the complexity of the dynamics leading to communication or comprising communication barriers began to unfold. Within their stories, problems with communication could often be found pre-separation as well as post-separation. Unresolved feelings of anger toward their former spouse and feelings that they were not being heard by the former spouse despite their efforts were common.

Although couples' research (Bodenmann & Cina, 2005; Germain & Gitterman, 1996; Gottman, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1999; Johnson, 1996) specifically addresses marital relationships, issues involving conflict and problem-solving within marriage may inform understanding of the demands of postdivorce parenting relationships. For example, in conflict resolution or problem-solving in the marital relationship, men and women both tend to engage in a stress-reduction process that aims to restore balance individually and within the marital relationship (Bodenmann & Cina, 2005). Parents in the current study also aimed to restore balance and reduce stress, individually and within the postdivorce relationship dyad. For example, individually women described finding employment and relying on friends for emotional support and, within the postdivorce parenting dyad women described making efforts to improve communication strategies. Similarly, Gottman's (1999) "core triad of balance", which proposes that perception, physiology and behaviour act as a thermostat within the marital relationship (Carrere, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000) may also inform the postdivorce parenting relationship based upon the experiences of the participants. The parents in this study also described how their perceptions of their former partner, and her or his behaviour within the relationship, either resulted in a "working" (i.e., balanced) relationship or one that was "not working." Although the couple's relationship had dissolved, there appeared to be an association between balancing the parenting relationship through a sharing of responsibility for conflict resolution and describing a "working" postdivorce parenting relationship. According to Gottman (1991), in couple relationships, active non-defensive listening and problem-solving helped reduce conflict. Perhaps the parents in this study referenced noncommunication as a barrier to their relationship because they still expected listening and problem solving and felt it was essential to parenting after dissolution of the marital relationship. Whatever the reason, participants' reports of former spouses not engaging in the process of conflict resolution, or as not having the ability to actively

engage in resolution, was described as problematic by both men and women and was associated with a “not working” postdivorce parenting relationship.

Gottman (1999) also described how couples aim to maintain a stable, steady state in the marriage by balancing positivity and negativity in their interactions. The ability to balance positivity and negativity is dependent upon both what each person brings to the relationship and how each person’s interaction influences the other. Gottman described what each individual brings to the interaction as the *uninfluenced stable state* which is “dependent upon the individuals’ temperaments, their personal histories, and the history of the relationship” (p. 35). The interaction between the parties, or how one partner influences the behaviour, thought and physiology of the other partner is referred to as the *influenced stable steady state*. According to Gottman, couples nearing separation or divorce bring more negative uninfluenced stable steady states to the interaction. The manner in which the interaction occurs can either move the individual’s uninfluenced stable steady state in a more positive or more negative direction. To develop a working marriage, the stable steady states must have a larger number of positive interactions in perception and behaviour, and there must be a sense of calmness in the physiological state of the individual.

Consistent with Gottman’s (1999) research of marital relationships, findings in the current study point to the importance of both parties in the relationship assuming responsibility for the maintenance of a functioning relationship. In the current study, the women who emphasized that both they and their former spouses were responsible for mitigating conflict and maintaining a “working” postdivorce relationship recognized how behaviours and feelings of both parties influenced the dynamics. (As noted previously, no men described a “working” postdivorce parenting relationship). In contrast, those men and women who reported that their postdivorce parenting relationship was “not working” emphasized that their former spouse was

making the relationship unworkable despite their own efforts. Those parents placed responsibility for problems in the relationship on their former spouse.

The concept of dyadic coping, specific to marriage has not been explored to its full potential in the divorce research. Understandably, any application of dyadic coping in the couples' literature must consider the unique relationship of divorced parents, whereby they no longer function as a dyad but rather as two individuals with the common goal of parenting. Divorced parents also bring with them their own unique history and a spousal relationship that has ultimately dissolved. Based upon Gottman's (1999) work, we can assume that what each person brings to the interaction is already influenced by a history of negative interactions and that their uninfluenced stable steady state is already largely negative. Findings from the current study suggested that preseparation dynamics were also present postseparation and postdivorce. Based upon Gottman's research and the findings from the current study, there is some indication that the dyadic coping patterns of the marital relationship may not be severed completely when a parenting relationship continues. Hence if there is more negative interaction than positive interaction in the postdivorce parenting relationship (with nothing positive to offset the negative), then negativity comes to define the "not working" postdivorce parenting relationship.

How the postdivorce parenting dyad copes (whether positive or negative) is also supported by the divorce literature. Amato and Previti (2003) suggested that postdivorce adjustment is negatively affected when individuals blame or externally attribute responsibility for the divorce to their former partner. Other research has found that people who initiate the divorce process perceive the transition and process more positively than those who do not initiate divorce; they tend to perceive the divorce transition as a challenge (Richmond & Christensen, 2000). In contrast, those who did not initiate the divorce and experience the process as thrust upon them have more difficulty with postdivorce adjustment (Amato, 2000; Richmond &

Christensen, 2000). Amato (2000) suggested that a greater sense of control in regard to the transition and adjustment helped create a more positive postdivorce adjustment.

Attribution—or where responsibility is placed—influences how people describe the events that they believe led to their divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003). In similar fashion, the current study found that how individuals attributed responsibility for problems was associated with how they described their postdivorce parenting relationship, whether they thought it was “working” or “not working.” Gottman (1999) described an association between “fundamental attribution error”, defined as attributing problems in the marital relationship to a defective character trait of the partner, and dissatisfaction in the marriage. In the current study, there also appears to be an association between how parents attributed problems in the postdivorce parenting relationship and whether they described their relationships as “working” or “not working”. In this study, a sense of shared responsibility for the relationship between the ex-spouses was associated with a successful relationship; attributing responsibility for problems to the former spouse was associated with unsuccessful outcomes. This study cannot identify whether postdivorce parenting relationships are influenced by “fundamental attribution error” as Gottman (1999) found in marital relationships. What is illuminated however, is the relevance of utilizing couple’s research, such as that of Gottman (1999), to inform understanding of postdivorce parenting relationships. Findings suggest that the complexity of the postdivorce parenting relationship can only be understood by considering couple’s research.

The findings of this study also provide rich data about how parents describe the source of their negative feelings. Parents discussed problems in the postdivorce parenting relationship as stemming from negative feelings or beliefs about the other parent. Mothers who were frustrated with the postdivorce parenting relationship identified the origin of their frustration as their view that their former partners were poor parents. The mothers reported making significant efforts to



foster the fathers' investment in the parental role. They stated that despite these efforts however, many of the fathers failed to engage with their children in a way that would indicate their children's needs were being met. For example, mothers typically expressed concern that fathers did not invest financially in the child or did not give the child adequate time. Mothers found these behaviours damaging not only to the father-child relationship but, because of the emphasis mothers placed on the child's needs, damaging to the postdivorce parenting relationship.

Mothers who identified their postdivorce parenting relationships as "not working" typically expressed frustration with their former partners because they did not think the fathers were good parents. This frustration seemed to further negatively affect the postdivorce parenting relationship. In contrast, mothers who reported "working" postdivorce parenting relationships described their former spouse as meeting the needs of the children. In this study fathers only described postdivorce parenting relationships that were "not working." They expressed frustration based on their belief that their former spouse did not support the father-child relationship, although most men reported that their former spouse was a good parent. Mothers' perceived lack of support for the father-child relationship was associated with a "not working" postdivorce parenting relationship as reported by the fathers.

In this study gender differences seemed to be related to the source of dissatisfaction with the postdivorce parenting relationship—and for women, in the belief that their former partners were not good parents (either due to lack of ability or will) and for men, in the lack of perceived support from their former spouses for the father-child relationship. In other words, for women, the postdivorce parenting relationship seemed to be influenced by whether they believed that their child(ren)'s needs were being met, whereas for men the postdivorce parenting relationship seemed to be influenced by whether they believed their ex-spouses were impeding the father-

child relationship. Some women expressed an awareness that their perspective on the father-child relationship differed dramatically from that of their former spouse.

Women's support of men having contact with their children is considered essential to father-child relationships (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000). All of the fathers in this study expressed frustration with the perceived lack of support they received from their former spouses, their children's mothers, which is consistent with research findings that men often feel unsupported by their former spouses in the postdivorce father-child relationship (Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Sano, Richards, & Zvonkovic, 2008). Fathers have named this *maternal gatekeeping*, by which they mean their former spouses' attempts to exclude or restrict their involvement with their child (Fagan & Barnett, 2003). Consistent with previous research, the fathers in the current study reported frustration with what they perceived as their children's mothers to be gatekeeping or purposefully keeping their children from them (Sano et al., 2008).

The importance of maternal support for the father-child relationship, both before and after dissolution of the marriage, was highlighted by the findings of the current study. For example, all of the mothers expressed the desire for their children to have positive contact with their fathers, as did most mothers in Sano and colleagues' (2008) study. Yet despite the mothers' efforts in their relationships with their respective former partners, fathers in the current study reported that their former spouses did not support their (the fathers') relationship with their child, leaving a gap between what the mothers the fathers perceived. Also consistent with previous research, the mothers in this study reported that they might impede the father-child relationship out of worry or fear for their child's safety (Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Sano et al., 2008). Fathers' competence in parenting was found to directly influence mothers' willingness to support the father-child relationship and mothers' support of the relationship was key to father's involvement with their children (Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000).

According to both the couple's literature and the divorce literature, gender influences perceptions, both within the marital relationship (Gottman, 1999) and following divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003). In the current study, the only parents who reported "working" postdivorce parenting relationships overall were women. The other women and all of the men described "not working" postdivorce parenting relationships. As indicated, when parents described "not working" postdivorce parenting relationships, they also attributed problems in the relationship to their former spouse, and vice versa. When parents described a shared responsibility however, for maintaining the postdivorce parenting relationship with their former partner they described a more positive relationship.

The findings of the current study appear consistent with findings from the couple's literature. For example, Gottman's (1999) series of longitudinal studies, comprising 20 four-hour observations and subsequent interviews with 677 couples, identified factors that distinguished unhappy and subsequently divorcing couples (and married, stable, but unhappy couples) from happy, stable couples. Gottman's (1999) results may be applicable to understanding how some postdivorce parenting relationships function well while others are in a state of dysfunction. For example, findings of the current study, which point to the attribution of responsibility for problems as associated with the overall functioning of the postdivorce parenting relationship, are not surprising when we consider the role played by attribution in problems in the marital relationship. Gottman (1999) found that a "fundamental attribution error" is present in distressed marital relationships. According to Gottman, in a marital relationship, when one spouse attributes problems to their partner's character, there will be ongoing conflict and distress. In contrast, couples in happy relationships do not attribute problems to their partner but rather share responsibility for the problems and emphasize positive interactions while minimizing their focus on negative interactions. The findings of the current study suggest that attribution also plays a

role in the postdivorce parenting relationship and whether it is “working” or “not working”. Gottman’s (1999) findings were about marital relationships. However, attribution also emerged as relevant in this study of postdivorce parenting relationships. This suggests that findings from couple’s research must be understood to fully comprehend the complexity of postdivorce parenting relationships.

### **Men and Women Function Well After Divorce Even When the Postdivorce Parenting Relationship is “Not Working”**

Postdivorce adjustment has been defined in the literature as a process that requires reestablishing a lifestyle as an individual rather than as part of a couple (Amato, 2000; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Richmond & Christenson, 2000). The findings of this study suggest that men and women adjusted well in terms of individual functioning after the divorce, regardless of whether they depicted positive adjustment in the postdivorce parenting relationship. As noted, the findings of this study also suggest that gender plays an important role in how this adjustment occurs and that women require different supports than men to support positive adjustment. All of the men and the majority of women had established relationships with new partners and described these current relationships in positive terms. Men described their current partner as offering support as they coped with their “not working” postdivorce parenting relationship. Despite all of the men and most of the women reporting “not working” postdivorce parenting relationships, only one woman regretted her decision to separate from her former partner. The other men and women all described their lives, with the exception of their postdivorce parenting relationship, as positive and successful. While time did not appear to be associated with improvement of the postdivorce parenting relationship, it did appear to be associated with men and women finding success in other aspects of their lives such as investing in new relationships, finding employment and feeling positive about accomplishments. As

noted, for men this sense of accomplishment typically related to their increased confidence as fathers and for women this sense of accomplishment related to adjusting to a new lifestyle of postseparation independence. Overall, findings suggest that a “not working” postdivorce parenting relationship is not associated with and therefore does not undermine positive adjustment and success after divorce.

The importance of supportive resources for recovering after separation or divorce and developing a “working” postdivorce parenting relationship was mentioned by all 20 participants. Risk and resilience theory (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1987) offers a theoretical framework to understand the importance of resources during times of stress. As previously indicated resilience does not refer to a sole trait or characteristic of the individual but rather is a two-dimensional construct that refers to exposure to *adversity* (also referred to as risk) and a positive adjustment outcome whereby individuals may be viewed as resilient when positive adaptation results after exposure to adverse circumstances (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1987). When individuals who have children undergo divorce, not only must they adjust individually but they must also transition from a spousal relationship to one based solely on parenting. The findings suggested that the men and women in this study successfully adapted to life after divorce. The findings also suggested however, that despite this positive individual adaptation, for the majority of women and all of the men, the postdivorce parenting relationship continued to be problematic.

Men and women described resilience as they appeared to function positively and to describe happiness in their life despite the adverse circumstance of divorce as well as the adverse situation of a “not working” postdivorce parenting relationship. As clearly expressed by the participants, the availability of internal and external protective resources, as well as the presence of internal and external risk factors, influenced the postdivorce parenting relationship. Informal

supports, such as family and friends, were identified as important to all participants while formal supports, such as counsellors, lawyers, and mediators, were discussed as valuable by some participants. In terms of formal supports, men and women reported that the value of formal supports depended upon the right fit between the formal support and the participant. Internal protective resources included confidence in self as a parent and adapting to change in lifestyle while risk factors included negative feelings.

### **The Timeliness of Supports: Mediation as a Unique Resource**

Most parents described mediation as a positive support in resolving matters following separation. It emerged, however, that the positive results achieved through mediation were not sustained over the longer term. In fact, parents (both men and women) who engaged in mediation reported ongoing conflict with their former spouses and held the view that, although they had initially settled issues surrounding custody and access arrangements, disputes between them continued and problems increased as they tested the agreement. Some of the parents reported a need to return to court years later, after mediation, in an attempt to resolve matters. So, while mediation was initially helpful, the findings suggest that it did not result in long-term success in resolving disputes in the postdivorce parenting relationship. These findings are supported by some research (Toews & McKenry, 2001; Pearson & Thoennes, 1988) but not by other research (Kelly, 1993). The findings are consistent with research that has suggested that mediation does not resolve issues over the longer term or improve parental cooperation (Pearson & Thoennes, 1988). In contrast, Kelly (1993) found that parents who engaged in mediation had greater cooperation in their postdivorce parenting relationship than those who relied on the adversarial process. The current study did not offer a comparison of outcomes between parents who engaged in mediation with parents who engaged in the adversarial process, nor did it offer a definitive conclusion about the use of mediation as related to postdivorce parenting. It did, however,

provide insight into how parents experienced postdivorce parenting relationships, whether they engaged in mediation or the adversarial process.

The findings of this study suggest that mediation might play an effective role in this negotiation during the time immediately following separation. The findings also support research suggesting that over half of women and one-third of men report ongoing anger with their former partner 10 years or more after separation (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989), and that ongoing anger in the divorce process is associated with poorer postdivorce relationships (Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999). Given the experiences of participants, it is important to consider the benefits and limitations of using mediation to address custody and access issues with divorcing parents.

### **Conclusion**

The postdivorce parenting relationship is highly complex and requires an understanding of couple's research and postdivorce parenting research. "Working" or "not working" is the central unifying theme that emerged in this study to describe the experiences of parents engaged in postdivorce parenting relationships. This central unifying theme signifies the outcome of a highly complex relationship. To understand the complexity of the postdivorce parenting relationship, the researcher drew from the experiences of men and women. While none of the men described "working" postdivorce parenting relationships, women who described "working" relationships reported success in three areas: SELF RECOVERY, EX-SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS, and CHILD NEEDS. Situating the postdivorce parenting relationship in an ecological framework ensures that the reciprocal relationships among the self, friends and family, and the community are considered. In addition, risk and resilience theory (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1987) and conflict theory (Cosser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959) foster understanding of the complexity of postdivorce parenting relationships. As indicated, risk and resilience theory

emerged both when examining protective resources and risk factors to postdivorce parenting relationships, and when parents described success in their lives after divorce despite reporting a “not working” postdivorce parenting relationship. Conflict theory informed the discussion of the complexity of relationships when negative feelings and violence were reported. Gender emerged as important to consider in order to understand the experiences of men and women in this study, as did attribution and time. All of the men and most of the women who reported that their postdivorce parenting relationships were “not working” were adamant that the longstanding problems were unlikely to improve.

Second, despite the dissolution of the couple relationship, dynamics within these postdivorce parenting relationships were described as developing from a culmination of predivorce and postdivorce experiences, and the interplay among internal and external factors. For divorcing parents, the dyadic relationship continues despite the end of the couple relationship because their parental roles do not cease. It appears therefore, only through understanding and considering couple’s research, can the complexity of the postdivorce parenting relationship be fully appreciated. As has been discussed in the couple’s literature (Gottman, 1999), one of the challenges to the postdivorce parenting relationship appeared to be associated with the concept of attribution. In this study, the parents who viewed their postdivorce parenting relationship as “not working” typically attributed problems in the relationship to their former spouse and, therefore, perceived a solution to the difficulties as largely outside of their control and in the control of their ex-spouse. In contrast, those women who described “working” postdivorce parenting relationships described a shared sense of responsibility for the maintenance of the relationship. This is not a linear or causal relationship but contributes to an understanding of the complexity of postdivorce parenting relationships.



Third, all 20 parents described their postdivorce parenting experience from their own unique perspectives. They acknowledged challenges and obstacles in their parenting relationships. The participants who reported having “working” relationships described the resources that contributed to the success of their relationship. Regardless of whether they depicted their postdivorce parenting relationship as “working” or “not working” however, all of the men and women reported success in other aspects of their life. It seemed that people moved on and reported positive feelings about the state of their postdivorce life, aside from the state of their postdivorce parenting relationship. Parents spoke of separation and divorce as an adverse situation and reported associated challenges, including financial stress, lack of housing, and negative feelings. They also described personal resilience however, as they discussed overcoming these adversities and, although the postdivorce parenting relationship seemed to be “not working” for the majority of participants, developed a successful, positive life after divorce.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study was designed to explore the postdivorce parenting relationship. The researcher was interested in how parents experienced parenting with their former spouse after dissolution of the couple relationship. Only from the lived-experience of divorced parents could this type of information be accessed. The researcher wished to hear the voices behind the statistics to learn from the experiences of those living in postdivorce parenting relationships.

Rich data emerged from this qualitative research. Although the findings correspond with research findings in the literature, because it is qualitative, there is no assumption that the findings will be generalized. The findings might not reflect the experiences of parents from diverse cultures, same-sex postdivorce parenting relationships, geographical areas, or socioeconomic groups. Individuals were self selected and, had other people responded to the newspaper article, different factors may have emerged as relevant. The study was limited to one

side of the postdivorce parental relationship; the ex-spouse was not represented in the analysis or findings. Further interpretation of results should consider that reports were retrospective and might have been influenced by personal bias and more emotionally laden memories. Further, the number of mothers in the study outweighed the number of fathers. Finally, because the interview guide did not specifically ask questions about intimate partner violence, the findings regarding this issue in the postdivorce parenting relationship were limited.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Certain findings warrant further exploration:

First, this study identified an association between attribution and the outcome of “working” or “not working” postdivorce parenting relationships. Further exploration should be undertaken to gain more understanding of attribution and its role within postdivorce parenting relationships. Research that follows parents over time, from the point of separation through a designated time period, would shed more light on attribution, for example its development, whether it was present at the point of separation or whether it resulted from an accumulation of stressors or conflicts. Interviews conducted over time (e.g., t1, t2, t3) could determine whether attribution changed over time and what impact that might have on the relationship dynamics. Further, to create a fuller picture of the postdivorce parenting relationship, future research would benefit from including both parents from the former couple relationship in the sample group.

Second, gender differences were apparent in how participants experience postdivorce parenting relationships. It would be important that future research reach out to more fathers to further explore the differences in gender that emerged from this study. The experiences of women engaged in postdivorce parenting relationships might be studied separately from the experiences of men. While perhaps difficult to access a sample group, it would be interesting to conduct research with women who do not identify themselves as the primary parent.

Third, future research may include perspectives of others in addition to the parents, which would provide triangulation. Beyond interviewing and collecting data from parents, a qualitative study that included children of divorce would also provide a postdivorce family perspective on adjusting to life after separation. A subject for further inquiry would be to compare and contrast the perspectives of practitioners, such as mental professionals, working with divorced parents to examine whether there is congruency between what the parents viewed as significant issues in postdivorce parenting and the views of practitioners working with parents after divorce.

Finally, the findings of this study seem to be quite consistent with some findings of couple's researcher and theorist, John Gottman (1994a, 1994b; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996; Jacobson & Gottman, 1998; Levenson & Gottman, 1983, 1985; Gottman & Levenson, 1992, 2000). Further clinical research could address the underlying issues associated with problems in dyadic functioning within a postdivorce parenting context. Gottman's (1999) core triad of balance theory offers a potential framework from which to approach difficulties in the postdivorce parenting interaction. Such an application would require modifications to ensure its appropriateness to the unique dynamics of the postdivorce parenting relationship. Given the qualitative sample size but rich data of the current study, future research may build upon the emerging themes associated with whether a postdivorce parenting relationship is "working" or "not working." Using these themes, future research may focus on testing the process or pathway that leads to "working" or "not working" relationships.

### **Implications for Practice and Policy**

The findings of this study have implications for parents engaged in postdivorce parenting relationships as well as for informing practice and policy in the area of divorced parenting. The primary implication for practice is an understanding that the postdivorce parenting relationship is

highly complex. Findings from this study suggest that those working with parents during separation and postdivorce should have an understanding of both couple's research and postdivorce parenting research. The relationship between fathers and children in the context of postdivorce parenting has been described as facing unique obstacles. While research has addressed the factors that impede father's involvement with their children after divorce (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000) and the important role this relationship plays for the child (Hetherington et al., 1998; King & Sobolewski, 2006), fathers in this study reported feeling that this relationship is not valued by their former partners, lawyers or judges. This perception should be considered when developing programs to assist men in playing an active role with their children in a postdivorce context. Training sessions could be offered with mental health professionals working with parents and families after divorce to support understanding of clinical issues underlying custody and access disputes and postdivorce parenting issues.

The majority of participants described being unsuccessful in developing a "working" postdivorce parenting relationship with their ex-spouses and many had resigned themselves to the likelihood that such an outcome would never occur. When considering the narratives of participants who were able to develop "working" postdivorce parenting relationships however, the potential for more positive experiences for parents and children after divorce can be seen. Given that all the parents who described "working" relationships were women, it is important to consider the role that gender plays in the postdivorce parenting experience. Two ways for professionals to support parents in navigating this complex relationship with more success may be to consider and invest in supportive, protective resources, and examine attribution beliefs of parents struggling with the common goal of parenting.

### **Study's Relevance for the Advancement of Social Work Knowledge**

Social work has increasingly committed to the use of evidence-informed practice (Rosen, Proctor, & Staudt, 1999). Despite social workers being paramount in supporting families and individuals through and following divorce, the current literature base reflects a lack of social work research in the area of postdivorce parenting. While drawing from the psychological literature and legal literature is valuable, given the number of social workers working directly with divorced parents and children, the absence of research from within the profession is concerning. Further, research conducted from a social work perspective would be better able to capture the importance of employing an ecological approach to support parents as they transition from being married to being divorced, and as they deal with the parenting relationship that remains. This qualitative study contributes to building a social work research base in the area of postdivorce parenting.

This study is relevant to informing social work practice and research addressing father-child relationships in the context of divorce; postdivorce adjustment for mothers; postdivorce adjustment for fathers; and conflict and problem-solving in postdivorce parenting relationships. It is hoped that this study will contribute to further exploration of these postdivorce parenting relationships and build a bridge between the couples' research and divorce research. The findings suggested that, together, couples' research and divorce research can comprehensively inform an understanding of how people continue to function in a parental relationship when their marital relationship has dissolved. An approach to understanding postdivorce parenting relationships that integrates couple's research and divorce research may offer the best opportunity to capture the complexity of this unique dyad.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Informed Consent**

You are being invited to participate in this research project, *Parenting In The Context of Divorce: Exploring Individual Adult Attachment Style and Satisfaction with the Post-Separation Parenting Relationship*, conducted by Julie Gowthorpe. You understand this research is part of her Ph.D. at the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. You understand that Ms. Gowthorpe will be interviewing approximately 20 participants. You understand that to be eligible for the study, you must be in a post-separation parenting relationship with a former partner with whom you share parenting of one or more children.

You understand that you are agreeing to complete a questionnaire and engage in an interview with Ms. Gowthorpe. The questionnaire will take you about 15 minutes to complete. The purpose of the questionnaire is to provide more information about your individual attachment style. The purpose of the interview is to explore your feelings about your post-separation parenting relationship with your child(ren)'s other parent. You understand that the interview will be about 45 minutes to 1.5 hours long. It will be recorded by an audio recorder and later transcribed by Julie Gowthorpe. You understand that if you do not wish the interview to be recorded, Ms. Gowthorpe will take notes. The researcher will maintain your privacy and all information you provide will be kept confidential. Ms. Gowthorpe will also make sure that your information is reported in a way that is anonymous, such as substituting a pseudonym for your name in the written report. You understand that one risk of your participation is that confidentiality can only be extended within the limits of the law. You understand that your participation in the interview is entirely voluntary and that you may refuse to answer any particular question or stop the interview at any time. For many people separation is a painful experience and discussion of events may trigger emotional discomfort. You are only being asked

to elaborate to questions in a manner with which you are comfortable. Should you become upset at any time during the process you will be provided with a list of resources where you may seek help. You understand that you can request a copy of the final report. The results of the interviews may be used for publication but the information will be combined and made anonymous to ensure that you cannot be recognized. You understand that data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the office of Ms. Gowthorpe. It will be destroyed in September 2015.

You understand that by attending for the interview you will receive a \$5.00 coupon for Tim Horton's to thank you for your time. You also understand that if you do not complete the interview you will still received the \$5.00 coupons from Tim Horton's. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, please contact Jill Parsons at University of Toronto, Health Sciences Ethics Review Officer, at 416-946-5806 or via email at [jc.parsons@utoronto.ca](mailto:jc.parsons@utoronto.ca). You understand that you may also contact the research supervisor, Dr. Faye Mishna at 416- 978-1385 or via email at [f.mishna@utoronto.ca](mailto:f.mishna@utoronto.ca). You are being given a copy of this consent for my own records.

Signature: Print Name:





## APPENDIX C

### Interview Guide

#### Introduction

I am interested in how your relationship with your former spouse influences the way you relate as parents since your separation or divorce. In the case of parenting with your ex-spouse, this might include how you communicate about your child's needs, how you deal with day to day parenting, such as school and behaviour, how you deal with larger issues like medical needs or health concerns and how you deal with extended family members.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Can we begin by you telling me some things about yourself?

Probes: Can you say more about that?

How would you describe your current parenting relationship with your child(ren)'s mother/father?

Probes: Can you say more about that?

How would you describe how you parented during your marriage with your ex-wife/husband?

Probes:

Did you have similar beliefs about parenting?

Did you have similar beliefs about child discipline?

How did having children change or alter your relationship with your former spouse?

Probes:

Can you tell me more about that?

Did you trust your former spouse to share in the parenting of the child?

What supports were available to you following the birth of your child?

Did you feel supported by the other parent following the birth of your child(ren)?

What led to your separation or divorce?

Probes: Can you tell me more about that?

Did you trust your former spouse to continue to act in your child's best interest?

Did you trust that you and your former spouse could come to a solution regarding custody and access?

What or who supported you during the transition from marriage to divorce?

Tell me about what made you decide on the current parenting arrangement?

How do you feel about your former spouse now?

Probes:

Do you trust your former spouse to act in the best interests of your child?

Do you feel that you can address concerns with your former spouse?

Can you tell me more about that?

Do you believe that your former spouse listens to your concerns?

Has your spouse remarried or is now cohabiting with another partner?

**If yes:**

Probes:

Can you tell me how you feel this has affected your relationship with your former spouse?

Do you trust your former spouse to place the needs of your child above the needs of his/her new relationship?

If your former spouse were here, how do you think he/she would describe his/her parenting relationship with you?

Probes: Do you think that view the relationship similarly?

If your child was here how do you think he/she would describe your relationship with your former spouse?

What supports are available to you at this time in your life?

I have one final question that I am going to ask you to first respond with a number.

On a scale of one to five, with one being completely unsatisfactory, three being somewhat satisfactory and five being completely satisfactory, where would you place your satisfaction with your parenting relationship with your ex-husband/wife?

Probes: What makes you choose that number?

If you could identify one thing that could improve your rating, such as from a completely dissatisfied to a somewhat satisfied, what would that be?

Before we finish the interview, I would like to give you the opportunity to add or comment on anything you think is important that I haven't asked or you would like to expand on.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study and help provide information for other parents coping with divorce and parenting. I recognize that this is often not an easy discussion for people and I appreciate your effort. Thank you.

## APPENDIX D

### **Consent to Audiotape**

You give your permission to audiotape your interview for the purposes of this research project, Parenting In The Context of Divorce: Exploring Individual Adult Attachment Style and Satisfaction with the Post-Separation Parenting Relationship, conducted by Julie Gowthorpe. You understand this research is part of her Ph.D. at the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. If you grant permission for audiotaping, no audiotapes will be used for any purpose other than to do this study, and they will not be played for any reason other than to do this study. At your discretion, these tapes will be destroyed. You understand that you may withdraw your consent, without penalty, at any time. If you grant permission for audiotaping, audiotapes will be destroyed as soon as they have been transcribed and anonymized.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, please contact Jill Parsons at University of Toronto, Health Sciences Ethics Review Officer, at 416-946-5806 or via email at [jc.parsons@utoronto.ca](mailto:jc.parsons@utoronto.ca). You understand that you may also contact the research supervisor, Dr. Faye Mishna at 416- 978-1385 or via email at [f.mishna@utoronto.ca](mailto:f.mishna@utoronto.ca). You are being given a copy of this consent for my own records.

Signature: Print Name:

Date:

## APPENDIX E

### **Memo**

I have just finished interviewing a mother. Very articulate. Child focused. Saw article in paper and excited to have opportunity to share experience. Although she described episodes of verbal conflict at access exchange points on a consistent basis. Father attends her home for access exchange and comes in the home. She appears to have coped by “tuning out” his verbal abuse. Should clarify, she does not define his behavior as abusive. This is my interpretation when I reviewed the interview as a whole. Also interesting that access exchange is not taking place in a neutral location despite his behaviour toward her. Highlights importance of using neutral location for access exchange when risk of conflict or violence. Theme throughout interview of making decisions (ex. child custody, financial issues, access) based upon fear of father’s reaction and his threats to take the children. Also apparent that these dynamics were present prior to separation. Participant proud of changes in self and independence but continues to make decisions regarding children based upon fear of ex-husband’s response.