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### *Shared Parenting After Abuse*

*Battered Mothers' Perspectives on Parenting  
After Dissolution of a Relationship*

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The story has become increasingly familiar. They were an attractive, suburban couple with an 11-year marriage and a bright future. After years of hard work, they were a year into their dream job. Close family ties supported the couple and their young children. However, recently, the relationship turned sour and they separated. Divorce papers were filled with intimations of emotional, financial, and sexual coercion, physical threats, intimidating gun play, and veiled threats directed toward her. He countered with reports of mental instability, physical violence, and child abuse. After years as a stay-at-home mother, she began learning word processing skills in preparation for her life as a single parent. She was ready for a new life, but he vowed to never let her go.

She did what she could to manage the risks of their volatile relationship. Consultations with a divorce lawyer had been secretive. She moved out of their home prior to filing for divorce. Because of the nature of his work, she tried to limit disclosure of damaging information to a few close friends and her immediate family. Since tension and conflict in the relationship were high, she promised her family that she would never be in his presence alone. Knowing his love for the children, she hoped that an informal agreement to weekend visits would foster goodwill. They agreed to use her parents' home as the pick-up and drop-off site.

On a Saturday afternoon in April 2003, a chance meeting placed them in her car at a local drug store. He was less than 24 hours into his weekend visit with the kids and had taken them on errands. On a whim, she decided to pick up cold medication and parked her car in front of the store only seconds before he arrived. She was on the cell phone with her mother just as she realized the chance encounter. Her mother begged her to leave immediately, but she hung up before the gravity of her mother's concerns could be impressed on her. Seven more calls to her cell phone went unanswered over the next 12 minutes. He had shot her in the head, then shot himself; and the couple lay dying in her car. A short distance away, the children were locked in his car—witnesses to the murder-suicide

that unfolded. They were the children of Crystal Judson Brame and David Brame, the police chief of Tacoma, Washington. (Modeen, 2004)

The 2003 murder-suicide of the Brames is the story of shared parenting in the wake of intimate-partner violence and with the imminent prospect of relationship dissolution. Ultimately, their story illustrates the ubiquitous risks inherent to shared parenting after intimate partner violence.

## *The Parenting Context*

### *Relationship Dissolution*

In social science research, relationship formation has been of greater interest than relationship dissolution (Cherlin, 1992; Sweeney, 2002). However, trends in relationship trajectories toward the latter half of the past century broadened the range of relationship research to include the process of dissolution, and it was through this research that the fragile state of American marriages became apparent. From the 1940s to the 1970s, the rate of legal relationship dissolution for first marriages (i.e., divorce) rose 50% (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). In 2002, the probability of first marriages ending in divorce after 5 years was 20%, and 33% after 10 years. Outcomes for de facto unions, or those involving couples in common-law or cohabiting arrangements, were considerably worse. The probability of premarital cohabitation ending in 5 years was 49%, and 62% after 10 years (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Wilson & Daly, 2001).

In examining the causes of these seemingly dismal prospects for relationship longevity, Olson and DeFrain (2000) found that chronic financial problems, lack of communication, and infidelity were primary reasons for relationship conflict. Relationship distress and the probability of relationship dissolution, as well as mismanaged conflict, increased with negative interactions arising from these difficulties (Gottman, 1994). However, it was the manner in which couples handled conflict, rather than the presence of conflict itself, that ultimately predicted dissolution (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994; Sprecher, 1999).

### *Shared Parenting*

When relationship dissolution occurs, it transpires on multiple levels with asynchronous timelines (Demo, Find, & Ganong, 2000). Depending on the level of involvement, couples negotiate several types of dissolutions in the process of ending a romantic relationship. Dissolution of emotional, financial, and legal ties typically occurs individually and collectively when committed cohabiting relationships end. Clearly, all couples (whether legally married or in unions) must deal with the dissolution of emotional ties, which

includes romantic and sexual attachments. In addition, whether married or not, cohabiting couples also deal with disentangling finances and joint economic investments. However, rarely do all of these dissolutions occur spontaneously and simultaneously. Cherlin (2002) notes that "the unmaking of a marriage [or committed relationship] occurs in many stages over a period of time that often begins well before the couple separates and that extends well after they are granted a divorce [or the relationship ends]" (p. 430).

One of the most difficult areas to fully disengage as a couple is around the common bond of children (Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001). Children forge an enduring bond between intimates—one that lasts at least 18 years, if not a lifetime. As estranged intimates initiate various forms of dissolution, they must also face the reality that the shared parenting relationship cannot be readily terminated. Shared parenting begins, in earnest, at the birth of the child and morphs developmentally as the child, each parent, and the family collectively transition to new developmental phases (Rodgers & White, 1993). In most cases, shared parenting is an intergenerational endeavor that transcends the bonds of the romantic or sexual relationship, whether the relationship is committed or noncommitted, legal or de facto, involving cohabitation or separate residences. However, its nature changes, at least quantitatively, when the couple relationship ends.

Shared parenting, in general, describes a negotiated, yet often implicit and unspoken, agreement between parents (typically, the child's biological parents) to supervise, educate, and financially support the child. Margolin et al. (2001) suggest that three important relational dimensions inevitably become part of the agreement: conflict (disagreement about child-rearing practices), cooperation (support and respect for the other's parenting skills and burden), and triangulation (forming a coalition with the child for the purpose of undermining the perception or authority of the other).

After a relationship dissolves, shared parenting is almost inevitably complicated by conflictual interactions and lingering negative emotions (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). It becomes a parallel, rather than a cooperative, endeavor with former partners opting for as little interaction as possible. Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) reported that couples were more likely to adopt a parallel, disengaged style over cooperative or conflicted styles of shared parenting. In this style, estranged parents who prefer as little contact and conversation as possible often communicate through children and choose to parent separately.

For an unknown number of couples, the complications of shared parenting are further challenged by a history of domestic violence. Reports of domestic violence during marriage are the best predictors of interpersonal violence after relationship dissolution, which is a major cause of concern for women contemplating the prospect of shared parenting (Campbell, Sharps, & Glass, 2001). There are only a few studies that have examined the dynamics of shared parenting in couples where domestic violence has occurred (Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989; Pruett & Hoganbruen, 1998). The domestic violence

literature strongly suggests that the probability of negative emotions and escalating conflict not only makes interacting uncomfortable in a couple with a history of violence, but it also renders it dangerous because of the often volatile disposition of batterers. The conflict, cooperation, and triangulation dimensions of coparenting could assume unhealthy, and potentially abusive, dimensions when battered women attempt to negotiate child support and father-child contacts with men who have battered them. However, the outcomes from the interaction of domestic violence and shared parenting are unknown.

Conversely, the relationship between domestic violence and child outcomes are better known. Research on outcomes for children living in violent households indicated that between 1993 and 1998, 41% of female victims of domestic violence lived in households with children, and children in these homes were the victims of child mistreatment (Appel & Holden 1998; Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2000). Children are more likely to be harmed by or be victims of intimate-partner violence in their homes (Parkinson, Adams, & Emerling, 2001; Rumm, Cummings, Krauss, Bell, & Rivara, 2000). In addition, child witnesses to highly conflictual interactions between parents, as well as domestic violence, were more likely to experience behavioral problems (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

A review of the literature on shared parenting underscores the lack of data on shared parenting among couples with a history of domestic violence, leaving one to wonder what women's and men's expectations are of shared parenting after a history of abuse. The prospect of having to make joint decisions in a relationship that has historically been characterized by domination and coercion (at least from the battered woman's perspective) would seem unfavorable to both partners. For women, concerns exist over revictimization and being able to assert personal rights and control, as well as advocating for the child. For men, concerns arise over capitulating to external controls and conceding perceived rights to have overt control over his former partner and the child. Paradoxically, by ending the abusive relationship with their former partners, the ex-partners must forge a new relationship with the same partners, especially when children are involved—one that ideally requires redefined power dynamics and greater boundary definition and equity.

This chapter describes an initial effort to investigate African American women's perceptions of shared parenting with men who have battered them in the past. The primary research question guiding the study was: "what types of shared parenting expectations do battered women have in reference to men with whom they have a history of violence?" The larger goal of this study was to seek women's perspectives on the decision-making processes involved in shared parenting with men with whom they have a history of domestic violence. However, its findings may help to spark, or even inform, additional research into this realm of shared parenting, which is often fraught with tensions about violence, whose ramifications can often turn catastrophic, and which continues to linger below the research radar. We hope that men, women,

and children from various ethnic backgrounds will ultimately be the beneficiaries of more focused, and systematic, research on this topic.

### *A Focus-Group Study*

In this chapter, we report on focus-group data from African American women residing in two large urban areas. The focus groups brought together women who were in the process of shared parenting or had experienced shared parenting with an ex-batterer. In using a focus-group approach, we wanted to tap the subjective experiences of a group who have individually shared a similar situation through focused questioning and group interaction (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990). This approach provides an opportunity to learn what aspects of the topic of interest are important to the participants (Patton, 2002; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). It also results in detailed responses about respondents' cognitive, perceptual, and affective interpretations of the situation while also stimulating similar or divergent thoughts in the group. The goal of the focus-group approach is to expand our understanding of the range of respondents' experiences of the situation—for example, specific feelings, observations of others' reactions and activities, and respondents' attributions.

### *Informing Perspectives*

In engaging the topic of women's perspectives on shared parenting with men who have battered in the past, we utilized four informing perspectives to provide structure for the research design. These perspectives not only informed the design, but they also acted as sensitizing concepts for guiding our data analyses (Patton, 2002). Symbolic interactionism posits that the symbols, rituals, and behaviors employed by a particular cultural group are imbued with unique meanings and provide essential insights into the values and goals of the group (Blumer, 1969; Kuhn, 1964). We used it here to increase our sensitivity to taken-for-granted words and implicit concepts familiar to specific locales and experiences by the study's respondents. We also employed a life-course perspective to provide the frame for examining various trajectories and impacting variables that describe the lives of individuals sharing similar life experiences (Featherman, 1983; Elder, 1991). In the case of domestic violence, it was helpful in understanding the impact of time and developmental phases and transitions, as well as how these factors affect psychological processes.

In addition, we draw on human-ecological theory and family-systems theory to understand the family in context and the context of family interactions. Human-ecological theory acknowledges individuals' and families' embeddedness in social networks, communities, and larger institutional and cultural systems that exert various levels of overt and covert influence in their

lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Similarly, family-systems theory provides a helpful lens for describing the relational aspects of interactions between various families that are and have been affected by the domestic violence without the onus of ascribing blame (Hill, 1971; Straus, 1973). Family-systems theory has been criticized by feminist scholars for this failure to ascribe culpability, especially in instances of abuse and violence (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Therefore, we are careful to employ it as a descriptive, rather than an explanatory, framework for understanding the collocations of relationships and events identified by respondents.

### *Participants*

In the spring of 2003, a purposeful, convenience sample of African American women was recruited from two women's programs. Both programs were located in large, Midwestern urban cities and were considered "culturally sensitive." Here, "culturally sensitive" describes a specific intent to address the cultural, physical, and emotional needs of a specific group of color (sometimes, several groups of color). In this case, the programs were chosen for their sensitivity to African American women. The majority of the 18 women respondents were informed of the study by program directors and staff.

This population was important for three reasons. Initially, this population was chosen to explore the unique interaction of domestic violence and shared parenting because of our interest in its impact on and manifestation in African American communities. African Americans emphasize the inherent value of children and the importance of family relationships, especially as they relate to kinship networks; therefore, it would seem that shared parenting would be an important kinship interaction (Burton & Sorenson, 1993). Second, proportionately, African American women are more likely than women of other ethnic groups (except Native Americans) to experience domestic violence; hence, we suspect that they are also more likely to be in positions of shared parenting with partners with whom they have conceived a child and at whose hands they have experienced domestic violence (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Third, this population was also targeted because of the increased likelihood that it would contain women in various stages of relationship dissolution; therefore, perceptions and expectations based on a variety of shared-parenting negotiations and agreements would be present.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The primary research question guiding this effort was: "what types of shared parenting expectations do battered women have in reference to men who have battered them in the past?" In order to explore this question, we conducted focus groups using a semistructured interview guide covering topics related to contact and isolation issues, safety concerns, services, and

perceptions of fathering. In addition to the interview, respondents were asked to complete closed-ended questions providing demographic information. For the demographic survey, respondents provided data about age and marital status, help-seeking, domestic violence, and children. Several open-ended questions were also posed in reference to shared parenting and counseling experiences.

We relied on the focus-group transcripts and survey questions for insight into the shared-parenting experiences of women who had experienced physical abuse from their child's father. Focus-groups were audiotaped for purposes of generating transcripts. The transcripts were reviewed and coded by the primary interviewer (C. Y. T.). Both descriptive and interpretive coding were part of this process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In addition, research assistants served as scribes and noted important thoughts or ideas. Scribes' notes were employed as a way of facilitating group interaction and as a check of topics covered by the group. In the focus-group interview, participants discussed their needs and their children's needs in reference to facilitating the father-child relationship. Therefore, we examined the interviews to discern perceptions of contact, visitation, safety concerns, and the services needed, as well as to provide descriptive information on women's expectations.

Each participant responded to 22 survey questions about her relationship with the batterer with whom she shared parenting. Questions covered current marital and living status with the batterer; marital and living status during the relationship; the number of years in the relationship; current quality and nature of the relationship; types of violence experienced in the relationship; types of services sought during the relationship and from whom; and the batterer's current contact with the child being coparented.

We employed generalized content analysis, using conceptually ordered matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Conceptually ordered matrices provide the researcher with the opportunity to cluster responses to conceptually related questions in a meaningful way. As noted earlier, a variety of sensitizing concepts guided our analysis and the development of these matrices (Patton, 2002). During coding and analyses, we utilized sensitizing concepts from symbolic-interaction theory, life-course-perspective theory, ecological theory, systems theory, and the literature on shared parenting (Bengston & Allen, 1993; Klein & White, 2002).

In understanding the findings from our interviews, it is important to note that the findings are based on description and interpretation of respondents' comments. Therefore, some findings may be congruent with and others contradictory to prevailing views in the field of domestic violence. As noted earlier, the findings describe the women's perceptions of the phenomenon of interest rather than define causal relationships. In addition, during the data-collection process, pseudonyms were used by all respondents in order to protect confidentiality. Participants were asked to pick a name by which they could be identified in the group and on tape. Therefore, names cited in the inserted quotations are pseudonyms.

### ***Focus-Group Participants***

Demographic data and survey data were collected for the 18 participants in the study. Sixteen women (89%) were African American, one was of African heritage (5.5%), and one was European American (5.5%). One half of the women were between 18 and 33 years of age ( $n = 9$ ), while 78% fell between 18 and 40 years of age. Sixteen participants provided information on relationship status; therefore, two respondents were missing data on relationship status. At the time of our interviews, 25% ( $n = 4$ ) of the 16 participants were single and never married, but they were cohabiting with a partner, while 31% ( $n = 5$ ) were single, never married, and not cohabiting with a partner. Two women were legally married; one was cohabiting with her husband (6%), and one was not (6%). Of the 16 participants, 25% ( $n = 4$ ) were divorced and not cohabiting with a partner; one person (6%) was divorced and cohabiting with a partner (not necessarily her husband).

Fifteen of the 18 participants provided information on their children. Of these, 40% ( $n = 6$ ) had one child, 20% ( $n = 3$ ) had two children, 13% ( $n = 2$ ) had 3 children, 7% ( $n = 1$ ) had 4 children, 13% ( $n = 2$ ) had 5 children, and 7% ( $n = 1$ ) had 6 children. Children were almost evenly split in terms of gender, with 55% female ( $n = 21$ ) and 45% male ( $n = 17$ ). In reference to their current relationship with the referent batterer, 72% ( $n = 13$ ) of the 18 participants reported that they "do not see each other," 11% ( $n = 2$ ) reported that there was contact with some conflict, 5% ( $n = 1$ ) had contact with no conflict, 5% ( $n = 1$ ) reported a friendly relationship, and data were missing for 5% ( $n = 1$ ). When asked about their current relationship with the referent batterers, 83% ( $n = 15$ ) of respondents reported that they were estranged, while 17% ( $n = 3$ ) reported still being involved or married.

### ***Emergent Themes***

Three major themes emerged from the analyses of the focus-group data. First, respondents acted from assumptions about shared parenting. The need for safety and the need for fathers' access to their children were the two assumptions that framed the group's discussion and were the background to the other two salient themes. Second, respondents emphasized conditions for shared parenting, including the issues involved with initiating and terminating contacts with the father. Finally, the third salient theme focused on the impact of time on the shared-parenting process. What emerged for us was a metaphorical "picture" with safety and access composing the frame, and conditions for shared parenting being the content of the canvas. Figure 2.1 illustrates these themes.

#### ***Assumptive Beliefs: Safety and Access***

The two crosscutting, foundational themes that tied together and provided the context for the remaining themes emerging from the analysis were: (1) safety



for mothers and children; (2) children's and fathers' inherent need to have access to one another. In examining the relationship of these themes with other salient themes in the study, it became apparent that safety and accessibility were assumed givens or understandings that underlay respondents' perceptions of shared parenting with an estranged, violent partner and framed the values that guided their interactions with their child's coparent. We refer to these themes as *assumptive beliefs*. These assumptive beliefs were the implicit guiding values underlying mothers' decisions to facilitate the parent-to-parent and father-child relationships. The belief about the need for safety was related to fathers' histories of violence toward the mothers, while fathers' access to their children appeared more closely related to the kinship values of this community.

**Safety**

Unequivocally, safety was the touchstone issue framing the conversations and the ensuing comments about respondents' experiences, expectations, and needs related to shared parenting with a former batterer. It was implicit in most of the responses provided in the focus groups, and it shaped the expectations, contexts, and logistics of shared parenting. If verbalized, this parameter would have been voiced as: "if it were safe, . . ." with safety being understood as the lack of physical or verbal violence or intimidation. It was clear that respondents were most concerned about safety for their children; their own safety was secondary. Therefore, when respondents discussed initiating shared-parenting contacts, determining parameters of contact, and terminating

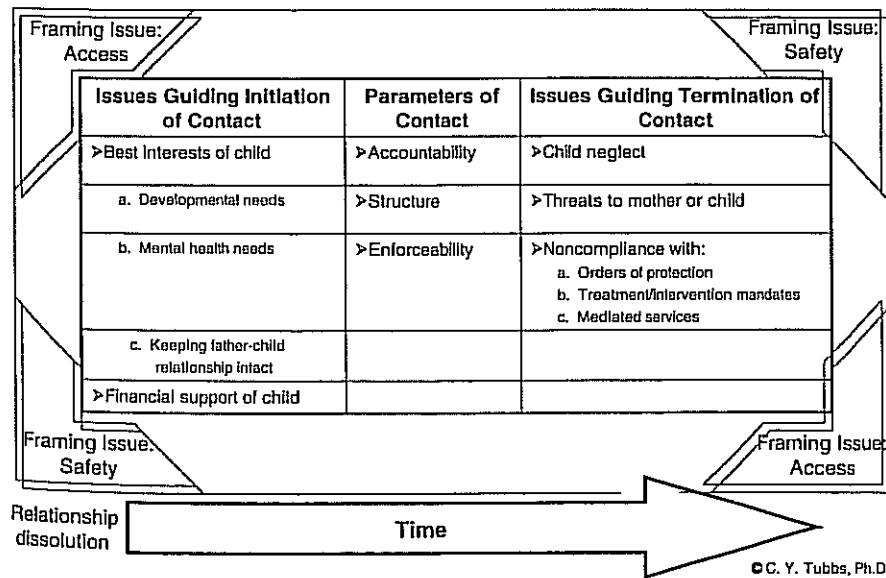


Figure 2.1. Emergent themes among mothers regarding parenting after abuse

father-child contacts, safety was the orienting factor. Julia stated, "I really think that the most important thing is safety. Safety! So that you always feel that it's okay to take the child . . . [to the] father."

#### *Access*

Similarly, children's and fathers' access to one another was an assumption that informed respondents' comments. Respondents did not struggle with question of "if" contact should take place but, rather, "how" and "when." Consequentially, since father-child contact was a given, the conditional parameters of "how" and "when" occupied more of the discussions:

His father wasn't in the picture. So I figured that even though there was abuse going on, I wanted my young son to be around and be with his father. And we set up, as you said, "a structured visitation." I felt like this: he was a no-good s.o.b. for a husband, but maybe he could be a better father, and the two—they're separate—roles, and so what I tried to do was kind of stay out of it and let him find out who his father was.

#### *Conditions for Shared Parenting*

Within the context of safety, respondents identified several other conditions for shared parenting with their former partners. We divided these conditions into three categories: initiating shared-parenting contacts; determining parameters of contact; and terminating shared-parenting contacts (see Figure 2.1). Parameters of contact included facilitators and barriers to visitation logistics, with facilitators further broken into three types of components: accountability components; structural components; and enforceability components.

#### *Initiating Shared-Parenting Contacts*

Shared parenting is a personal parenting decision. In other words, it is as much about a mother's personal decisions to act in the best interest of the child as it is a joint decision between a child's mother and father to work together (Pruett & Hoganbruen, 1998). It is a personal decision to put the child's needs before one's own relational needs or expectations, especially when the child's father is uncooperative or inadequate in fulfilling his parenting responsibilities. Desiring to act in the best interest of the child was the overarching motive among the mothers we interviewed in initiating shared-parenting contacts with a former batterer. Therefore, respondents reported that children's developmental and mental-health needs, as well as children's material needs, prompted their decisions to initiate conversations about shared parenting.

Respondents' knowledge of children's developmental needs was premised on a mixture of cultural mores and popularized scientific findings. Although

this mix did not always agree with the current literature on child development and on the impact of domestic violence on children, it anchored respondents' beliefs about what is best for their children. As the following quotation illustrates, respondents factored in their knowledge of children's developmental needs when pondering decisions to initiate contact:

I think the child should be able to see [his or her] biological father, that's all. Because basically, it's been shown through research that children [who] have that father figure fare better throughout their life or something like that. I think it's a void for them [that] a mother can't fill, but I also think it depends on other circumstances, like if there were drugs, drug use, or the father was abusive to the children. Also, the children's ages. . . . I guess if they determine that they don't want to see him that should be considered.

Conversely, one mother noted that the stress of single parenting and parenting children during developmental transitions was the precipitating factor in her decision to contact her children's father:

It was like very extreme stress to handle, to try to handle all of the individual needs and responsibilities and behaviors and attitudes of the kids as they grow up. So that was one of the reasons that I would initiate the visitation with their dad for a while, I mean, just visitation once a week [was] like to deserve it, just to give me something for me, okay?

Child mental health and a sense of emotional security were also primary motivators cited for initial contacts or negotiations with former batterers. Although these two reasons seem to be the very reasons that mothers would choose to leave abusive relationships (i.e., because of the very real possibility that children were negatively impacted by exposure to violence), one participant referenced her own experience of growing up without an invested father as a much worse prospect than the possibility of recovering from violence. In addition to growing up without a father, respondents expressed personal beliefs about child development and mental health, considering it inappropriate for mothers to ignore the manifestations of children's anguish over the absent parent. In addition, they felt no right to disrupt growing father-child bonds by withholding contact rights from either the child or their ex-partners. Just as importantly, participants did not want to increase the probability that fathers would abandon their children because of parental hostilities precluding contact.

In articulating their motives for initiating contact with former batterers, several respondents also stated that they hoped fathers would separate the couple relationship from the father-child relationship. These respondents firmly believed that the father-child relationship would not be tainted by abusive behavior and would continue to grow. This group of respondents believed that the intimate-partner violence directed at them was not transferable to children. Karen explained, "I say 'yes' also because I feel like the situation is totally different as far as, you know, father and child and me and

the father, it is just totally different." Similarly, Jan stated, "I wouldn't personally want to have anything to do with him, but I still would want [him] to have something to do with his child, though." However, others held the belief, evidenced by their comments on safety, that the batterer's abuse was more global and not affected by the best interests of children. Sarah captured this sentiment:

do they really love their kids and want to be [with them]? . . . I don't believe they have the child's best interest in mind. And I think [that] when they say they want to see the kids that they really want to get to the mother. . . . Is [it] possible for them to make that switch and really feel like they want to be responsible for having to raise their child when all these years they've not been, and not responsible and abusive? And so, I'd really question the validity of their decision.

A more muted emergent theme important to initiating contact centered on child support. Mothers acted to share parenting with ex-batterers when they feared that compliance with formal or informal child-support arrangements might be contingent on fathers' access to their children. Respondents appeared willing to entertain the risk of having contact with a former batterer in order to enhance the probability that they and their children would receive needed monetary support. This theme was entangled with, but clearly secondary to, the theme of the developmental impact of child abandonment. That is, mothers were not hesitant to contact fathers about some form of child support. Sarah's comment evinces a mixture of assertiveness about boundaries and concerns about child support:

I don't believe I would ever go back. PPO [personal protection order] or no PPO, but I don't want to, these are just my feelings. [I do not want to] jeopardize anything that has to do with his importance because I want it to be guaranteed that [he] give[s] me my child support.

#### *Parameters of Contact*

Respondents reported that their primary shared-parenting goal was being able to facilitate a father-child relationship while decreasing the probability that their ex-partners might be abusive. Personal safety during times when children were transferred from their care to the care of their fathers was the most salient personal-safety concern. Julie commented, "he should not come to the home for the children. As a matter of fact, I feel that [for] a woman that's been battered, the child should be brought to the courthouse."

Respondents reported being afraid that being in the batterer's presence again would be too much of a temptation for unresolved negative feelings and abusive relationship dynamics to emerge. In other words, even if respondents felt comfortable with children visiting their fathers, they were

not confident that their direct involvement in transferring the child would not lead to some form of violence. Suggestions for dealing with transfer-of-care situations ranged from formal arrangements involving transfers monitored by law-enforcement officials (e.g., police precincts) or at visitation centers to informal arrangements using relatives' homes. Visitation centers are neutral locations where children can safely interact with at-risk, noncustodial parents in a monitored environment. They are also venues where battered parents can "drop off" children for mandated visits with the noncustodial parent. Jane related her experience with both formal and informal arrangements:

what I did was supervised visitation, and it was downtown, in the [name of facility], and eventually, for a few months, it was like that. Then it was supervised by my sister in that she went everywhere, she met up with them, she took our son to meet his dad, or she got in a cab, or whatever. I think that it went pretty well because my sister at that point was out of the loop, and he trusted her to not to tell anything and so on and gave my son a chance to have some contact with his father.

Similarly, respondents expressed concerns about making contact before they could coach children on the appropriate types of information that they should divulge about their current living arrangements. They reported being afraid that children would be placed in situations where they disclosed guarded information about the mother's residence, place of employment, or the location of beloved family members. This concern was expressed for all children but especially for younger, approval-seeking, or cognitively unsophisticated children:

I have to agree with you because in some instances, depending upon the age of the children and how sophisticated they are, there can be some manipulation techniques—just as you were saying—trying to find out from the child "what's going on in the house, who's coming and going?"; and sometimes children, because they want to be acceptable [*sic*] by both mom and dad, especially when they are separated, will tell dad what they think dad wants to hear, only because they want to stay on dad's good side.

Therefore, they suggested that certain precautions needed to be in place prior to considering shared parenting contact options with their former batterers.

## **Contact Logistics**

### ***Facilitators of Contact***

When asked about the logistics of visitation and custody, respondents reported that *who* would make the decisions about the specifics of visitation was just

as important as the when, how, what, and where of visitation. The majority of respondents felt that judges, in collaboration with mediators or child advocates, were most qualified to make these decisions. A few respondents supported the involvement of respected family members (e.g., grandparents) or respected members of both the respondents' and ex-batterers' social networks. Mothers felt that physical safety was enhanced by a mediated, enforceable structure (i.e., including mediation and involvement by the courts) with immediate and tangible consequences. By *mediated*, participants indicated that they invited the prospect of input from an impartial referee whose primary directive was the best interest of the child. Enforceable components would require that the stipulations of the agreements be operationalized to

### **Fathers' Voices on Parenting and Violence**

*Tricia Bent-Goodley and Oliver J. Williams*

Following is a brief summary of fathers' comments on their parenting and violence. We interviewed 17 men who batter, 15 of whom were African American and 2 Caucasian, about their perspectives on coparenting with their victims after violence. The men were interviewed in two focus groups, one in Michigan and one in Minnesota, and asked a set of 27 questions in a semistructured interview format. The men were asked questions about (1) coparenting, (2) custody issues, (3) safety issues, and (4) fatherhood. The focus-group interviews lasted about two and one half hours at each site and were audiotaped, transcribed and then analyzed by an independent researcher (Bent-Goodley) not involved in the interviewing.

#### **Fathers' Views on Their Role in the Family**

Most of the fathers in the focus groups did not view the battered woman or any woman as their equals; in fact, they viewed women and children as having a lower but similar status. As one man put it "Men should be in charge . . . and I should be the man of the house and the disciplinarian." This refers both to the children and their female partner, as one man said, "We need to be there to discipline the children. . . . Like children, she needs to be disciplined too." Generally, these men held rigid sex-role stereotypes and tended to fit the traditional stereotype of men who batter as being controlling.

Another impression was that most of these men did not want to separate the child from their mother, unless there was evidence that she was not a fit parent and the child was unsafe. Yet they were very clear that fathers were important in their child's life, too. They described

how important it was for fathers to be valued beyond a provider role or in terms of economics alone. Comments included the following:

"Children need to know their daddy and to know where they come from on the daddy's side of the family. . . . The mother can't give them that. . . . I can teach my son how to be a man. . . . He can't get that from his momma." Another man stated, "I don't have a job, but I should be able to spend time with my child and for them [sic] to get to know me."

Another reported regarding the narrow perspectives of fathering,

"It seems that all my wife and kids want from me is money. . . . I should be viewed as more than just a paycheck."

### **Fathers' Rights in Light of the Violence**

When listening to the comments of the fathers, it was sometimes difficult to determine whether men were minimizing the effect that their violence had on the battered woman and exposed children or were just stressing the significance of fatherhood and the importance of their having continuous contact with their children. For instance, most of the fathers acknowledged that exposing the children to violence was harmful and could impact the children's feelings toward them, but as one respondent noted,

"Time and distance from the father would only make the ability to reunite with the father more difficult in the future. . . . Regardless of what happens between the parents, a child should always be allowed to be around their father."

What was absent from the respondents' comments was an awareness that a child's exposure to their mother's victimization could traumatize the child. There was neither acknowledgment that such events could affect children's fears and reluctance about interacting with him, nor that the children may require additional time away from him because of those fears.

A final impression is that the fathers believed that they have a right to contact with their children, that they have a desire to be with them, and that they have something to offer them. What tends to be absent is a recognition that children and battered women may not always be able to rebound from the impact of their behavior as quickly as fathers would want. Rather, the fathers seemed to suggest that their violence and abuse should be overlooked without evidence of real change or a guarantee of safety from his violence and abuse.

### **Fathers' Recommendations on Coparenting**

Fathers recommended the following ideas regarding what they wanted from their battered partners concerning their children and what could strengthen their capacity to engage her in positive coparenting interactions. These recommendations must be taken with seriousness but also with caution. The issue is not whether the recommendations are unfounded and without merit; rather, it is how to interpret and balance their suggestions with evidence of how batterers behave, the stories and voices of the battered women and children, and the specific behaviors and actions of the man.

#### ***Strengthen the Coparents' Capacity to Communicate About the Children***

Most of the fathers felt that one impediment for them was communication about the children's needs with the mother. When they did communicate, they reported, "it often would disintegrate into an argument and she would become oppositional with me." Other times they had to communicate through someone else and not directly with her. The respondents reported, "this was difficult because the person you speak with, does not like you." They felt it was important to speak with her directly, or with someone else that they could relate to, and then "find a way to stay positive." They felt they needed help "to keep it positive" in this area.

Another issue that arose and seemed to cause conflict was the role of the mothers' new partner. Fathers suggested that "arguments happen because her new man would put himself into issues that had nothing to do with him. . . . It was between the father, mother, and children." They recommended that the father and mother set boundaries about the new partner's involvement in their issues.

Most men also felt that their battered partners tended to be unclear when they communicated with them. For example, one stated, "They would say one thing about what they were willing to let me do with the children and then renege on their promises." The men also discussed how she might be sexually suggestive or want to re-establish a romantic or sexual relationship. In this regard, some men reported "that if I did not cooperate then she would withdraw and become more difficult about what I wanted to do with the children." Other fathers stated "that it was important that the mothers were clear and consistent. . . . that when the relationship is over they treat it like it is over and not send mixed messages and mixed signals."

#### ***Set Clear Expectations***

A source of irritation for these fathers was the unpredictability of their interactions with the mother and children. They felt that every-



thing was up in the air and under her control. They wanted things to be more predictable, consistent, and routine. One father felt "that both parents should say what they were trying to achieve from all this and how they were going to accomplish it." Visitation was another issue they wanted resolved. Another father felt that "the mothers would sometimes agree to a time and date and then change it. . . . I feel like this is unfair but there is no consequences [sic] to the woman or reason for her to change what she is doing."

#### ***Use an Objective Third Party***

The fathers reported that there were times when the conflict and ability to communicate on issues were beyond the parents' capacity to agree. This was often when trouble and problems would escalate. As one man noted, "We may be locked in and unwilling to move from our position, or she may be unwilling to give. . . . This is the time to bring in a neutral and objective third party to resolve the dispute."

#### ***Inform the Children***

Most fathers felt that their children were very confused about what was going on when parents separated. They cited the child's confusion in their interactions with the father, the mother and between parents. One man reported, "Many of the children did not understand why things were so different regarding their visit and family interactions." Another recommended, "Children should be told about what happened, why things have changed, and what the rules are, and how it's going to be, and what things are going to stay the same."

#### ***Encourage Positive Parenting***

Finally, the men stated that in order to assist them to become healthy and positive fathers, they needed help. Especially if they were poor and they had few resources, they wanted helping systems to direct them to resources that would help them help their children. It seemed that the resources highlighted by these men primarily focused on financial resources.

allow for accountability and evaluation. Structural components would also provide guidance for visitation, custody, and support. Although the following discussion artificially separates these components, the reader will quickly recognize that accountability, structure, and enforceability are inextricably intertwined.

### *Accountability Components*

In the discussion of enforceable structure, participants referred to components or mechanisms that would provide consequences to batterers for failing to act responsibly toward their children; that is, they would hold him accountable. Most respondents advocated formal arrangements. Some suggested that informal arrangements would also work; however, they provided no concrete details on how enforcement would take place. Either way, respondents wanted assurances that men's issues with reference to controlling their violence and/or alcohol and substance abuse were being addressed. Violence control was essential because of the inappropriate and dangerous behaviors directed toward children out of anger toward or in attempts to manipulate mothers. In addition, if their children's fathers were still drinking or using drugs, mothers saw no reason to enter into conversations, no matter how promising, about allowing them to care for their children. One respondent succinctly surmised, "there should be some help before he sees his child." Another respondent stated:

I don't think that person would be the appropriate parent if they're under the influence, if they're only keeping the child [on the] night that they're drunk. I don't think they're thinking the right thing. They shouldn't even have the child.

Respondents felt that children would be abused, neglected, or abandoned if allowed to visit with or if left in the custody of a substance-abusing father. Exposure to individuals under the influence of alcohol or drugs, individuals too impaired or disinterested to consider child welfare, and the dangers inherent in substance-abusing cultures (such as unsavory persons, unknown persons, and illicit substances) were the types of abusive and neglectful behaviors noted by respondents.

### *Structural Components*

In the discussion about facilitators of visitation, respondents also suggested that agreements provide structure. Participants expressed a desire to have a structure in order to decrease the likelihood of being entangled in the various forms of emotional manipulation that were typical in their abusive relationships. Veronica recalled: "he did a lot of manipulating with our son, you know. He would put him on the phone and let him call, but [say,] 'Don't tell her where I am or anything, don't say where you are,' and so on."

The types of emotional manipulation of greatest concern involved passive-aggressive behavior and using ambiguous threats and threatening behavior toward children for leverage. Passive-aggressive behavior was manifested in disrespectful behavior toward respondents (such as being constantly late or acting outside of agreements), failing to provide child support, making indirect or veiled threats, or seeking information about the respondent's private life. Threats of harm to the children were another form of emotional ma-

nipulation from which respondents sought to be freed. Children had been taken without mothers' consent (i.e., kidnapped) during scheduled visitation for periods of several hours to several days. In one case, two children were picked up after school without the mother's consent; they were released to the father because the school was not informed of the custodial arrangements. In another family, the child had been driven across state lines during a couple of short-term visits with his father:

it had to be supervised because he had kidnapped him twice and taken him over the state line, and so enough was enough. I tried, and it didn't work! I went to, I kind of pumped up the volume a little bit, you know, until eventually he was sitting downtown on the fifth floor watching his kid through a window because that's where he had put himself, but yeah, his past abuse of me, my son's father, my ex-husband, was so abusive, and he didn't see that taking the child over state lines [was abusive]. [He] figured that was his son, he could do whatever he wanted to do with him.

For these mothers, the emotional burden of weighing their children's desires to see their fathers against the threats of the fathers' spurious decisions to take them without prior arrangements was difficult.

Finally, respondents felt that fathers who fostered negative attitudes in children during visits emotionally manipulated their children. These negative attitudes manifested as externalizing behaviors by children toward the respondents, behavior that typically occurred after visits with the father.

Two additional services were mentioned during the discussion about structural components. Although mothers did not use the formal term, those advocating for mediated and structured arrangements preferred that some form of guardian *ad litem* be appointed. None indicated prior experience with such an individual (at least not in the legal use of the term); however, they were cognizant enough of their own biases to understand the need of an impartial advocate—someone who could understand and represent the needs of their children. As mentioned earlier, for some, it was important that the impartial mediator be affiliated with institutionalized structures, such as the courts, while others expressed comfort with a respected, impartial member of the family or social network:

I would just like to say I think every woman that enters into a shelter or expressing the fact that she's been through a domestic-violence case should be appointed, free of charge, a counselor or something for the children. Forget the parents—obviously, they have their own issues—but if the child is appointed a counselor or something, it can make the appropriate decisions for the child. I think it'll be much better, because either person is pulling in their direction and is being selfish, you know.

The second service relevant to structural arrangements was the potential for access to various court services and officials during stays in women's shelters

so that formal and enforceable arrangements are in place while services are available, memories are fresh, and protection is offered. One respondent noted:

why couldn't we go through, if you're willing to participate through a family court, to set all of the procedures, like that the mother and father [are] willing to go through family court. . . . That way, it will all be taken care of before you go out into the world unprotected from the shelter.

#### *Enforcement Components*

The secondary intent of advocating for arrangements that provided accountability and structure was their enforceability. This issue was salient when respondents referenced ex-batterers' alcohol and substance abuse, as well as needing some assurances that the fathers were receiving treatment or supervision for other mental-health issues, such as anger management. Respondents also reported that they felt more comfortable with shared parenting with former batterers if they had some assurance that violations of personal protection orders (PPOs), visitation, or custodial arrangements would be sanctioned. Many hinted that court mandates had not been enforced. In part, several admitted that mandates had not been enforced because they were unwilling to engage the difficulties and consequences of seeing the mandates enforced.

#### *Barriers to Contact*

The mothers we interviewed identified two primary barriers to visitation and shared parenting. First, the lack of safety was an important impediment. As indicated earlier, respondents were unwilling to expose themselves or their children to fathers (and individuals in his environment) who might harm or neglect the child. Understandably, those mothers who felt that their situation with the children's fathers was too volatile had made little or very limited contact. For those who had more extended contact, referencing past experiences with the fathers helped to determine the levels of risk to children. If children were not perceived as targets of abuse or revenge, then respondents were more willing to further shared-parenting negotiations, regardless of perceived danger to themselves.

Second, the mothers reported that limited financial resources, as well as safety concerns, would prohibit them from seeking, enlisting, or abiding by structured and enforceable arrangements. In one group in particular, the nuanced differences in class status shaped respondents' expectations for and perceived use of court and mediation services. Those who reported limited resources stated that they were not certain if they would use or expect their children's fathers to use supervised transfer locations; therefore, they advocated for informal structures. The following respondent indicated that finances would be a barrier to her use of formal structures once she left a shelter and its supports:

it's like [a group member's name] said: everybody don't have the financial [resources], and legal aid—it's a waiting list to even get in there. As far as the lawyers and all the rest of that stuff, I mean, a lot of people can't afford all that. Me, myself, I can't really afford all that.

On the contrary, those with more resources appeared more rigid about the need for mediated forms of contact and less concerned about the legal or financial impacts of noncompliance on the father.

### *Terminating Shared-Parenting-Contacts*

Similar to the barriers impeding contact logistics, respondents stated that they had terminated or would terminate shared-parenting contacts if fathers' behaviors or lifestyles placed them or their children in danger. Threats or threatening behavior directed toward the children or the respondent, refusals to comply with formal or informal contact and visitations agreements, and attempting to manipulate children were unacceptable behaviors. Violations of court mandates (e.g., personal protection orders), noncompliance with treatment recommendations (i.e., substance- or alcohol-abuse counseling, anger management), or mediated services would also prompt termination, at least temporarily. Interestingly, respondents did not make direct reference to failure to participate in batterers' intervention programs as a precondition for termination. Sonja noted that she would terminate contact if the ex-batterer made "threats towards me or [if] any of my children told me that he threatened them. And if he had [given] any punishments that I felt was inappropriate for them."

The noteworthy aspect of mothers' conditions for terminating contact was that they balanced mothers' clear preference for children having contact with their fathers with concerns about safety. Respondents seemed to assume a position of fathering within parameters (especially if they assumed physical custody) versus either extreme of "no fathering at all" or "fathering at all costs." The data suggested that respondents were reasonable in their expectations of fathers in terms of providing for children's physical and emotional safety and well-being while under their care. Providing for children's emotional well-being included cessation of imminent threats against the mother, especially if she was involved in the transfer of children during visits.

### *Impact of Time*

Time was another muted theme in respondents' comments. Time was especially important in terms of life-course issues, as developmental transitions often signaled transitions in the decision-making processes around shared parenting. Mothers' concerns with safety decreased when children transitioned from preverbal to verbal, to school age, then adolescence, and beyond. Participants reported that they felt less protective when children's cognitive,

verbal, and physical maturity increased the probability that they could report problems and care for themselves in the event of adult neglect or abuse:

I feel that it depends upon the age of the child, it has a lot to do with it. I also feel that [it's about] how the abuse was done. If it was done in front of this minor, it could have a dramatic effect on the child, okay? Yet, I still think that the child should be able to be involved with the father; but then it depends upon the age of the child. Because if you have a teenager or son, as I do, you know, he has a lot of resentment, you know, so within time, he will have to heal. He is at the age where he can make his own decisions. If I had young children, they don't quite understand what's going on . . . [.] then I probably would still be involved with their father. But with teenagers, I would let them make up their own mind.

The nature of the shared-parenting relationship also undergoes a parallel developmental progression. Understandably, parents must modulate more intense anger and conflict during the time immediately after the dissolution of their relationship. The passage of time provides distance and perspective on the partner relationship and what forged it, as well as the needs of the child and the immediacy of attempting to make the family work:

my child is now an adult with his own children, but as time went on, he—the batterer, the shared parent, ex-father—he ending up paying for the relationship that he had made with his son by using him to get to me and find out what I was doing. . . . [S]o he asked him questions and put him in the place where I never could, 'cause I can't ask you why you don't want to be a good father, but your child sure in the hell can.

### *Discussion*

This chapter examined the responses of women who have shared or who share parenting with men who battered them in the past. Focus-group data were analyzed to understand women's expectations for and experiences with shared parenting. The findings indicated that shared parenting was perceived as a necessary obligation of parenting, even with heightened concerns about one's own and one's children's safety. In order to decrease the likelihood that the abusive dynamics that drove them from their relationships would not seep into the shared-parenting and father-child relationships, respondents identified ground rules that would increase the probability of contact. Participants' expectations of shared parenting supported the existent literature in terms of shared-parenting dynamics, safety, and structured arrangements (Pruett & Hoganbruen, 1998).

Shared parenting in an intact union is difficult in itself since it involves merging the two disparate family cultures from which the couple emerged (Margolin, et al., 2001). Creating consensus about parenting children is part

of this complex process, especially since parenting is an emergent, individually- and relationally-oriented, life-course process occurring parallel to child development. The dynamics of abuse greatly diminish the aspects of trust and cooperation needed to share parenting, and estrangement strains even further the desire to cooperate (Pruett & Hoganbruen, 1998). Tension in the couple relationship negatively charges the affective context for joint decision making in reference to children.

Based on the data, two beliefs were important in reference to shared parenting in the context of African American couples with histories of domestic violence: the importance of father-child accessibility, and the need for safety. In many instances, these two beliefs conflicted, and this conflict created ambiguity and tension in respondents' decision-making processes. With reference to accessibility, despite the turbulent and traumatic relationships that they experienced with their children's fathers, respondents assumed that children's developmental and mental-health needs dictated some form of contact with their fathers. Even though these beliefs were predicated on popularized or outdated notions of child-development theory, or cultural mores, they nonetheless fueled mothers' sense of guilt about prohibiting father-child contact. As indicated in Carlson's (2000) research review, children benefit less, rather than more, from contact with abusive or neglectful parents (also see Giles-Sims, 1985). In addition, mothers' fears of violence deferred to concerns that lack of contact with the fathers would trigger the withholding of financial support and an increase in hostilities, and encourage divestment of the children.

Second, respondents' focus on safety underscored their realism about the need to keep themselves and their children physically and emotionally protected in the context of contacts with men who had a penchant for control. Respondents used safety to frame and contextualize their responses. When the prospect of initiating contact was on the table, respondents first considered current risks that the batterer posed either in perpetrating physical violence or being too impaired to be safe or provide safety. Once issues of initial contact had been addressed, then respondents outlined parameters that would increase the likelihood of an ongoing and less conflicted shared-parenting relationship that was safe for them, the children, and the fathers. This group of respondents believed that the intimate-partner violence directed at them was not transferable to children. However, many also enacted measures to increase children's safety and well-being when in contact with or when visiting their fathers.

Pruett and Hoganbruen (1998) suggest that parenting plans for estranged couples previously involved in intimate-partner violence should include safety plans for the mother and the child; mechanisms for facilitating equity in decision making between the shared parents; mechanisms for detriangulating the child; and interventions focused on communication skills and accruing information pertinent to shared parenting. Respondents' comments were congruent with this research. The unique aspects of this study emerge in the source of data, the explicit focus on African Americans, and respondents'

emphasis on mechanisms for enhancing informal, as well as formal, contact and visitation arrangements.

Our intent in writing this chapter is not to suggest that shared parenting after domestic violence should occur at all costs. We neither suggest nor condone this notion. However, in sharing this research, we assert that women's voices need to be heard—without judgment or censorship—so that researchers and practitioners know what they are thinking and thus can act appropriately to address their needs. In asking respondents to share their stories, we wanted to respect their words. We sought to amplify their voices without assuming the editorial authority of turning down the volume on the comments with which we did not agree or knew to be out of sync with the broader community of voices weighing in on the topic. The chapter provides no directive on what women should be doing—instead, it shares what *this* group of mothers are doing (and will keep doing), why they think they are doing it, and the process. Conversations encouraging behavioral and policy-related change cannot honestly occur unless there is acknowledgment of *where* those affected are and *why* they are there. We hope that this work is an initial step in the process of building a bridge from *what is* to *what can be* for shared parenting in African-American and other communities.

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