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ECOLOGICAL FACTORS INFLUENCING THE
COPARENTING RELATIONSHIP OF LOW INCOME,
UNMARRIED, NON-COHABITATING AFRICAN AMERICAN
PARENTING PARTNERS

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**ECOLOGICAL FACTORS INFLUENCING THE COPARENTING RELATIONSHIP
OF LOW INCOME, UNMARRIED, NON-COHABITATING AFRICAN AMERICAN
PARENTING PARTNERS**

By

Dyane Porritt Watson

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ABSTRACT

ECOLOGICAL FACTORS INFLUENCING THE COPARENTING RELATIONSHIP OF LOW INCOME, UNMARRIED, NON-COHABITATING AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTING PARTNERS

By

Dyane Porritt Watson

The primary purpose of this study was to understand the ecological factors that influence the coparenting relationship in African American families when biological parents are parenting together, but not living together. Additionally, a multicultural feminist perspective was used to explore how race and gender inequalities influence the coparental relationship for these families. Grounded-theory and qualitative methodology was used to provide a rich description of a relationship for a population that has hitherto been unexplored. The goal was to add the voices of fathers, particularly low-income, non-residential, African American fathers, into studies of the coparental relationship. Six African American parenting partner couples completed demographic questionnaires and were interviewed conjointly.

Data analysis uncovered both similarities and differences between the coparenting relationships for these couples compared to frameworks suggested within the literature, which is based primarily on white, middle-class, intact families. Analysis revealed similarities in the dimensions of coparental solidarity, coparental support, coparental undermining, and shared parenting. Differences were revealed in subthemes. Within the dimension of coparental solidarity, unique subthemes included determination to have the father present in their child's life, and the couples' desire to live together. The unique

theme found in the shared parenting dimension included the concept that the father made up for his absence. Analysis also suggested that minority status and experiences of oppression influence couples' coparental relationship. Community factors that were significant included cultural beliefs about fatherhood and lack of community resources. Theoretical and clinical implications were explored.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, Lauren.

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Throughout the ups and downs of graduate school, I have been blessed with a community of people who have encouraged me. I am sure that the experience of graduate school and writing a dissertation is always unique, however, I have felt that so many have supported me through times of great difficulty. I would like to express my thanks to those who have stood by me and believed in me, even when I doubted myself. First, I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Marsha Carolan for her compassion, insight and direction. I am a better scholar, therapist and individual because of her guidance. I would also like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Esther Onaga, Dr. Tom Luster and Dr. Maxine Baca Zinn for their steadfast patience and support. Next, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Laurie Van Egeren for introducing the concept of coparenting and for encouraging my academic development. Also, I am so appreciative of Marie Kuzych-Howard for her strength, and her willingness to let me make my mistakes while still having faith in me. I would also like to thank my parents for their continued confidence even when they didn't understand what I was trying to accomplish. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Bryan, and my children, Lauren and Tyler. They cried with me, laughed with me and believed in me. When I wanted to give up, they reminded me of my successes and downplayed my failures. Without their support, I would never have made it this far.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	XI
LIST OF FIGURES	XII
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	1
IMPORTANCE OF THE RESEARCH	3
THEORETICAL-CONCEPTUAL MAP	5
THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS	9
<i>Human Ecological Theory</i>	9
<i>Multiracial Feminist Perspective</i>	14
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	18
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	22
A FRAMEWORK OF COPARENTING	22
<i>Implications for Child Adjustment</i>	25
COPARENTING IN AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES	26
AFRICAN AMERICAN NON-RESIDENTIAL FATHER INVOLVEMENT	27
ECOLOGICAL FACTORS INFLUENCING THE COPARENTAL RELATIONSHIP	29
<i>Individual Factors Influencing the Coparental Relationship</i>	29
<i>Microsystem Factors Influencing the Coparental Relationship</i>	30
<i>Mesosystem Factors Influencing the Coparental Relationship</i>	32
<i>Exosystem Factors Influencing the Coparental Relationship</i>	33
<i>Macrosystem Factors Influencing the Coparental Relationship</i>	34

<i>Chronosystem Factors Influencing the Coparental Relationship</i>	34
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	36
QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY	36
<i>Reliability and Validity Criteria</i>	37
<i>Theoretical Sensitivity</i>	38
SAMPLING PROCEDURES	41
DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES	43
RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND AREAS OF INQUIRY	44
DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES	46
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS	48
SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS	48
RESEARCH QUESTION 1: INFLUENCE OF INDIVIDUAL FACTORS	50
<i>Individual Beliefs and Attitudes</i>	50
<i>Individual Personality Traits</i>	51
RESEARCH QUESTION 2: INFLUENCE OF MICROSYSTEM FACTORS	52
<i>Child Influences</i>	53
<i>Extended Family Support</i>	55
<i>Extended Family Influences</i>	56
RESEARCH QUESTION 3: INFLUENCE OF MESOSYSTEM FACTORS	58
<i>Coparental Solidarity</i>	59
<i>Coparenting Support</i>	61
<i>Coparenting Undermining</i>	62
<i>Shared Parenting</i>	65

RESEARCH QUESTION 4: INFLUENCE OF EXOSYSTEM FACTORS	66
<i>Other Partner's Extended Family</i>	67
<i>Employment</i>	68
RESEARCH QUESTION 5: INFLUENCE OF MACROSYSTEM FACTORS	69
<i>Cultural Beliefs</i>	69
<i>Community</i>	70
RESEARCH QUESTION 6: INFLUENCE OF CHRONOSYSTEM FACTORS	72
<i>Child Characteristics Developmental</i>	72
<i>Influence of Experience</i>	73
<i>Transition to Parenthood</i>	74
RESEARCH QUESTION 7: LOCATIONS WITHIN STRUCTURES OF POWER	75
<i>Community Resources</i>	76
<i>Childhood Experiences-Wanting Something Different</i>	77
RESEARCH QUESTION 8: STRUCTURES OF POWER AND MEANINGS	79
<i>Discipline</i>	79
<i>Child's Interest Foremost</i>	81
<i>Family of Origin Influences</i>	82
RESEARCH QUESTION 9: ROLE OF POWER	83
<i>Division of Labor –Style</i>	84
<i>Extended Family Support</i>	84
<i>Determination to Have Father Present</i>	85
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION	86
REVIEWING THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY	86

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS	87
<i>Human Ecology Theoretical Implications</i>	87
<i>Multiracial Feminist Theoretical Implications</i>	97
CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS	102
STUDY LIMITATIONS	106
PERSONAL REFLECTIONS	108
APPENDICES	111
APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM	112
APPENDIX B: PARENT DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE	114
APPENDIX C: ORIGINAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE	116
REFERENCES	119

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1: Theoretical Map and Research Questions and Areas of Inquiry	45
Table 3.2: Theoretical Map and Research Questions and Key Themes	47
Table 4.1: Summary of Demographic Variables	49

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Theoretical-Conceptual Map	8
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The primary focus of this study was to understand how ecological factors influence the coparenting relationship of low income, unmarried, non-cohabitating African American parenting partners. Research with Caucasian, middle-class married couples has begun examining the influence of these factors on the coparenting relationship. However, there is little research investigating these factors in African American families where the biological parents of a child are not living together but are working together to raise their child. The fundamental goal of this study was to provide a rich description of those factors that contribute to the development of constructive coparenting relationships for this population. This goal was important, as knowledge gained will contribute to understanding factors that stimulate resilience in vulnerable families, thereby assisting marriage and family therapists in providing appropriate therapeutic services.

Chapter One presents an introduction to this study, including a statement of the problem and the importance of the research. Conceptual and theoretical foundations are discussed. In Chapter Two, a review of the literature is offered with a focus on previous research on the framework of the coparental relationship, and on ecological factors associated with low-income African American families. Chapter Three will review the qualitative methodology proposed in addition to important issues in qualitative research.

Statement of the Problem

The field of family therapy has long noted the importance of the coparental subsystem. In 1974, S. Minuchin coined the term “parental holon” to describe the parenting system within the “executive hierarchy” of the family (S. Minuchin, 1974).

Almost a decade later, P. Minuchin (1985) suggested including interparental research within whole-family system research. Although much of the coparenting research in the 1970s and 1980s centered on divorcing parents, recent research has highlighted the importance of the coparental subsystem within intact families, suggesting distinctions between the construct of coparenting in divorced families and intact families.

However, researchers have begun to question the delineation of this “non-divorce” coparenting relationship only within intact families. These studies are aimed at broadening our conceptualization of coparenting to wider family structures and for populations that are more diverse, while maintaining a specialization for divorced families. Recent work has begun to look at coparental processes for intergenerational families (Goodman & Silverstein, 2002) and ethnically diverse family structures (Jones, Shaffer, Forehand, Brody, & Armistead, 2003; Kurrien & Vo, 2004). Particularly, for low-income, African American families, much of the focus has been on single, mother-headed families and their community and extended network of support (Brody, Flor, & Neubaum, 1998; Forehand & Jones, 2003; Jones et al., 2003; Jones, Forehand, Dorsey, Foster, & Brody, 2005).

Research has consistently shown the negative consequences of unmarried childbirth and single parenting for children. These children are at greater risk of living in poverty, lower academic achievement, higher risk of teen and non-marital child bearing, behavior problems, impulsive/hyperactive behavior, and school problems (Amato, 2000). Additionally, it has been shown that the quality of the relationship between parents is important for children’s well-being and that children do better when their parents are

available and able to relate with each other without excessive conflict (Hayward & Gorman, 2004).

Few studies have concentrated on the relationship between biological parents who are not living together. In Jones' et al. (2005) study of coparental support and conflict in single, mother-headed African American families, 26% of their sample identified the biological father as the primary coparent. However, in most studies of single, mother-headed African American families, biological fathers, even those identified as coparents, have not participated in the study, and therefore have not shared their perspective. Additionally, it should be noted here that although this author has chosen to focus on the relationship of the biological parents, it is believed that other formulations of coparenting may be favorable for child outcomes. This study is not meant to imply that biological parents are the only options for beneficial coparenting support systems. Using a grounded theory approach permits a focus on unexplored areas of experience; therefore, this study employed a qualitative methodology to develop a better understanding of this underrepresented group.

Importance of the Research

In 2001, 13 million children under the age of 18 lived in poverty, and of that 13 million, 37 percent of children who lived with their unmarried mother, and 16 percent of children who lived with their unmarried father lived in poverty (Kreider & Fields, 2005). The rate of single-parent families increased from 9% in 1960 to 27% in 1998. Further, two thirds of African American children spend at least part of their childhood in a single-parent home, away from the other biological parent (Teachman et al., 2000). Particularly for single-parent families without a male present, children are more likely to experience

poverty and as a consequence of poverty, will experience negative educational and developmental outcomes (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997).

It has been well documented that the adult partner relationship has important implications for child outcomes (see Cummings & Davies, 1994, and Grych & Fincham, 1990 for reviews). Additionally, research has documented the unique influence the coparenting relationship has on children's adjustment (e.g., Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1996; Brody, Stoneman, Smith, & Gibson, 1999; McHale, Johnson, & Sinclair, 1999; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998; Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, & Frosch, 2001). For unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners, various obstacles must be navigated in creating beneficial coparenting relationships.

Cohen (2003) found that unmarried African-American fathers' positive relationship with their child's mother was associated with being more involved with their child at infancy and at age 3. Additionally, although Jones' et al. (2005) definition of a coparenting partnership extended beyond biological parents, they found that behaviors associated with coparental support and coparental conflict were predictive of maternal parenting behaviors. While much research has looked at single-parent African American families, particularly single parent, mother-headed families, few have explored how African American parents in unmarried, non-cohabiting relationships coparent, and particularly how both the biological mother and biological father navigate working together to raise their child. This finding is important not only in furthering research on the coparental relationship in diverse families, but also in understanding factors that link the coparental relationship to father involvement.

Theoretical-Conceptual Map

The theoretical-conceptual map (Figure 1.1) below shows the anticipated reciprocal influence of the ecological factors and the coparenting relationships of African American parenting partners. While this study primarily focused on the influence of ecological factors on the coparental relationship, it is important to note that individuals may also have a profound influence on each other and the environments in which they exist. Within the triadic relationship of mother, father and child, not only do adults influence each other and the child individually, but also, the child influences each adult (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and, it was expected, the development of the adult coparenting relationship (McHale, Kazali et al., 2004).

Also underlying this study was feminist theory with a focus on a multiracial perspective (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 2000; Collins, 1986). Multiracial feminist concepts are interwoven into the map and are italicized to highlight their importance. Multiracial feminist perspective is compatible with a Human Ecological approach in that it also concentrates on factors in the environment that structure the availability of resources for marginalized individuals and families. Structures of race, class, and gender within our society “create barriers, limit opportunities, and constrain choices” (p. 5) for marginalized groups (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1994).

Ecological theory suggests that the individuals are embedded within three primary environments: (1) the natural physical-biological environment; (2) the social-cultural environment; and (3) the human built environment (Buboltz & Sontag, 1993). This study focused on the social-cultural environment, which encompasses several systems. These systems include the individual, the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the

macrosystem, and the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It was anticipated that individuals would not only be influenced by their own set of systems and their child, but would also be indirectly influenced by their partners' systems. Also, within the social-cultural system, are intersections of power. The macrosystem incorporates structures of power such as race, social class, sexual orientation, physical abilities, and national or immigration status (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 2000, p.6). These patterns of inequality shape the daily lives of individual and families influencing interactions between all systems of their environment.

It should be mentioned that on the theoretical-conceptual map, the mother and the father's exosystems, microsystems and individual systems diverge, representing that the parenting partners in this study are not cohabitating and therefore bring unique systems into their relationship. Additionally, human systems are complex; therefore, there may be some overlap in these parenting environments. Following Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979), 1994), one parent's workplace would be a component of the other parent's exosystem. The mesosystem contains the linkages between microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). For this study, the interaction of two microsystems and exosystems, the mothers' and the fathers' as they work together but from separate residences to raise their child, was the mesosystem under investigation. To highlight its importance in this study, only one mesosystem is shown on the map. This underscores that it is the interaction of two individuals' microsystems and exosystems (the mother and the father's) from separate households.

Black arrows are shown on the theoretical-conceptual map representing the interaction between systems in this study. This study is not designed to be longitudinal;

however, the chronosystem is believed to play a central role in shaping individuals' lives. Although not the focus of this study, factors such as social-historical timeframe of the study, developmental issues, and time referenced events in the lives of participants was included in analysis as needed. As such, the chronosystem and its components have been depicted in the theoretical-conceptual map.

Ecological and Feminist Factors Influencing African American, Not Co-residing, Biological Coparents

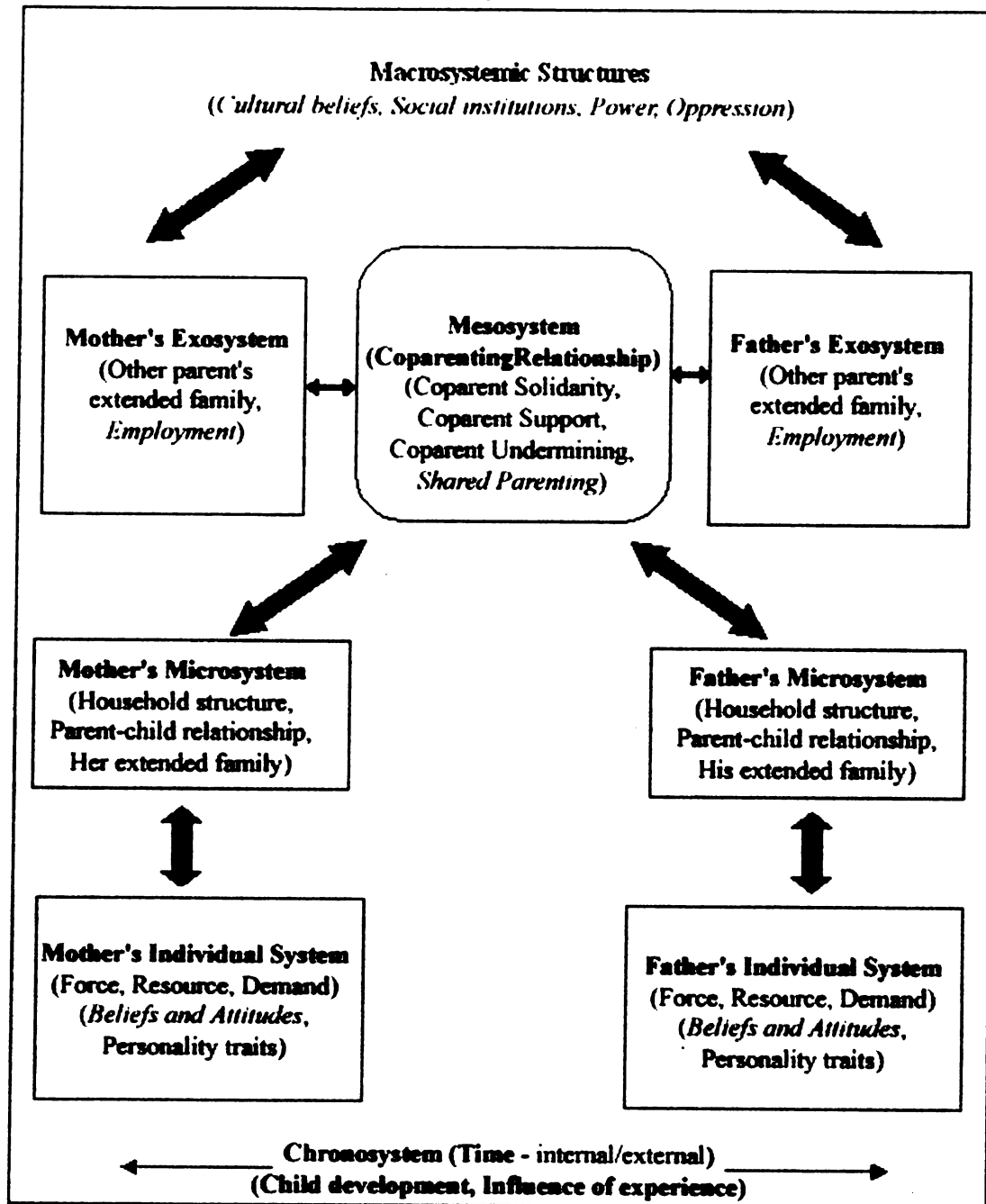


Figure 1.1: Theoretical-Conceptual Map

Theoretical Foundations

Although this study will utilize a grounded theory approach to develop a substantive theory of the coparenting relationship for African American unmarried families, the formal theories employed for guiding this research will be Human Ecological Theory and Multiracial Feminist Perspective. This section will discuss their application to this research

Human Ecological Theory

Feinberg (2003), and Doherty and Beaton (2004) have suggested ecological models of coparenting that include nested sets of factors that are interdependent. They suggest that the coparenting relationship is set within a broader system, where individual parent characteristics, child characteristics, and the overall couple relationship are mutually influential on coparenting, individual parenting and child adjustment. These factors are also bi-directionally influenced by environmental supports and stresses. Social supports and community resources enhance coparents' ability to maintain solid coparenting, where economic and work related stresses might weaken the coparental relationship. Therefore, an ecological approach allows for the assessment of the effects of factors at the individual, family, community, and societal levels on the structure and functioning of the coparental relationships in African American families.

According to Buboltz and Sontag (1993), Human Ecological Theory is focused on humans as both biological organisms and social beings in interaction with their environment. Three primary environments are proposed to affect families: the natural physical-biological environment, the social-cultural environment, and the human built environment. The natural physical-biological environment includes components such as

atmosphere, climate, soil, water, plants, and animals. The human-built environment includes modifications made by humans to the natural environment (e.g., roads, cultivated land, buildings, pollution). The social-cultural environment is more abstract and includes the presence of other human beings (e.g., communities), abstract cultural constructs (e.g., language, cultural values) and social and economic institutions (Buboltz & Sontag, 1993). These environments provide the context and primary base for human activities and interactions and while each provides important reciprocal influences on families, this study will focus on factors within these environments that influence coparenting behaviors.

Because the social-cultural environment is comprised of interactions between human beings, cultural values, and social and economic institutions, this environment can be further broken down into distinct systems. Using Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 797) is beneficial as it focuses on the processes of interactions between individuals, families and their environment. This model is composed of interacting systems where an individual is embedded. These systems include the individual, the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem.

These systems are abstract and complex and often overlap. For clarity in this study, this author has chosen to conceptually distinguish between two individuals' sets of systems, although those systems may overlap significantly (see Figure 1.1). For example, as the biological parents of a single child with whom that child spends regular time, these two parents may be considered part of the child's microsystem. However, for this study, the focus is on the coparenting relationship and not specifically the child; therefore, this

study considered each individual parent as being at the center of one set of systems. How factors within these two sets of systems interact and influence each other, particularly from a strength-based perspective, was the focus of this study.

In Bronfenbrenner's (2006) model, at the individual level, the characteristics of the person function both as an indirect producer and as a product of development. This interaction of development takes place through 'proximal processes' and is a function of the form, power, content and direction of those processes (p. 798). Additionally, the individual level of Bronfenbrenner's model has been broken down into three classes of individual characteristics that he suggests influence developmental process: (1) force characteristics, (2) resource characteristics, and (3) demand characteristics. Force characteristics can be either developmentally generative or developmentally disruptive and are dispositions of the person that either encourage or discourage the occurrence of proximal processes. These characteristics include such things as curiosity, responsiveness, and discretion, or impulsiveness, distractibility, aggressiveness, apathy, and shyness.

Resource characteristics consist of the "biopsychological liabilities and assets that influence a person's capacity to engage effectively in proximal processes" (p. 812). Assets may include characteristics such as ability, knowledge, or skills where liabilities may include genetic defects, physical handicaps, or illness. These resource characteristics either hinder or encourage an individual's ability to interact effectively with others and their environment.

Finally, demand characteristics consist of an individual's capacity to invite or discourage reactions from other human beings in their environment. Examples of

demand characteristics include temperament, and physical appearance (e.g., a fussy baby prompts different reactions in their environment than a happy baby).

The microsystem level of Bronfenbrenner's model is a setting that is closest to the individual. This system encompasses an individual's activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations with people, symbols, and objects (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These settings may include an individual's family, peers, school, or neighborhood. Within microsystems, individuals have direct interactions with parents, teachers, peers, and others.

The mesosystem involves linkages between microsystems, or as Bronfenbrenner suggests, "...a system of microsystems" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Examples of this system are the connections between experiences at home and experiences at school, and between family and peers. Events in one microsystem can affect events in another microsystem. For this study, the interaction of two microsystems, the mothers', and the fathers' as they work together but from separate residences to raise their child, is conceptualized to lie within the mesosystem. Most studies focusing on dyadic relationships (i.e. marriage) would conceptualize that relationship within the microsystem; however, to clarify the linkage between the mother and father's microsystem from separate residences, this author has chosen to consider the coparental relationship within the mesosystem.

The exosystem is defined as a context in which the individual does not actually participate, but in which occurrences influence the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). A parent's place of work is often given as an example of an exosystem for a child. A parent's workplace may offer stressful conditions or economic changes that influence

how that parent will interact within a child's microsystem. In families where parents are working together to raise a child, but do not live together, defining the pertinent exosystems becomes more difficult. For this study, the exosystem of one parent would be the parts of the other parent's microsystem that influence their relationship, but in which they are not embedded. For example, in families where parents do not live together, the mother may maintain a household with her children, but the father of the target child may not be the father of the other children in the household. The mother's microsystem may include interactions with her other children's father. The target father may never have contact with the other children's father, but his presence may influence decisions that the mother makes. Therefore the father's exosystem would include the mother's relationship with her other children's father. This system is expected to play an important role in influencing how these parents are able to collaborate in their coparental relationship.

The macrosystem involves the broader culture and subcultures in which individuals live, including the society's values and customs, and influences the nature of interactions within the other levels. The macrosystem embraces not only the ideology of a culture or subculture's social institutions, but also the organization of those institutions. The macrosystem consists of political and religious beliefs, beliefs about race, ethnicity, gender and other power structures. On the theoretical-conceptual map (Figure 1.1), the macrosystem is depicted as encompassing all systems. Society's values, customs, and institutions underlie interactions throughout all other systems.

Finally, Bronfenbrenner (1994) suggests that the chronosystem "encompasses change or consistency over time not only in the characteristics of the person but also of

the environment in which that person lives (e.g., changes over the life course in family structure, socioeconomic status, employment, place of residence, or the degree of hecticness and ability in every day life).” Families develop over time and events and experiences influence how relationships are negotiated.

Multiracial Feminist Perspective

Also underlying this study is a concern for how locations within society, and the implications of inequalities based on race and gender influence the development of relationships. Early in the scholarship on gender, gender was seen as a central organizing structure for social relations. However, studying gender from a dualistic perspective over-generalizes men’s and women’s experiences (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 2000). Baca Zinn, et al. (2000) suggest that this format does not account for differences and inequalities between groups of women and ignores the voices of other marginalized people. These scholars insist that gender does not operate in isolation and that it must be studied as it intersects with other structures of power such as race, social class, sexual orientation, physical abilities and national or immigration status (p.6). They suggest viewing gender through “the prism of difference”, whereby scholars look at the experiences of all marginalized groups from the local (lived experiences), and the global perspectives (p.7). This framework sets the stage for broadening our vision of gender from simply a categorical view, where men and women are polar opposites, to deconstructing all of the layers of inequality. It gives us a framework for seeing the interconnections of power structure that include not only gender, but race, class, sexual orientation and physical ability.

Multiracial feminist work uses social constructionism to explore the concept of gender and race intersecting in the lives of white and women of color. They suggest that women's experiences are not only gendered, but also simultaneously structured in a system of racial inequality. However, these systems are not exclusive structures of oppression, and social class, sexual orientation, physical abilities, nationality, and immigration have been recognized as contributing to people's social locations whereby domination occurs. Individuals "are located differently with varying amounts of oppression and opportunity, some people can be disadvantaged by gender but advantaged by race" (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 2000). Therefore, a white woman may be disadvantaged compared to a white male, but advantaged in relation to an African American woman.

The overarching theme of multiracial feminism is that of intersectionality. Intersectionality regards gender as a socially constructed concept that works through a network of systems of inequality. Systems of inequality like race, class, gender, sexuality, physical ability, and immigration status work simultaneously to place women and men in various locations with different opportunities for power and variations on their level of oppression (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 2000). The intersectionality of this system suggests that there is a hierarchy of power where people may be disadvantaged by gender, but advantaged by race, or advantaged by gender, but disadvantaged by physical ability or immigration status. In a system where women are typically oppressed, some women may benefit from the oppression of other women.

In her work on migrant domestic workers in Rome and Los Angeles, Parrenas (2001) has shown how white women benefit from the oppression of the Filipina migrant

women they hire for domestic help. She also reveals the hierarchical chain of oppression that exposes the interconnection of women's experiences through social structures.

Using a multiracial feminist framework leads to understanding of these connections between women, men, and differences in location within the power structures of society.

Glenn (2000) suggests three key analytic concepts of a multiracial feminist framework: relationality, structure and representation, and power. These levels include representation or symbolic meanings at the macro level, social norms including etiquette and rules at the micro-interaction level, and social structure including power and resource distribution at the macro level. The concept of relationality implies that different groups are positioned in relation to one another and power for one group is based on the interaction of subordination for another group. Different groups of men and women experience oppression differently based on their racial location, and meanings are constructed based on a group's location.

Additionally, positions of power are accomplished through the domination of one group over another. Without subordination, domination cannot take place. Using this concept of relationality, multiracial feminists suggest that subordinate groups are particularly located to emphasize the contrasts of power because power becomes invisible for dominant groups. Without analysis, white becomes the universal race, and male becomes the universal gender. Frankenberg (1996) notes that "whiteness comes to be an unmarked or neutral category, whereas other cultures are specifically marked 'cultural'." In this way, all 'others' become the deviant, to be measured against the dominant norm.

A second analytic concept that Glenn (2000) proposes is that gender and power are socially structured and played out in symbolic ways within society. Power structures

are a part of institutionalized systems, but are also important in determining social behavioral norms for specific groups. Meanings of being female, male, African American, White, Latino or Asian change based on historical contextual situations. We cannot simply study the structure of social institutions and the distribution of power, without acknowledging the meanings gender and race carry. Conversely, to simply look at the meanings a group has for gender or race, ignores the influence of underlying social structures that may be hidden in everyday experience. For example, West and Fenstermaker (1993) looked at the investigation of everyday gendered conversations to examine the lived experiences of women and men. They note the hidden structural power men retain in something as commonplace as conversations between people.

Finally, Glenn suggests that power is the third analytic concept for multiracial feminism. She proposes that “power is seen as simultaneously pervasive and dispersed in social locations of all kinds,” (Glenn, 2000) and are not always easily recognized. She indicates that language and meaning of race and gender are based on historically developed norms. Therefore, resistance to current forms of domination need to consider experiences in the everyday lives of people, in other words, “the personal becomes political” (p.13). This is particularly important, as past research has neglected to consider the context of poverty when exploring family well-being, economic stability, and marriage patterns (Wells & Baca Zinn, 2004). Therefore, in this study, special attention will be given to representations, meanings, and consequences of power within coparenting partners’ ecological systems.

Research Questions

As an exploratory qualitative study, the research questions upon which this study was guided were open and encompassing. The primary research question guiding this study was: How do ecological factors influence the coparenting relationship of low income, unmarried, non-cohabitating African American parenting partners? However within this primary question were several sub-questions that this study investigated.

These questions are as follows:

1. How do individual factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners? It was expected that individual factors that include force, resource and demand characteristics (personality, emotional stability, physical and mental health) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), internalization of oppression, and individual beliefs and values regarding the role of being a parent would influence the coparental relationship.

2. How do microsystem factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners? The microsystem encompasses an individual's activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations with people, symbols, and objects (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This system is considered to have the largest influence on individuals as interactions occur most often here. It was anticipated that factors within this system such as the structure of the household (number of members, relationships with other members, roles of those members) would have a direct influence on the individual parent, and an indirect influence on the coparenting relationship. Of particular note in this system is the influence of the target child. Parent's perceptions of their

child's temperament, the child's relationship with each parent, and how parents negotiate those relationships were explored in this study.

3. How do mesosystem factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners? As a system that contains the linkages between systems, the mesosystem is of particular interest in this study. For this study, it was proposed that the coparenting relationship is positioned within the mesosystem, as it is the system where both partners' systems come together. It is the linkage of two individuals' micro- and exosystems. This system incorporates relationship qualities such as communication practices, conflict management skills, and coparental processes (solidarity, coparenting support, undermining coparenting, and shared parenting). Therefore, it was expected that it would have significant influence on individuals' perception of the coparenting relationship.

4. How do exosystem factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners? The exosystem includes those environments that the individual does not participate in, but is influential in that individual's life. In families where parents are working together to raise a child, but do not live together, exosystems were expected to play an important role in influencing how these parents are able to collaborate in their coparental relationship.

5. How do macrosystem factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners? The macrosystem involves the broader culture and subcultures in which individuals live, including the society's values and customs, and influences the nature of interactions within the other levels. The experience of living in poverty, suffering racism, legislation that limits access to resources and choice, and

beliefs about single parenthood, parenting roles and expectations was anticipated to influence not only individual behavior, but also the structure of the coparental relationship.

6. How do chronosystem factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners? Social-historical context and developmental issues were expected to play a role in how families structure relationships. Individual developmental stages as well as family developmental stages influence how relationships and interactions occur.

7. How do differences in location within structures of power influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners? It was anticipated that an individual's location within the intersections of inequality through race, class, and gender would influence not only the availability of opportunities and resources, but would also influence how relationships were maintained. African American parents are not only experiencing their location as minority status within the broader culture, but are also differently situated through gender. It was expected that partners would be influenced together by their cultural minority location, and individually in relation to their gendered location on the power structure.

8. How does the structure of power and the meanings individual have for these influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners? It was believed that the interaction of the experience of marginalization and the meaning of that marginalization would influence how African American coparenting partners navigate their relationship.

9. How does the role of power in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners influence the coparental relationship? Finally, how coparenting partners perceive ideal and real division of labor, reasons for that division, oppression, and how they cope with oppression was expected to influence the relationship they develop in parenting their child.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Controversy exists as to whether an a priori review of the literature predisposes a grounded theory researcher to a set of conclusions (LaRossa, 2005). However, although this study employs a grounded theory approach, this author has had extensive experience researching coparenting. Therefore, it is unrealistic to assume that this author has *no* prior knowledge of previous scholarly work. Therefore, as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), and LaRoss (2005), a brief review was assembled before data collection began, but using the concept of constant comparison, the literature was reviewed as it became relevant to emerging themes from the data. This chapter includes a review of the literature pertinent to this study including portions of the original review and additions the researcher found important to the developing concepts. The original review included literature pertaining to the framework of coparenting, implications of the coparental relationship for adult development, and implications of the coparental relationship for child development. Further literature that has been added includes an overview of the literature regarding African American father involvement, and literature regarding ecological influences on the coparental relationship.

A Framework of Coparenting

The coparenting relationship is defined as the relationship between adult partners concerning issues of parenting (McHale, Kuersten Hogan, Lauretti, & Rasmussen, 2000). Research on this relationship began in the early 1980's when researchers began using family systems theory to investigate dyadic and triadic interactions within the family. Belsky's (1981) early work creating a conceptual model of parenting set the stage for investigating the coparental relationship within the triadic family system. In his model,

parenting is influenced by individual parent characteristics, the marital relationship, employment, and social circumstances, and by child characteristics. Early work also investigated how marital relationships affect the coparenting relationship (Cowan & Cowan, 1999). Research continues to investigate the connection between the marital and coparental relationship. However, much of the research on the coparental relationship has included a homogenous population, particularly married, middle class, white families.

Therefore, Van Egeren and Hawkins (2004, p. 166) defined a broader definition of coparenting, “coparenting relationship exists when at least two individuals are expected by mutual agreement or societal norms to have conjoint responsibility for a particular child’s well-being.” Using this definition, coparental partners may or may not be engaged in a romantic relationship, and may or may not be co-residing. They also suggest that the coparental relationship begins upon the birth of the child and coparental behaviors may take place both as overt interactions between coparental partners as well as actions and feelings that “promote or undermine the partner’s effectiveness as a coparent and parent” (p. 167). Covert coparenting behaviors will be discussed further in the following sections.

Although researchers have begun suggesting a framework for conceptualizing the coparenting construct (Doherty & Beaton, 2004; Feinberg, 2003; Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004), this appears to be a work in progress. To date, several dimensions have appeared to be sustaining within the literature. This study will use the framework outlined by Van Egeren and Hawkins (2004), and includes the dimensions of coparenting solidarity, coparenting support, undermining coparenting, and shared parenting.

Van Egeren and Hawkins (2004, p. 168) define coparenting solidarity, as “the feature of coparenting that typifies the affective, enduring quality of growing together as parents and forming a unified executive subsystem.” They suggest that coparenting solidarity encompasses overt behaviors of affect (expressed warmth), developmental aspects (i.e., growing together), and covert behaviors of cohesion (reinforcing partners place in the parenting alliance when that partner is not around).

The dimension of coparenting support is defined as behaviors from one’s partner that encourages accomplishing parenting objectives (Belsky, Crnic, & Woodworth, 1995; Frank & Tuer, 1988; McHale, 1995; Westerman & Massoff, 2001). Van Egeren and Hawkins (2004) suggest that coparenting support is found in “helping” behaviors (i.e., retrieving objects when the partner’s hands are full), or feeling reinforced by one’s partner. In recent work, coparenting support has been found to mediate the relation between marital adjustment and maternal warmth (Bonds & Gondoli, 2007).

Conversely, undermining coparenting are those behaviors that intrude on partners accomplishing parenting goals. Undermining coparenting can be seen when one’s partner expresses criticism, vocalizes disrespect, or undercuts their partner’s parenting decisions or behaviors (Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995). Like supportive behaviors, undermining behaviors can be both overt and covert (McHale, 1997). Partners may demonstrate undermining coparenting both in the presence of their partner (i.e., when one partner excludes the other in an activity (McHale, 1997), or when they are with the child alone (Westerman & Massoff, 2001).

Shared parenting encompasses the division of childcare labor and includes not only actual time spent on tasks, but also the responsibility carried for that task to be

accomplished and partner's perceptions about the fairness of this division. It also includes the concept of how much each partner is engaged with the children. Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) suggest that engagement is a circular process, and as mothers are able to yield to father's involvement, and fathers are able to approach childcare with a sense of wanting to learn, not only are parent-child relationships strengthened, but also the relationship between coparents.

Implications for Child Adjustment

The importance of coparenting behavior as a unique influence on children's adjustment has been well documented (e.g., Belsky et al., 1996; Brody et al., 1999; McHale et al., 1999; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998; Schoppe et al., 2001). Research has shown that children may be particularly sensitive to disagreements that relate to them (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Marital conflict over child-rearing is a better predictor of child behavior problems than either global marital distress or conflicts in areas not related to child-rearing (Jouriles et al., 1991; Snyder, Klein, Gdowski, Faulstich, & LaCombe, 1988). Moreover, in McHale and Rasmussen's (1998) study of family group level dynamics, father's positive coparenting practices were linked to fewer internalizing and aggressive behaviors in their preschool aged children. In this same study, mother's disparagement of her coparent was related to higher levels of child aggressive and internalizing behaviors.

Additionally, Katz and Low (2004) found that violent couples had more conflict and detachment, and were more negative and critical during coparenting activities than non-violent couples. In these families, children are at increased risk for anxious and depressive symptoms and non-compliant behaviors. McHale and Rasmussen (1998)

found that hostility-competitiveness and lower coparenting harmony scores were related to teacher's ratings of preschool children aggressive behavior, and greater discrepancies in parent involvement was related to teacher reports of anxious-fearful behavior. El-Sheikh and Whitson (2001) reported that increased marital conflict was a significant predictor of detrimental child outcomes. Additionally, mothers' ratings of child-rearing disagreements about their 2-year-old sons have been related to both maternal and paternal ratings of sons' behavior problems at 5 years of age (Ingoldsby, Shaw, Owens, & Winslow, 1999).

Coparenting in African American Families

Most research on the coparenting relationship has focused on White, middle class samples, and therefore may not be generalizable to low-income African American families. Researchers have suggested that some African American families view parenting as a communal task, where extended family and community networks assist in child-rearing tasks (Forehand & Kotchick, 1996; Jones et al., 2003; Marshall, Noonan, McCartney, Marx, & Keefe, 2001). However, Coley (2001) found that many single mothers are raising their children with help from the biological fathers, although they are not married or living together. Few studies have concentrated on the relationship between biological parents who are not living together. Most studies of single, mother-headed African American families, biological fathers - even those identified as coparents - have not participated in the study, and therefore have not shared their perspective.

Of those studies that have focused specifically on African American families (with an extended definition of the coparental relationship), Jones, et al., (2005) found that coparenting support and conflict was associated with mothers' levels of monitoring.

They suggest that coparental support may offer mothers resources and childcare assistance that shield them from the stress associated with risky violent neighborhoods. From this same sample, these investigators found that lower levels of coparental conflict protected girls from internal and external behavior problems in the context of higher levels of neighborhood violence (Forehand & Jones, 2003).

African American Non-residential Father Involvement

Although this study was not intended to investigate father involvement per se, this topic has important implications within the coparenting relationship. Therefore, an overview of the literature on unmarried African American fatherhood is included in this review. Wilson et al. (2005) note that it is often assumed that in single-parent African American families, where a mother and her children are living together, fathers are not involved in family life. They suggest that the role of father is very important in the African American family, and that fathers' interactions with their children reflect role flexibility and fathers' desires to be involved in raising their children. They also note that poverty and unemployment place low-income African American fathers in a vulnerable position, where family participation and support are crucial to their survival (p. 329). Additionally, they link low-income and limited education to African American men's inability to find employment, which then is found to be directly related to marriage rates in African American couples, as well as men's self-esteem and independence (p. 331). Likewise, Bowman et al. (1998) found that joblessness and low income had negative effects on African American men's psychological well-being. Therefore, societal constraints not only limit African American men's ability to provide family income, but also influence how they view themselves in relationship with their family.

Additionally, researchers have looked at associations between mothers and father's involvement with children (Cowan & Cowan, 1987; Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998). Studies indicate that when mothers work to include fathers in parenting, fathers are more likely to be involved in their children's lives (Hoffman & Moon, 1999). In their work with the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, Cohen (2003) and Johnson (2001) indicate that the relationship between parents was associated with father involvement with their child. They found greater father involvement, when the parents' relationship was more supportive, perceived as more satisfying, and had less negativity. Complementing this, Downer and Mendez (2005) found that fathers who reported a strong coparenting relationship were more involvement in home-based educational activities.

Additionally, conflict between coparents was found to have a negative effect on father involvement (Coley & Hernandez, 2006). Coley and Hernandez (2006) suggest that the relationship may be bi-directional; where fathers become more involved, more collaborative coparenting results, and conflict is lessened. They also found that when non-residential fathers engaged in antisocial behaviors, parental conflict increased, and father involvement decreased. Furthermore, Coley and Chase Lansdale (1999) found that in looking at longitudinal data, involvement of many fathers drops over time. One moderating effect has been found however, in that fathers who were involved with the mother at the time of the child's birth, were more likely to maintain involvement over time (Coley & Hernandez, 2006).

Ecological Factors Influencing the Coparental Relationship

Individual Factors Influencing the Coparental Relationship

As stated above, individual factors that influence developmental processes include force, resource and demand characteristics. Force characteristics include an individual's dispositions that can either positively or negatively influence the occurrence of proximal processes. Characteristics such as responsiveness, or shyness can influence how individuals develop relationships. Resource characteristics may include assets such as ability, knowledge, or skills or liabilities such as genetic defects, physical handicaps, or illness that can influence how an individual interacts within a relationship. Demand characteristics, like temperament and physical appearance influence how others react to an individual.

Much of the current research has focused on individual characteristics that influence the development of the coparenting relationship. Belsky, Crnic, and Gable (1995) found that parents with similar individual psychological attributes (introversion and extroversion) had more positive coparenting relationships. Research has also identified that fathers high in flexibility (highly perceptive, interested in entertaining others' viewpoints, and skilled in adjusting their behavior to changing or unfamiliar interpersonal demands) and mothers high in responsiveness, and self-control (low in reactance) are more likely to achieve an effective coparenting relationship (Cowdery & Knudson-Martin, 2005; Talbot & McHale, 2004; Van Egeren, 2003). Additionally, Lindsey et al., (2005) found that mothers with high self-esteem displayed fewer intrusive coparenting behaviors. They suggest that parents who view themselves positively may

be better able to form supportive relationships, have more positive parenting behaviors, and feel more competent in managing the challenges of parenting.

Other individual factors like age and gender have also been found to influence the coparental relationship. Van Egeren (2003) found that individual factors that predicted coparental satisfaction included age and prebirth concerns about childbirth and parenthood for mothers, and occupational status for fathers. Other work has shown that individual's prebirth "triadic capacity" to imagine their family relationships without leaving out either themselves or their partners from the relationship was associated with predictions of coordination within the triad post-birth (Von Klitzing & Burgin, 2005). This suggests that an individual's beliefs and attitudes about what the family will look like after the infant is born is an important indicator of how the coparenting relationship will develop.

Microsystem Factors Influencing the Coparental Relationship

The microsystem level of Bronfenbrenner's model is a setting that is closest to the individual. This system encompasses an individual's activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations with people, symbols, and objects (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As mentioned earlier, for the current study, the coparental relationship is conceptualized within the mesosystem; however, most of the literature studying the coparental relationship focuses on the coparental relationship within a marital system and therefore, within the microsystem. This system is considered to have the largest influence on individuals as interactions occur most often here.

As might be expected, research has shown a link between the marital and coparental relationship. McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, and Rao (2004) have suggested

maintaining a distinction between the marital (romantic) and the coparental relationship when doing research. However, due to the interrelations between family subsystems, the coparenting and adult (romantic or platonic) subsystems are expected to be related (McHale, Lauretti, Talbot, & Pouquette, 2002). Therefore, characteristics of the adult relationship will have significant implications for the coparental relationship.

Belsky and Hsieh (1998), and O'Brien and Peyton (2002) found that couples whose marital satisfaction declined over time experienced more coparenting-related disagreements. They have suggested that positive marital relationships carry over into the coparenting relationship, and negative marital relationships trigger difficult coparenting relationship (Fainsilber Katz & Gottman, 1996; Lindahl, Clements, & Markman, 1997; J. P. McHale, 1997). However, some researchers have found that a number of families experiencing marital distress are able to maintain effective coparenting relationships (McHale, 1995; McHale et al., 2000). This has important implications for African American parenting partners whose interpersonal relationship may or may not have romantic overtones.

Another factor that has shown to be important in the coparental research is the characteristics of the child. Characteristics such as the child's gender and temperament have influence on parenting and the coparenting relationship. Research suggests that the presence of a male child increases the likelihood that couples will marry (Lundberg & Rose, 2003) and remain married (Morgan, Lye, & Condran, 1988) and that male children are more likely to observe parents' childrearing disputes than females (Cox, Owen, Lewis, & Henderson, 1989). However, research on the influence of children's gender on the coparenting relationship is less clear. Floyd and Zmich (1991) found child gender to

be unrelated to perceptions of the coparenting relationship. However, McHale (1995) found differences in coparenting behavior among maritally distressed couples depending on their child's gender. They reported that maritally distressed parents of boys displayed more hostile-competitive coparenting behavior, while distressed parents of girls were more likely to display discrepant levels of parenting involvement.

Children's temperament is another characteristic that may influence coparenting. Evidence suggests that child temperament has a profound impact on parenting behavior in that difficult temperament has been linked to hostility, criticism, a tendency to ignore the child, coercive discipline, and a lack of sensitivity in mothers (Cutrona & Troutman, 1986; Gallagher, 2002; Putnam, 2002). Few researchers have investigated the direct link between infant temperament and coparenting behaviors. However, Lindsey et al., (2005) found that fathers of children with a difficult temperament demonstrated more intrusive coparenting behavior. Research is still needed to understand the influence children have on the coparental relationship.

Mesosystem Factors Influencing the Coparental Relationship

The mesosystem involves linkages between microsystems, or as Bronfenbrenner suggests, "...a system of microsystems" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). It is important to note that mesosystemic (and exosystemic) factors vary depending upon the focus of the study. For example, in studying married couples, the mesosystem of a wife would be different than the mesosystem of husband. Although this study between nonresident coparents conceptualizes that relationship within the mesosystem, traditional research on the coparental relationship between married couples would not. Most of the coparental

literature has focused on married couples, and therefore, this review will look at those factors within the literature that would traditionally be found in the mesosystem.

Social support has been suggested as an important influence on parenting (Belsky, 1984). Although social support has been related to the quality of mothers' and fathers' parenting behaviors (Jennings, Stagg, & Connors, 1991; Volling & Belsky, 1992), researchers have suggested that the coparental relationship may mediate the effect of social support on individual parenting behaviors (Floyd et al., 1998; McHale et al., 2003; Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995; Floyd & Zmich, 1991; Levy-Shiff, 1999).

Another factor associated with the development of the coparental relationship is the individual's perceptions of the coparenting relationship in their family of origin. Van Egeren (2003) found that fathers who perceived their own parents as maintaining a successful coparenting relationship were more likely to rate their own coparenting relationship positively.

Exosystem Factors Influencing the Coparental Relationship

The exosystem is defined as a context in which the individual does not actually participate, but in which occurrences influence the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). A parent's place of work is often given as an example of an exosystem for a child. For individuals coparenting, whether residing together or not, the other parent's place of work is within that individual's exosystem. In the research on coparenting, parents' employment outside the home may influence parent's interactions with their children, particularly when comparing dual earner families to single earner families (Crouter, Helms Erickson, Updegraff, & McHale, 1999). Easterbrooks and Goldberg (1985) found that parents in dual-earner families spent less time alone with the child during weekdays,

and were less responsive to their child's behavior than single-earner households. However, further investigation is needed in understanding the connections between parent's employment and the quality of coparenting relationships.

Macrosystem Factors Influencing the Coparental Relationship

The macrosystem involves the broader culture and subcultures in which individuals live, including the society's values and customs, and influences the nature of interactions within the other levels. The macrosystem embraces not only the ideology of a culture or subculture's social institutions, but also the organization of those institutions. The macrosystem consists of political and religious beliefs, beliefs about race, ethnicity, gender and other power structures. Particularly for African American low-income coparents, experiences of oppression and inequality were anticipated to influence the development of the coparental relationship. However, few researchers have looked at the influence of factors outside of the family on this relationship. Exceptions are Conger et al., (2002) and Conger and Conger (2002) studies which suggest that economic hardships lead to economic pressure which then influence increased parent emotional distress and increased interparental conflict-withdrawal patterns.

Little research has been done looking at race and ethnicity and the coparental relationship. Of those that have, the focus has been on the influence of the coparenting relationship on child outcomes (Brody et al., 1998; Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1995) instead of on the influence of race and ethnicity on its development.

Chronosystem Factors Influencing the Coparental Relationship

Finally, Bronfenbrenner (1994) suggests that the chronosystem includes changes and patterns in environmental context and personal characteristics over the course of time

that influence that individual's development. Family developmental status is related to both each individual member's developmental stage, and aspects of the whole family developmental cycle (Elder, 1998). The transition to parenthood is considered a crucial time in the developmental phase of the family, and in particular for the development of the coparental relationship, and therefore, much research has focused on this developmental phase of family life (Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Belsky, Spanier, & Rovine, 1983; Belsky & Volling, 1987; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Feldman, 2000; Van Egeren, 2003). Although this focus suggests that developmental processes are important in the study of coparenting, (Gable et al., 1995; McHale et al., 2000), most research has focused on first-time parents and therefore, comparisons across developmental stages remain unexplored. Additionally, little work has focused on how the coparental relationship may influence an individual's adult development (McHale, Kuersten-Hogan et al., 2004). McHale et al., (2004) suggest that future research is needed in looking at how the coparental relationship influences individual's parental development, and relational and cognitive capacities (p. 227).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Methodology

Because of the dearth of research on coparenting relationships for low income, unmarried, non-cohabitating African American parenting partners, a grounded theory approach was used (Straus & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory allows for the discovery of important aspects of families' lives that have not been explored or uncovered in previous research. This study used a grounded theory approach to gain a rich description of the ecological factors that influence how unmarried, non-cohabitating African American mothers and fathers experience their coparenting relationship. Through understanding factors that influence how these parents who have successfully negotiated a coparenting relationship into their lives, knowledge gained can inform future studies investigating the most effective ways to assist at-risk families.

According to Martin and Turner (1986) grounded theory is "an inductive, theory discovery methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data." Straus and Corbin (1998, p. 12) suggest that theory emerges from the data. It is a process of constant comparison. Data are compared to other data, then to theory. Substantive theory emerges as plausible reasonable relationships produced among concepts and sets of concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

There are three basic elements of grounded theory: concepts, categories and propositions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Concepts are the basic units of analysis and are, "labeled phenomenon...an abstract representation of an event, object, or action/interaction that a researcher identifies as being significant in the data" (Strauss &

Corbin, 1998, p. 103). During data analysis, concepts begin to be grouped together in higher, more abstract levels called categories. Straus and Corbin (1998, p. 114) suggest that, “Categories are concepts, derived from the data, that stand for phenomena ... they answer the question “What is going on here?”

The final elements of grounded theory are propositions, which indicate generalized relationships between a category and its concepts and between discrete categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 22). In this process of labeling phenomena, grouping them into categories and discovering relationships, theory is inductively derived. From this perspective, research does not begin with theory leading to investigation, but theory is allowed to emerge from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 23). However, while the goal of grounded theory is to inductively allow theory to emerge from the data, Strauss and Corbin (1994, p. 273) have suggested that “theory may be generated initially from the data, or if existing (grounded) theories seem appropriate to the area of investigation, these may be elaborated and modified as incoming data are meticulously played against them.” For this study, a grounded theory approach permitted the researcher to be open to allowing the data to generate new theory while also elaborating the existing theory within the coparenting literature.

Reliability and Validity Criteria

Lincoln and Guba (1985) provided a structure for considering reliability and validity to maximize the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability within qualitative research. Credibility, similar to the quantitative concept of internal validity, is a measure of how likely the study will produce findings that are trustworthy. For this study, peer debriefing, raw data verification, and memoing throughout the data

collection process were used to ensure the credibility of the findings. Peer debriefing is the process of presenting analysis to a peer to explore meanings, interpretations, bias, and inconsistencies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the processes of analysis, data and interpretations were discussed with the investigator's advisor and with a colleague familiar with coparenting research. Raw data verification refers to the process of going back and comparing the theory against the raw data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, memos were kept recording the investigators thoughts and feelings which provided an audit trail of the research process. These memos were used to remind the investigator of her biases and to help her to suspend judgment.

Theoretical Sensitivity

Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to "theoretical sensitivity" of the researcher as a key issue in qualitative research. Theoretical sensitivity is a concept that includes the researchers' level of insight into the research area, how attuned they are to the nuances and complexity of the participant's words and actions, their ability to reconstruct meaning from the data generated with the participant, and a capacity to "separate the pertinent from that which isn't" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 44). This sensitivity is gained through knowledge of the literature, and personal and professional experiences. Theoretical sensitivity can be compromised when a researcher loses their ability to be open-minded, willing to listen and to "give voice" to participants of their research.

This author's personal and professional experiences offer both limitations and benefits when addressing theoretical sensitivity for this study. As a doctoral student in the Marriage and Family Therapy program, she has significant training in providing culturally competent therapeutic services. As a Caucasian woman from a middle class

background, she has had to question her own responses to issues of privilege and “cultural blindness”. However, her life experiences are very different from those of her participants. Using a multiracial feminist theoretical perspective was intended to ground the investigator in her own location and remind her of covert privileges and preconceptions which might obscure understanding her participant’s experiences.

Additionally, her many years of experience as a researcher of the coparental relationship, as well as her personal experiences as a mother and coparent required her to continue to question her own preconceived ideas of gender, roles, parenting, and what makes a successful coparenting relationship. African American families have repeatedly been portrayed as not meeting the “standards” of the dominant culture in research. This study was meant to provide a rich description of phenomena that may not have been fairly reported historically.

Although constant vigilance and a willingness to question her own reactions helped in maintaining an open-minded perspective, key informants were beneficial in assisting the researcher in questioning her beliefs and reactions and in reminding her of areas where she may have been swayed by the current literature. Additionally, as mentioned in the previous section, memoing was particularly useful when the researcher’s knowledge of the coparenting literature highlighted aspects of interviews that fit within that literature. In suspending judgment, the researcher was able to allow participants to define their coparenting relationship both as it fit within the dominant literature, as well as how it differed.

Using feminist methodologies requires researchers to acknowledge how their identities and locations within structures of power influence their choice of research

questions, their methodologies, the interactions between themselves and their participants. In the process of recruitment and data collection, the researcher's experiences were important in understanding findings from this study. The investigator's location within the structures of power played a significant role in how prospective participants may have felt toward volunteering for this study, and their willingness to share their experiences during the interviews. As a white, middle-class, graduate student, the researcher had access to power that participants did not. Participants were all members of the minority culture and were low-income. Most participants either had not finished high school, or had finished high school, but had no further education. Some participants required help in reading the consent forms and survey, and few had access to adequate employment opportunities. Additionally, these couples may have felt that they did not meet dominant cultural norms in terms of cohabitation, marriage and parenting. These differences between investigator and participants led to complications in the recruitment process. It was difficult to find ways to inform potential participants of the study, and the researcher recognized that couples might feel distrust and hesitate to risk joining. Not only were class and race differences present in the interviews, differences in gender were also present. For all interviews, the mother was the person who contacted the investigator. During the initial moments of most interviews, fathers were silent. As the researcher explained the study and told couples about her desire to give them a voice in the literature, the fathers began to talk about their experiences. The researcher's sensitivity to issues of power, and her experiences as a therapist working with diverse family systems may have helped to alleviate some of the participant's concerns.

Sampling Procedures

Unlike the sampling done in quantitative investigations, theoretical sampling cannot be planned before beginning a grounded theory study. The specific sampling decisions evolve during the research process itself (Straus & Corbin, 1998, p. 215). During initial data collection, when the main categories are emerging, a full 'deep' coverage of the data is important. Later, theoretical sampling requires only collecting data on categories, for the development of properties and propositions. The criterion for judging when to stop theoretical sampling is the category or theory's 'theoretical saturation'. Glaser and Strauss define theoretical saturation as the time when no new or relevant data are emerging, categories are well developed, and the relationships among categories are well established and validated (1998, p. 212).

For this study, initial participants were selected using a purposive sampling "open" technique (Straus & Corbin, 1998) in which participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Participants must identify as African American
- Participants must be jointly, biologically related to at least one child who is between the ages 1 and 3.
- Both parents must agree that a coparental relationship exists between them.
- Both parents must be available and agree to participate in an interview where both were present.

It was originally proposed that participants would be recruited from the Michigan State University Extension (MSUE), Building Strong Families (BSF) programs serving unmarried parents with children aged prenatal through three years of age of African

American, Latino and Caucasian descent. However, the study's researcher moved to central New York, and arranging interviews across a long distance became unrealistic. Therefore, community agencies that serve populations similar to those at BSF were contacted in the researcher's new community. All participating agencies were found within the People's Equal Action and Community Effort, Inc. (P.E.A.C.E., Inc.) organization. P.E.A.C.E., Inc. provides programs and services throughout the community. Although many programs were contacted within P.E.A.C.E., Inc., three served populations that met this studies criterion: Early Head Start, Head Start, and the Family Resource Centers.

These programs serve a significant number of African American parents (50%) and requirements for receiving services include meeting federal poverty guidelines. Families were informed of the option to participate through flyers either posted in P.E.A.C.E. building entryways or sent home in student folders. Interested parents contacted the researcher by phone for information and to arrange time for interviews. Upon completion of the interview, families received two fifteen-dollar gift certificates to local stores. Criteria for inclusion to the study required that parents did not live together, and therefore it was thought that two gift certificates would offer participants options for dividing the incentive between households.

Originally, BSF staff were proposed to be key informants, as they were members of the proposed population communities. Within the new community, key informants included the director of one of the family resource centers, the leader of a men's involvement group from that center, and a mother from the community that volunteered to be interviewed even though she did not meet the criteria. These key informants were

invaluable to the validity of this research. Not only did key informants assist the researcher in becoming familiar with the new community and in posting flyers within that community, they also inspired, questioned and helped focus the researcher's thoughts.

In accordance with the Michigan State University's University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects protocol, measures were taken to protect participants. All participants signed informed consents, which explained the purpose of the study, the requirements of confidentiality, that participation was voluntary, and contact information for questions regarding the study. All data including audiotapes, field notes and memos were locked in a file cabinet in a locked office where only the investigator had access.

Data Collection Procedures

Using a qualitative grounded theory approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews based on areas of inquiry (see Table 1.1). To make participants as comfortable as possible, participants were able to choose to have interviews take place either in their homes, or at the P.E.A.C.E., Inc., buildings within their community. All participants chose to be interviewed in the home of the mother of the couple's child. Participants were interviewed conjointly, and all participants declined the offer for babysitting services. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed by the primary researcher.

Couples were asked to be interviewed conjointly. It was recognized that interviews of individuals might give different results than conjoint interviews. The decision to interview conjointly was made because the coparenting relationship *is* a relationship. As such, interactions between parents were seen as important in supporting

the data gained in the interviews. Impressions of interactions between parents were noted in field notes. The investigator's experiences both as research interviewer and family therapist assisted her in recognizing pertinent interactions between parents. Interviews were audio taped then transcribed by the investigator, and the investigator recorded field notes and memos during and after the interviews to assist in orientation to the emerging theory. Subsequent interviews were directed by information obtained in previous interviews. As mentioned above, when main categories were emerging, a full 'deep' coverage of the data was important. Afterward, theoretical sampling required only collecting data on categories, for the development of properties and propositions.

Research Questions and Areas of Inquiry

Grounded theory methodology calls for flexibility and reflexivity within the research process. Therefore, to allow for constant comparisons between the data and the research process, areas of inquiry that have been derived from the study's conceptual and theoretical framework are suggested below in Table 3.1. Areas of inquiry were used to frame interviews, but also allowed the researcher to alter and add questions for relevance to emerging data.

Table 3.1: Theoretical Map and Research Questions and Areas of Inquiry

Theory	Conceptual	Research Questions	Areas of Inquiry
Human Ecology Theory	Individual Influences	How do individual factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners?	Personality, Health, Beliefs regarding opportunities and limitations within society, Beliefs about parenting
	Microsystem Influences	How do microsystem factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners?	Household structure, Relationship with child, influence of child, Extended family
	Mesosystem Influences	How do mesosystem factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners?	Coparenting Relationship-decision-making, support/undermining behaviors, Power Struggles/conflict management
	Exosystem Influences	How do exosystem factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners?	Job availability, Partner's extended family,
	Macrosystem Influences	How do macrosystem factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners?	Poverty, Racism, Laws, Cultural beliefs about parenting, Community structures, (safety, support, resources), Daycare availability and quality
	Chronosystem Influences	How do chronosystem factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners?	Social-historical setting, and events within partners' lives, Child development
Multiracial Feminist Theory	Relationality	How do differences in location within structures of power influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners?	Opportunities, Constraints within society, How it is different from other groups who are situated with more power in society
	Structure and Representation	How does the structure of power and the meanings individual have for these influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners?	Beliefs about "parenthood/motherhood/fatherhood", Beliefs about opportunities and effects of those opportunities (or lack of)
	Power	How does the role of power in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners influence the coparental relationship?	Ideal and real division of labor, Reasons for division, External power-perceptions of oppression, Actions used to cope

Data Analysis Procedures

Using LaRossa's (2005) interpretation of Grounded Theory Method's coding, three phases of coding were used in data analysis: Open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In open coding, the concept-indicator model uses constant comparison to identify concepts that are associated with words or phrases within the data. LaRossa suggests, "while coding an indicator for a concept, one compares that indicator with previous indicators that have been coded in the same way" (p. 841). A concept is considered theoretically saturated when new indicators do not yield more understanding about that concept. In this phase of analysis, 60 codes were identified.

The second phase of coding is axial coding, which consists of creating categories and subcategories (LaRossa, 2005) based on properties (i.e., characteristics of a category) and dimensions (i.e., location of a category along a continuum). Axial coding is important in the investigation of processes, or as LaRossa quotes "investigation of causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances, and conditions" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990a, p. 153 as cited in LaRossa, 2005). In the second phase of coding the data, the original 60 codes were narrowed down to 23 categories of codes.

The final phase of analysis was selective coding, which refers to the process of outlining a theoretical schema of the phenomena under study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Selective coding consists of selecting the core variables that tell the main story and most accurately described the participants' experiences (LaRossa, 2005). In this phase, the 23 categories of codes were further reduced by determining which theoretical concept it was related to. Table 3.2 presents how key themes were related to research theory and questions.

Table 3.2: Theoretical Map and Research Questions and Key Themes

Theory	Conceptual	Research Questions	Key Themes
Human Ecology Theory	Individual Influences	How do individual factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners?	Individual Beliefs and Attitudes, Individual Personality Traits
	Microsystem Influences	How do microsystem factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners?	Child Influences, Extended Family Support, Extended Family Influences
	Mesosystem Influences	How do mesosystem factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners?	Coparental Solidarity, Coparenting Support, Coparenting Undermining, Shared Parenting
	Exosystem Influences	How do exosystem factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners?	Other Partner's Extended Family, Employment
	Macrosystem Influences	How do macrosystem factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners?	Cultural Beliefs, Community
	Chronosystem Influences	How do chronosystem factors influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners?	Child Characteristics-Developmental, Influence of Experience
Multiracial Feminist Theory	Relationality	How do differences in location within structures of power influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners?	Community Resources, Childhood Experiences-Wanting Something Different
	Structure and Representation	How does the structure of power and the meanings individual have for these influence the coparental relationship in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners?	Discipline, Child's Interest Foremost, Family of Origin Influences
	Power	How does the role of power in unmarried, non-cohabitating parenting partners influence the coparental relationship?	Division of Labor –Style, Extended Family Support, Determination to Have Father Present

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the primary findings of this study. Included in this chapter will be a summary of the sample demographics, followed by a presentation of the primary findings. To assist in presenting clear findings, results are organized in association with the related research question. It should be noted that in using both Human Ecology Theory and a Multiracial Feminist perspective, overlap in themes were expected because experiences of oppression may occur within the layers of systems in which individuals are embedded.

Sample Demographics

At the beginning of this study, it was noted that unmarried African American fathers' voices were missing from much of the coparenting literature. To alter this situation, this study proposed to interview both the mother and the father of their biological child. The hope was to give both fathers and mothers a voice in this description. Despite a somewhat open definition of the relationship between the biological parents recruited for this study, most of the couples in this study were in committed, romantic relationships. Of the six participating couples interviewed for this study, only one couple no longer maintained a romantic relationship.

Because one of the criteria for participation required that both the mother and father be present during the interview, 50% of the sample was female and 50% of the sample was male. Participants' age ranged from 19 to 38, with a mean age of 26.5. Moms' mean age was 27 and Dads' mean age was 26. Mothers had between 1 and 10 biological children, fathers had between 1 and 3 biological children. Five of the six

couples had one child together; one couple had two children together. All children related biologically to the couples were between the ages of three months and three years.

Eighty percent of participants reported household incomes in the range of \$10,000 or less, twenty percent reported an income in the range between \$10,000 and \$20,000. One of the mothers and two of the fathers were employed full time. One father was employed part-time, and five mothers and three fathers were unemployed. Two mothers and two fathers had not finished their high school degree. Three mothers and three fathers had either received their high school degree or their GED. One mother and one father had completed some college courses. None of this sample had completed a college degree. When asked how many people live in their household, mothers' answers ranged from two to six, and fathers' answers ranged from two to five. Table 4.1 presents a summary of individual demographic variables with the pseudonyms chosen for each participant.

Table 4.1: Summary of Demographic Variables

Pseudonym	Age	Number of Children	Age of Target Child	Employment	Education	Number in Household	Income
Aaron	25	3	1	Full	> HS	4	0 to \$10,000
Keisha	20	1	1	Unemp	> HS	2	0 to \$10,000
Jamis	37	2	2	Part	Some College	3	0 to \$10,000
Crystal	38	1	2	Full	HS/GED	2	\$15,000 to \$20,000
Jacob	19	2	0.5	Full	HS/GED	4	0 to \$10,000
Jessica	19	1	0.5	Unemp	HS/GED	2	0 to \$10,000
Terrel	30	2	2 and .75	Unemp	> HS	5	0 to \$10,000
Nichelle	37	10	2 and .75	Unemp	> HS	6	\$10,000 to \$15,000
William	23	1	2	Unemp	HS/GED	2	0 to \$10,000
Latanya	26	3	2	Unemp	HS/GED	4	0 to \$10,000
Tyson	22	1	0.25	Unemp	HS/GED	4	0 to \$10,000
Noreen	22	3	0.25	Unemp	Some College	4	0 to \$10,000

Research Question 1: Influence of Individual Factors

It was expected that individual factors like personality, emotional stability, and physical and mental health would influence the coparental relationship (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). One theme that was particularly important in the interviews with the participants of this study, included individuals' beliefs or attitudes toward raising their child.

Individual Beliefs and Attitudes

The theme that the parents were working hard to do what was best for their child was heard at some point within all interviews. For example, Jamis stated,

Jamis: "... everyday, you know, you gotta like do the best for her. We work hard and you got to do the best you can. We work toward perfection, but there isn't perfection. You need to be able to accept that you can't be the perfect parent, you need to be able to forgive yourself daily...Daily!"

Related to this, Tyson's quote shows how the men in this sample believed that they should be available for their children. As he is talking about the father of Noreen's other two children, he states,

Tyson: "Yeah, well see, I don't see how a man wouldn't want to be involved with their kid's life, like I just can't like picture me like walking out on my daughter, like I don't understand the other kids' father, like that just don't make sense..."

Although none of the parents lived together in this study, five of the couples maintained a romantic relationship. While the couples in this study had varying reasons for not living together, all five couples expressed a desire to live together. For example, Terrel and Nichelle have two children together. Terrel expressed being torn between living with his mother who is caring for his father with Alzheimer and nieces and nephews, and being with Nichelle and their children. When I asked this couple what they would like to be different about their coparenting relationship this is how they responded:

Terrel: Well, I think that because my parents need me so much, I have to be there, so I'm always coming and going...I can't be here like I'd like to be...

Nichelle: I'd just like for us to be like, to be together, be in the household together...live together

Individual Personality Traits

Couples also talked about individual personality traits that influenced their coparenting relationship. Jessica and Jacob talk about how they work together as a couple, and how their personalities influence handling difficult times in their coparenting when I ask what was the best part of their coparental relationship.

Jessica: "Laughing...he helps keep things light, you know, like it may be really serious, but he makes everything fun, maybe even sometimes when it shouldn't be. It doesn't matter what kind of situation it is, he makes it fun.

Jacob: "Yeah and she keeps it balanced. But, you know, when it comes down to the serious stuff, I show my serious side. I mean, I've learned

that life is hard, and taking life too serious, just kills, you might as well enjoy yourself.

Talbot and McHale (2004) suggest that a father's ability to be flexible, and a mother's self-control contributes to successful coparenting. This is seen in the following example where Jacob and Jessica talk about times right after their child was born:

Jacob: Um, we had to fall, um a lot, um like literally hard on our asses, through my difficulties and through hers, before we could become real parents, we had to fall. I mean once we fell and got picked up off our asses, we saw the light and what could have happened, we was like...this can't happen no more. We were already doing the parenting thing, but we wasn't being the parents that we need to be and so we had to fall hard, hit our heads, and come to terms with it.

Dyane: So are you saying the hardships of what you had to endure really kicked you, or are you saying like your choices caused the falls that ...

Jessica: Our choices.

Jacob: yea, our choices mostly....cause I mean, the choices cause the hardships, so kind of it was both, you know. I mean, not all of it, cause like some was like just not doing things right, but other parts was like her being sick...

Research Question 2: Influence of Microsystem Factors

In this study, it was conceptualized that two microsystems, the mother's and the father's, would be interacting within the coparental relationship. Although it could be considered that the interaction between these two parents is one microsystem (the

proximal processes between individuals concerned for a child), for this study, the coparental interactions will be discussed in the mesosystem section. Within the microsystem, it was expected that factors within this system such as the structure of the household (number of members, relationships with other members, roles of those members) would have a direct influence on the individual parent, and an indirect influence on the coparenting relationship.

Themes representing this system included child characteristics, extended family support, and extended family influences. It is recognized that extended family support and influences may fit into many systems. In families where two individuals are working together to raise their child from different households, the other partner's extended family may or may not be a part of that individual's microsystem. For example, a father may be living with his parents while coparenting with a mother who lives in an apartment with her children. In this case, the mother may or may not have contact with the father's parents. Additionally, because he lives with them, the father may be involved in proximal processes with them which would in turn influence how he interacts with the mother of his child. However, in this study's interviews, family of origin influences were often discussed in terms of how an individual related to his or her family of origin, therefore, it will be discussed in this section.

Child Influences

Although themes from the interviews did not reflect a focus on the structure of the household, the child's influence on the parental relationship resounded. One interesting note is that when describing their child, all couples used words like busy, wild, or

energetic. Crystal and Jamis discussed how their daughter's personality influenced how they coparented:

Jamis: Well, honestly, I mean, I didn't really even want a break necessarily, but honestly, once Crystal got home, Shay didn't want me anymore, she wanted her mother! Once her mother walked through the door, Shay turned from this sweet baby, taking it easy, just cooling out, like her father, to this spazzed out baby ... like her mother!

Crystal: ...and I have issues with discipline, I need to stop and let him carry out what he was doing, you know. Cause she'll have a tendency to come and say, like when she has a time out you know, she'll come and say, "Mommy, Mommy" and I have a tendency you know...(to intervene)

Parents also discussed how their child's gender influenced how they coparented.

In the following piece, Tyson and Noreen discuss Tyson's apprehension in parenting a girl and Noreen's frustration when I asked what they would like to be different in their coparenting relationship:

Tyson: I think like change like, I wish I could like teach, like it is so hard like I already did what I could do, cause it's hard to teach girls when you don't, like, when you a man, like I can't teach them to be a woman, like I don't know how sometimes to, like... you know like I'm doing the best I can...

Noreen: It'll be years before they learn how to be a woman...

Tyson: but like things like now, I can't break it down for them, cuz I'm like a man you know...

Extended Family Support

Couples also talked about the support they received from their extended family. It was expected that extended family support would play an important role in these families lives. However, the coparents generally downplayed extended family involvement in parenting and focused on their relationship as parenting partners. For example, when asked if there were others who helped in parenting their daughter, Keisha stated, “Uh, not really, I mean, I get help financially from my mother, but as far as parenting, it’s me and him.”

Jessica also mentioned financial help from extended family:

Jessica: My aunt is ... in the beginning, she kind of didn’t want too much to do with the situation, but she came out and she knows Jacob now, and she’s been the biggest help with everything. She,...anything I can’t afford for her, she gets it. Anything Chanelle wants, Chanelle gets. She’s been a really big help, and his mother, we’ve had our difficulties, but we’ve come to terms, and she helps.

Tyson highlighted areas where his family assisted the couple in multiple ways:

Tyson: Well like sometimes on the weekends if we want to go out to dinner or go catch a movie or something, they’ll watch them for us, sometimes they’ll watch them overnight for us. My mother brings them to church every Sunday; she’s supposed to be getting her first baptism; she’s supposed to do that real soon. They go to church with my mom...they buy them toys, everything...all this stuff comes from them...

The theme that came through in these interviews was that although extended family was important and they appreciated their help, these couples were coparenting their child together and did not consider other family members as coparents. Crystal and Jamis express this well in the following excerpt when I asked them if there were others who helped them coparent:

Crystal: um not, I wouldn't really say coparent, I mean his parents are really good about helping out like if we can't get to her school to pick her up or something, they are more than willing to help out, but as far as like parenting, it's just us.

Dyane: So when I use the word "coparenting" that really fits you two...

Crystal: yeah

Jamis: I don't think me and Crystal would have it any other way...

Crystal: No

Jamis: If I think, that like if you interfered too much, we'd take our child and run!

Crystal: yeah (laughing)

Extended Family Influences

Extended family influence was also considered a microsystemic factor in this study. Three subthemes emerged from the data regarding influences from participant's extended family. These themes included learning to coparent from parents, bad childhood/wanting to do something different, and strong female figure.

When asked what they thought had influenced their coparental relationship to be the way it was, some individuals reported that the fact that their parents had stayed together had influenced them. Others reported that they had negative memories from their childhood that they did not want to repeat. Noreen's story is a good example of learning from positive parental role models when she states,

Noreen: Well, my parents, like they were always there, like my parents got married when I was 4, and I had both of them in the home, that's why I try to keep us together, cause you know, I want my kids to have a father.

Others, like Aaron, reported not having a father around during his childhood, and wanting to provide something different for his daughter. He states, "...like I said, you know, I mean, I knew what it was like to not have a father figure around, and I wanted my kids to have me around." Other participants talked about how negative experiences in their childhood influenced them to want to do something better. For example, Jessica talked about how negative events in her childhood influenced how she talked to Jacob about discipline. She stated,

Jessica: Well, at first, it was a big argument. I told him if you ever put your hand on my child, I will kill you! And I really meant that cause I really had a very bad childhood and she will not go through that!

Nichelle echoes this when she stated, "Well I think that...I was raised strict...real strict. But I always said that when I had kids, I wouldn't be that strict, like my parents was on me..."

Finally, the theme of 'strong female' permeated the interviews. Sometimes, participants talked about a female in their extended family, usually either their mother or grandmother who "did everything". Aaron states, "...when I was growing up, it was really your mother, or your grandmother, it really wasn't a mother and father in a household together, working together... " When he was asked what or who had influenced how he was coparenting, Aaron replied,

Aaron: ... I guess I would say, my mother, well, my mother and my father, cause my father was never around, so I knew how that felt, not to have that father figure in your life. My mother, she's always been there, she helps me, she do what she can do, so...that's pretty much it."

Tyson reflected on the strength of his grandmother when he stated, "I lived with my grandma since I was 4 until I turned 18, and like I can't teach a girl how to become a woman, but like my grandmother taught me everything about how to become a man."

Research Question 3: Influence of Mesosystem Factors

As a system that contains the linkages between systems, the mesosystem was of particular interest in this study. It was conceptualized that the coparenting relationship is positioned within the mesosystem, as it is the system where both partners' systems come together. Four important themes emerged from the data and were similar to, but not exactly the same as, Van Egeren and Hawkins' (2004) framework of coparenting. These themes include coparental solidarity, coparenting support, coparental undermining, and shared parenting. Subthemes also emerged within these categories and will be discussed further in this section.

Coparental Solidarity

Coparental solidarity, as defined by Van Egeren and Hawkins (2004) includes overt behaviors of affect (expressed warmth), developmental aspects (i.e., growing together), and covert behaviors of cohesion (reinforcing partners place in the parenting alliance when that partner is not around). Within the category of coparental solidarity, four subthemes emerged which included expressions of growing together/unity, expressed appreciation for the other coparent, determination to have the father present in the children's lives, and a desire to live together.

In every interview, these couples spoke very clearly about how they were growing together and making a team unit. Terrel stated,

Terrel: Yeah, ya know it takes a lot...ya gotta feel like you're helping...it takes more than just one...it needs two people! I can talk to her, and she helps me, cause ya know, she has a lot more experience in doing this than me...

When I asked Keisha and Aaron what their favorite part of their relationship was, Keisha stated, "... um we seem to be bonding more." Because I was not sure if she meant the baby or Aaron, I asked her to clarify. She replied, "Aaron, well both really, but bonding with Aaron." Keisha was expressing how she felt that she and Aaron were growing together since the birth of their daughter.

These couples also expressed appreciation for the other, both in parenting, and in their support. Aaron stated that he enjoyed watching Keisha be a mother, and Jamis talked about the aspects of Crystal's parenting that he appreciated when he stated, "I think I kind of jump the gun on things sometimes; I don't sit back and think about things

as much as Crystal does.” As Crystal spoke about Jamis, I noticed that she was expressing her feelings about him. When I asked her if that was what I was hearing, she replied, “Oh absolutely, absolutely, I have the utmost respect for Jamis, you know?”

One theme that fell under the category of coparenting solidarity, but was not present in married couples was the determination to have father present and the difficulty that comes with not having the father living in the house with the children. These families talked about how important they felt the father’s presence was in the lives of their children. Some fathers talked about changes they made in their interactions with the mother of their children that would insure that they were present. Jamis states,

James: From the time Shay was born, I was determined to do everything possible to make sure I’m there for her...for Shay...I know I’m gonna always be there. If it’s me having to back out of an argument that I know I may be right about just to keep the peace, I will do that. If it’s me just saying...whatever is best, that’s what I’m gonna do to make sure I’m here!

Additionally, Crystal talked about her belief that their daughter needed to have her father in her life when she stated,

Crystal: I knew I wanted him to be a part of Shay’s life...you go through certain stages especially as a girl, like if your dad’s not around, you kind of go astray, you know, those awkward years? So you know, I would never want any kind of separation between the two.

When Noreen was asked what she would like to be different in her relationship with Tyson, she responds, “...um I just want him to be more involved, you know, it’s hard with him not living here, and you know sometimes I just would like more help.” As

they spoke to me about this, Tyson took Noreen's hand and smiled at her. Tyson was quoted earlier as saying,

Tyson: ... I don't see how a man wouldn't want to be involved with their kid's life, like I just can't like picture me like walking out on my daughter, like I don't understand the other kids' father, like that just don't make sense...

Of all the fathers interviewed, Tyson most often showed his frustration with not being able to be present on a daily basis.

Coparenting Support

In Van Egeren and Hawkins' (2004) framework, coparenting support is described as behaviors from one's partner that encourages accomplishing parenting objectives. Although this study was not structured as an observation setting, it was interesting to note that these couples repeatedly supported each other in sometimes very subtle ways. One observation that occurred consistently within the field notes was that the children seemed to transfer between parents very easily. Frequently, when I walked in the door at the beginning of the interview, the father was feeding the child, changing a diaper, or playing with the child. Subsequently, during the interview, the child (or children) would transfer back and forth between the mother and father's laps. The partner not engaged with the child often assisted in retrieving items for the parent holding the child. This was usually done so casually that had I not been looking for it, I would not have noticed it.

These parents also spoke about how they were reinforcing each other's presence within the coparental relationship. As Crystal spoke of her difficulty in disciplining their daughter, she talked about how Jamis always backed her up: She states, "He never says a

word when I have to do it, you know? When I have to give her time out, he never, ya know... ” Jacob spoke of the importance of the coparenting relationship for him and Jessica. He states,

Jacob: I mean, you need somebody by your side, that coparent, or anybody. Just say you had a rough day with the baby, and you need somebody to comfort you...and you don't have that cause that other, that significant other is not here with you, cause of whatever situation it may have been, or how every one else sees it.

Even when the couple was not longer in a romantic relationship, as in Latanya and William's relationship, they still spoke of reinforcing the other's presence in parenting. These coparents talked about how hard it was to work together when they did not have a relationship. When asked how they work out disagreements, this is how they answered:

Latanya: Um, (laugh) well usually we yell about it a bit at first, but you know, it used to be worse, but now, I don't know, my girls, they don't see their dad, and I want Tyrell to have his dad, you know...um so, I try to let some things go, you know?

William: yeah, um, we just talk it out, and try to come to a compromise. I really hadn't thought of it, but now that I hear her say it, I think Latanya really supports me, um you know, um being in Tyrell's life.

Coparenting Undermining

Coparenting undermining is described as overt or covert behaviors of one parent that interfere with the other parent accomplishing a parenting goal. Within the literature,

undermining behaviors have included expressions of criticism, disrespect, or undercutting a partners parenting decisions or behaviors (Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995). Most often, couples discussed how they came to terms with their disagreements. Many couples discussed problem-solving issues in conjunction with their disagreements, and therefore, the theme of problem solving is represented in this section. In the following excerpt, Crystal and Jamis spoke of how they worked through their disagreement on potty training issues:

Jamis: But in certain situations you know, like we had a problem with the potty training we had different views on how you're supposed to do it. I wanted her to just sit there until she went. Crystal was just more or less, just let her go when she wants to...so we came up with ...every half an hour, we came up with that together.

Dyane: So you guys came up with a compromise then?

Jamis: (laugh) yeah, well we came up with that to pacify me, cause I was the only one taking her (laughing)

Crystal: He is the more strict, stick to it, I'm the more lax one.

Crystal: Yeah, like it's a little tedious for a few days, but...

Jamis: yeah, I may not talk to her for a bit, but (laughing)

Crystal: Yeah, he's good for that one...he wants his own way (laughing)

Jamis: Well, if you don't have anything nice to say, you don't say anything at all, that way you don't hurt any feelings, and you stay out of trouble!(All laugh)

Crystal: Ah, right! Right, that's your theory.

Jamis: Yeah, what's your theory?

Crystal: Cut it out!!! Just knock it off, pay attention to what we're doing!

Sometimes, we just get off the beaten path, and it becomes a tug-a-war, you know?

Latanya and William talked about how they struggled with disagreements over discipline:

Latanya: yeah, like sometimes when I think he shouldn't give Tyrell something, or he shouldn't have something, then I think William is too lenient. I think I'm more strict than William, but you know I'm here every day, and so...you know, it's like, he can afford to play and let Tyrell get away with things because he gets to leave.

William: yeah, but that doesn't mean I don't know anything. I mean you know he's my son too, so I want to have some say.

Although each couple spoke of ways that they were aware of undermining each other, they also spoke of how they tried to make sure they worked out their problems.

Crystal and Jamis were most dynamic in their discussion of specific disagreements; however, they were also the most articulate in how they worked out their problems.

Crystal states, "...until I can sit down and say like maybe he's right, or vice versa, and it's not smooth by any means (laughing) but you know its...like he might say I want this, that or whatever, or something like that, and I'll be like well, you need to think about this or that, you know, like I'll give him a more outside view on it."

Jacob also talked about how he and Jessica solved problems. He states, “No, you know, we, when we disagree on something, you know, um its like, we have to talk about it, cause you know, that’s where you get into trouble, if you don’t talk about things.”

Noreen and Tyson downplayed any disagreement they may have had by talking about their desire to support each other:

Tyson: Not really, we really just try to be there for each other you know...we don’t really argue when it come to the baby, not really, you know...I mean, like it’s not perfect, we have our own little separate arguments but not really about the baby, we there for each other, we support each other 100 percent. We don’t really argue about the baby...the only thing like we might like argue about it maybe like her diaper size like I remember having a disagreement about that, but um not really...

Noreen: Yeah, I think we pretty much agree...I mean, ya know, we talk about things if I do something and he wants to do it differently, I mean, like we don’t always completely agree, but it’s never a big deal, we just talk about it, and move on ya know...

Shared Parenting

Finally, the concept of shared parenting included discussions regarding the division of childcare responsibilities. It was found that two subthemes emerged within this concept, including the fact that ultimate responsibility lay with they mothers, and fathers helped out and a subtheme unique to families in which the parents do not live together which reflected the idea that the father became involved in child care labor as a way of making up for his absence.

Often couples talked about how they ‘just did’ what was needed in the house, and as mentioned earlier, it seemed that children were as comfortable with going to their fathers as their mothers. Mothers also asserted that they held the main responsibility for the child, although they were grateful for the fathers’ willingness to help. When asked how the coparents decided who did what with their child, Crystal states,

Crystal: Um you know, I just want you to know, that kind of responsibility is put on to the mother, like if it wasn’t convenient to them, you know, you’re the mother, just that kind of thinking stuff, you know?

But not too bad, not really, it really was never an issue really.

Noreen also expresses her wish that Tyson would be more involved. She states, “...I just want him to be more involved, you know, um it’s hard with him not living here, and you know sometimes I just would like more help...”

Finally, these coparents talked about how the fathers worked to make up for times when they are not with their children. Aaron spoke about why he became involved with the child care responsibilities when he states, “I just do it, cause I know she had to do it all week so I try to basically you know watch the baby, wash the dishes, stuff like that...”

Research Question 4: Influence of Exosystem Factors

The exosystem includes those environments that the individual does not participate in, but is influential in that individual’s life. As mentioned earlier, variables within this system fluctuate depending upon the unit of analysis. In African American, low-income families where parents are working together to raise a child, but do not live together, one parent may or may not be involved with the extended family of the other partner. However, for clarity, the ‘other partner’s extended family’ was placed within the

exosystem for this study, with the understanding that individuals may or may not have close ties to their partner's extended family. As mentioned earlier, extended family support and influence was placed within the microsystem.

Other Partner's Extended Family

Within the exosystem, extended family resources often offered alternative residence options for these couples. For example, in Terrell's case, his responsibilities to his extended family preclude him from spending as much time with Nichelle as he would like. He states,

Terrell: Well, I live with my mom and my dad. My mom is raising my little sister and niece and nephew. I'm the only one who helps her. I want my sister to stay in school, not do what I did...I dropped out of school in 10th grade. I don't want her doing that. And my dad has...(Alzheimer's) ...and my mom needs my help. But I am here everyday too. I have to help.

Although these couples generally discussed such options in positive terms, where they saw their responsibilities to the extended family as important, it also had negative consequences on the living arrangements for the coparents.

In Jamis and Crystal's case, the option for Jamis to live with his parents has preserved the option for their daughter to receive services. When asked to describe their living arrangements, Jamis replies:

Jamis: Well, quite honestly, together, we uh, services we needed for our daughter, um we couldn't get them if we were together. Being and this is the truth, they wouldn't allow her speech and things, we'd be over the

income eligibility requirements so...we've had to have separate households, and luckily I can stay with my parents and still come down every day like I want to...

Employment

Additionally, in each of these families at least one partner was unemployed. For those partners working either part or full-time, themes emerged showing that their place of work played an important role in the coparental relationship. Having to work long hours, or working night shifts has played a significant role in Aaron and Keisha's relationship. Although Aaron lives in a separate residence with his son, he discusses the stress of working the night shift. He states,

Aaron: When I come over, like on the weekends, like today, cause I work nights, when I go home to my son, I gotta get up early and get him ready for school and everything like that so...ya know, 'cept when I come here, I get a break, cause we work together.

In Jamis and Crystal's relationship, Jamis is currently unemployed and Crystal works full-time. In the following excerpt, they discuss how they have managed to find a schedule that works for them:

Crystal: But you know, he's here every day, we take her to school together, he picks her up, cause I don't get through with work until after school, you know?

Dyane: Okay, so, how do you guys determine who does what in taking care of Shay?

Jamis: Our schedule determines that, you know, Crystal has to work, I'm unfortunately out of work right now, but basically, that's how we work things out now...

Crystal: Basically, yeah, who's available to be in the house, who's, you know...

Research Question 5: Influence of Macrosystem Factors

The macrosystem involves the broader culture and subcultures in which individuals live, including the society's values and customs, and influences the nature of interactions within the other levels. Two predominant themes emerged from the data that were associated with macrosystem factors. These included cultural beliefs, and community resources. Additionally, within the theme of cultural beliefs, two subthemes became apparent. These subthemes included the belief that a father figure is needed in children's lives, and men's gender roles within the family.

Cultural Beliefs

Interestingly, one theme that permeated all of the interviews in this study was that of the belief that a father figure is needed in children's lives. Underlying many of the participants' responses is the awareness that relationships between parents are precarious but that even if something were to happen where the couple no longer maintained a romantic relationship, the father-child relationship is crucial. For example, Keisha talks about how much she valued her relationship with her father, even though he didn't live in the same house with her as she was growing up:

Keisha: Well, I had my mother and father living in the same household until I was 3. They were never married, but they were together, my whole

life, they were on and off in a relationship together. After I was 3, they were apart and my mom had a house and he had a house, so I went with my dad every other weekend...I mean, like if that were to happen with Aaron and my relationship, I would, like, I would make sure he got her every other weekend or something like that.

Although William and Latanya are no longer romantically involved, William reports his desire to remain in his son's life. He states, "...I mean, he's my son, so I'm not going to let anyone else just raise him without my input you know. I mean, my dad wasn't around when I was growing up, and um I want to be involved." The participants expressed the belief that fathers were important in teaching their children. Jacob conveys this when he states, "Yea, I mean, there are so many things I want to instill in my child, I want to be there to teach her things."

Finally, Tyson reflects on his belief that Noreen and the girls needs him present:

Tyson: ... I don't like it that I can't live here, but I try to be here all the time, cause I know she needs, I know it's hard raising kids by yourself, kids need a father, and the kids look up to me and up to their grandmother, and they need that. They know that we're here, they can come to us...

Community

It was expected that elements in the community would be important in the development of the coparental relationship for the participants of this study. This became apparent in themes that emerged regarding how individuals perceived the community as being obstructive in them living together. As quoted earlier, Jamis talks about how community agencies would take away services for their daughter if they lived together:

Jamis: Well, quite honestly, together, we uh, services we needed for our daughter, um we couldn't get them if we were together. Being and this is the truth, they wouldn't allow her speech and things, we'd be over the income eligibility requirements so...we've had to have separate households, and luckily I can stay with my parents and still come down every day like I want to...

Jessica and Jacob also talk about how community agencies prevent them from living together. Although this couple did not want to go into detail, they suggest that an incident took place that they termed a misunderstanding. They discuss the results in the following quote:

Jessica: Because the community agency here is very ignorant...

Jacob: Cause, I mean, personally, if it were up to me, I'd live here all day, all night, sleep here, eat here, but I can't personally live here like I want to.

Finally, the participants talked about their desire for more support in the community. Noreen states,

Noreen: I feel like there isn't much support in the community, like Head Start is, my oldest goes to Head Start, but she's not learning much there, she's really smart, but like it offers her a place to go, and it's nice to have the time.

Additionally, at the end of the interview with Jessica and Jacob, I asked if there were things that they would like to add. They took that time to discuss the need for more programs for fathers:

Jessica: Um, I don't know if this is what you mean, I mean for like coparenting, but um, I think that there needs to be more programs for fathers. Like there are programs for mothers, but I don't think there are things out there in place for men...

Jacob: Yea, like she has this program to go to on Saturday, but what am I supposed to do? I can't go to a mom's group! They seem to think fathers don't want to have programs, but it's not true...

Research Question 6: Influence of Chronosystem Factors

Three main themes developed that fell in the category of Chronosystem factors. These themes included developmental aspects of the child, the influence of experience, and the transition to parenthood.

Child Characteristics Developmental

Most of the parents in this study talked about how things changed as their child grew. Keisha and Aaron discussed how their differences in ideas about discipline would become more of a concern, as their daughter got older. Keisha states, "I mean, when she gets older, there'll be things we disagree about, but not now." Nichelle, who had already parented teenagers, talked about the differences in parenting young children. She states,

Nichelle: When they get to be teenagers! It's not really that hard with these two (pause), well sometimes it's hard, but in a different way...sometimes when we tell her to sit down, she's up and down and can't sit still... (laugh) but when they get in to high school...!

Influence of Experience

Within the theme of influence of experience, two subthemes emerged which included learning from past parenting experiences, and learning from their coparent. In each of the couples in this study, one of the partners in each interview had older children with another person other than the coparent being interviewed. Additionally, in each interview the other partner had only the child(ren) between them. For example, Nichelle had 10 children, but only two of those children were Terrel's biological children. Terrel had no other children. Those parents who had older children spoke of how they had learned from their past parenting, and coparenting experience.

For example, Aaron states, "Actually, it's kind of better now cause like, I've got two others, but when I first had them, I was younger, I didn't know what I was doing." Not only do these participants talk about how they had learned from previous parenting experiences, they also spoke of how that experience taught them about coparenting. Jamis discusses how he is handling his coparenting relationship differently this time around:

Jamis: Right! That was a big part of it. I was brand new then, and I didn't know anything...17 years ago, I didn't know nothing!! When I had my first daughter, I was totally in the dark! It was...me and her mother broke up when...I think when she was three. From the time Shay was born, I was determined to do every thing possible to make sure I'm there for her...for Shay. So that in itself is the difference, I know I'm gonna always be there. If it's me having to back out of an argument that I know I may be right about just to keep the peace, I will do that. If it's me just

saying...what ever is best, that's what I'm gonna do to make sure I'm

here! So, that is the big difference

These individuals also spoke of learning from their current coparent. Throughout their interview, Keisha and Aaron talked about how Aaron's parenting experiences were beneficial to helping Keisha learn how to parent. She reinforces this as we talked about who had influenced her coparenting:

Keisha: I mean, she (Mom) was there for me, but I was doing it myself. I mean, he was there for me the most, like that's where I learned the most.

Dyane: So he really influenced you more than anyone else?

Keisha: Yeah, like he has the other two kids, so I'm learning from him, so...

Transition to Parenthood

Finally, couples discussed how becoming a parent had changed them personally and had changed their relationship. As Crystal and Jamis discuss the changes in their lives since the birth of their daughter, Jamis states, "... I love every minute of it, don't get me wrong...but that's the difference. It's structured me..." Tyson also explored how he had changed since his daughter was born when he states,

Tyson: yeah, it make me look at life different...like, I'm a man so I can't teach her things that I know, makes me try to see things from a woman's perspective, but I want to do things that are best for her, keep her going forward.

One theme that stood out in the interviews was how the couples' relationships had changed since the birth of their child. The loss of freedom was often mentioned. Jamis and Crystal state:

Jamis: We were talking about that the other night. When Shay came, it was like...Okay, gotta buckle down again!

Crystal: Before we could just pack up and do this and do that

Jamis: Right... We were like free spirits together.

Crystal: Now there's school...responsibilities.

Keisha also talked about how the stress of having a child changed her and Aaron's relationship:

Keisha: ...it's hard, um I mean, our relationship before she was born was great. I mean, I can't say it went downhill, but it's stressful, cause we do argue, I mean, that's any relationship, but we get through it, um it did change though, with so much stress with the baby, and the money and taking care of her and this and that, but it has changed, not too much, now that she's getting a little older, it's getting easier so...

Research Question 7: Locations within Structures of Power

It was expected that an individual's location within the intersections of inequality through race, class, and gender would influence not only the availability of opportunities and resources, but would also influence how relationships are maintained. African American parents are not only experiencing their location as minority status within the broader culture, but are also differently situated though gender.

In looking at this question, themes that depicted differences in locations between the individuals in the coparental relationship, and between the couple and dominant society were subtle. Couples did not roar out that they felt oppressed. What did come through was frustration; not only with their circumstances, but also with the community that they felt constrained them. Themes from the data that depict race, class, and gender inequalities included Community Resources, and Childhood Experiences-wanting something different.

Community Resources

In many of the interviews, the irony of feeling like the community believed that fathers should live with their children, but would not support these fathers doing so was noted. As Jamis and Crystal discuss the fact that if they lived together, their daughter would not receive the speech and language services she needed, Jamis states:

Jamis: You know, if things were different now, if we could get the services we needed, we'd be living together now. Unfortunately, that's not the case, and what's best for Shay, the services, is keeping us apart now, which is totally ironic, because you would think we should be together!

Couples talked not only about formal community resources, but also the structure of the area. Issues of safety permeated the interviews. For example, Tyson states:

Tyson: Like, I don't really like our circumstances, like, I would like to go someplace different, outside of this city and start new. But, like you just don't know what is going to happen, like, this city you know. I don't like it that I can't live here, but I try to be here all the time, cause I know she

needs, I know it's hard raising kids by yourself, kids need a father, and the kids look up to me and up to their grandmother, and they need that..."

When Crystal and Jamis discuss safety issues, they note that the area where Crystal and Shay live now is safer than their previous residence. Jamis explains,

Jamis: ...When we had to live down in town, now I had to live with her then, cause of the neighborhood we were in. It wasn't safe to be walking through the halls by themselves cause I know what type of people are down there!

They observe that the relative safety of Crystal's residence makes it okay for Jamis not to live with them, and therefore, Shay is able to receive the services she needs.

Tyson also discusses opportunities within the community. Without transportation, Tyson and Noreen struggle to find housing with sufficient room for them to live together. He states:

Tyson: ...I don't live here because, um there really isn't enough room for me to stay here. You know, um with the other two kids...um and then with the baby, there just isn't enough space... when we can get another apartment, more space you know, then we'd like to move together, someplace that wouldn't be so overcrowded, ya know, I mean, the kids need a lot of space...

Childhood Experiences-Wanting Something Different

Another theme that illustrated how the individual's in these families experienced the intersections of inequality was in expressing a desire for something better for their children. Although not specifically stated, these quotes display how these individuals

experienced subjugation within a system where they endure minority status. As Terrel spoke about his philosophy of discipline, he reveals a glance into his childhood. He states:

Terrel: Yes, that's how I was raised...strict! I know what the streets are like! I don't want these two making the same mistakes I did! I got kicked out of so many schools in Syracuse! I've got a learning disability, and if someone said anything about my learning disability, I beat them up! I want these guys to go all the way through school – do better than me! So, I will be strict!

This poignant statement reflects the pain he endured of not only growing up as a minority, but also with a learning disability. Jessica echoes this as she talks about the discipline she will not allow used on her daughter: She declares,

Jessica: Well, at first, it was a big argument. I told him if you ever put your hand on my child, I will kill you! And I really meant that cause I really had a very bad childhood and she will not go through that!

Many of the participants revealed that their father was not present in their lives, or were negative role models for them. In each interview, this theme was associated with wanting something better for their children. When asked who had influenced his style of coparenting, Aaron states:

Aaron: In my case, I guess I would say, my mother, well my mother and my father, cause my father was never around, so I knew how that felt, not to have that father figure in your life. My mother, she's always been there, she helps me, she do what she can do, so...that's pretty much it.

William also reflects these thoughts when he said, “Yeah, I mean, he’s my son, so I’m not going to let anyone else just raise him without my input you know. I mean, my dad wasn’t around when I was growing up, and um I want to be involved.” Finally, Tyson reveals how his relationship with his father influenced him. He states,

Tyson: Yeah, like I know my dad, like it’s just like, I lived with my dad one time, but like he was abusive, and like my grandmother come to get me and seen how I was like how he hit me, and she said like “I’m going to get you back home.”

When asked if this had influenced how he wanted to coparent, his response was,

Tyson: Yeah, well see, I don’t see how a man wouldn’t want to be involved with their kid’s life, like I just can’t like picture me like walking out on my daughter, like I don’t understand the other kids’ father, like that just don’t make sense...

Research Question 8: Structures of Power and Meanings

It was expected that the interaction of the experience of marginalization and the meaning of that marginalization would influence how African American coparenting partners navigate their relationship. Themes within this concept reflect how participants understood or made meaning of their interactions. These themes include issues of Discipline, individual beliefs and attitudes that place their Child’s Interest Foremost, Family of Origin Influences on beliefs about women’s roles in the family.

Discipline

As participants discussed issues of discipline, they often spoke about how their different philosophies were minor, with the sometimes-underlying awareness that what

was important was that they were working for the same end. These differences may reflect the differences in their positions within intersections of inequality, while also highlighting their common struggles as minorities. Terrel and Nichelle establish their unity while talking about their differences in discipline philosophies in the following:

Dyane: ...So, because you guys parent just a little differently, is that something that you sometimes disagree about?

Terrel: um no... I don't think so...

Nichelle: no, ya know, we both want the same thing for them...grow up...finish school...don't drop out...

Terrel: ...don't get kicked out...

Dyane: It sounds like that's something you guys have talked about...or how did you know that about each other?

Terrel: Yeah, we talk about it...but we both feel the same way about it, and I know that she wants the same thing for them...so...it's okay for her to do it differently.

However, although couples presented a united front, they also talked about their differences. In the following quote, Crystal and Jamis had been talking about how they deal with their disagreements about discipline. Crystal states:

Crystal: I know if we would disagree on something, he might suggest something and I would say like, no I don't want to do that (laugh) either he'll continue to do it until I come up with a different way...yeah that's pretty much, until I, you know, step in and do a different approach. That parts not easy, cause we do sometimes get like, I think this, well I think

that you know...and we both think we're both right. And until I can sit down and say like maybe he's right, or vice versa, and it's not smooth by any means (laughing) but you know its...He is the more strict, stick to it, I'm the more lax one.

As with Crystal and Jamis, the father's were often the strict parent, while the mothers considered themselves more lenient. Fathers often talked about the difficulties of life, the streets, or the consequences of not learning. For example, Jacob talks about his concern as he discusses disciplining their daughter as she gets older:

Jacob: ...and like if you don't go in when the teacher tells you to, then such and such happens, she needs to learn the consequences behind her actions. Not saying you have to be rough on her, cause like Jessica had, you know, that's like child abuse.

Finally, Keisha and Aaron talk about what they perceive will be their differences in discipline philosophy as their daughter gets older:

Keisha: Yeah, I'm more nervous about when she gets to be in her teens, ya know, like the staying out late, you know, cause like I want her to be able to grow up and have a boyfriend, he...no definitely not, if you're going on a date, I'm coming with you...so...I disagree. I want her to be able to go out and have fun, I mean, my parents let me...

Aaron: this is my thing...you gonna go out, I'm going with you (laughing)

Child's Interest Foremost

Like the Discipline theme, the theme of Child's Interest Foremost unites fathers and mothers. As Terrel was quoted as saying earlier, there was a pervasive impression

that regardless of the method, both parents were working to help their children survive in a difficult world. In Jamis' quote from the section on Coparental Solidarity, he states,

Jamis: From the time Shay was born, I was determined to do everything possible to make sure I'm there for her...for Shay...I know I'm gonna always be there. If it's me having to back out of an argument that I know I may be right about just to keep the peace, I will do that. If it's me just saying...whatever is best, that's what I'm gonna do to make sure I'm here!

William also worries about his son. Although he and Latanya are not together, they work together to do the best for their son. He comments, "Yeah, but I don't want him to, you know, get into trouble, I want him to grow up and you know, do better. So, I don't know, I think I'm strict with some things and not others."

Family of Origin Influences

One final theme that illustrated how the experience and meaning of marginality influenced their coparental relationship was that of Family of Origin Influences. In every interview, the theme of the strong female family member was present. As we talked about families and relationships, most participants selected a story about a mother, grandmother or aunt that they felt had deeply influenced their lives, and in particular, how they felt about parenting, and coparenting. As Aaron and Keisha talk about who influenced them, Aaron states, "...when I was growing up, it was really your mother, or your grandmother, it really wasn't a mother and father in a household together, working together...but I want that for my kids..." Tyson, who was so adamant about being involved in his daughter's life, states, "I lived with my grandma since I was 4 until I

turned 18, and like I can't teach a girl how to become a woman, but like my grandmother taught me everything about how to become a man."

Additionally, for participants who did have their fathers present in their lives, they still notice the strength of women in the family. Crystal states,

Crystal: Well, my dad was out of town a lot, I come from a family of 11 kids, he was a lineman. He worked out of town and so she did the everyday thing by herself. So, like I thought that was how it was, you know... you have to work out of town so I can see you on weekends. Now I think it is so much easier to have him around.

Research Question 9: Role of Power

Finally, how coparenting partners perceive ideal and real division of labor, reasons for that division, and how they cope with gender and racial inequalities was anticipated to influence the relationship they develop in parenting their child. Although couples talked about how they divided child-rearing tasks, what were particularly striking within this theme were the methods these couples used to cope with racial discrimination. It was anticipated that gender issues would be as apparent as racial issues; however, this was not found in these data. Three themes were particularly relevant for this question. Themes of Division of Labor-style, Extended Family Support, and Determination to have Father Present are represented in this section. Although many of these themes have been shown in previous sections, they are particularly pertinent when considering how couples negotiate issues of power and inequality.

Division of Labor –Style

When talking with the couples about how they decide who does what in terms of child related duties, most couples suggested that they “just do it”. This style of dividing child related tasks suggest that these couples have egalitarian relationships. For example, when I asked Tyson and Noreen how they decided who did what, this was their response:

Tyson: Well like it depends on who is there, like if her diaper needs changing and I’m holding her, then I change it...

Noreen: Yeah, like we both do whatever, it doesn’t matter who does it, it just needs to get done.

In addition to “just do it”, there was also an awareness that fathers who were less available because they did not live with the mother and child made up for that time when they were present. For example, Keisha and Aaron had been talking about how they both do work related to their daughter. However, they extended their explanation by adding:

Keisha: Well, because Aaron is only here on the weekends mostly, I do it all week, so when he comes here, I try to get the break, if it’s just to take a shower or stuff like that. I do it all week, so I ask him if he could help me on the weekends while he’s here.

Aaron: I just do it, cause I know she had to do it all week so I try to basically you know watch the baby, wash the dishes, stuff like that...

Extended Family Support

As mentioned earlier, these couples talked about how much they appreciated support from their extended family; however, they were also clear that they were parenting alone. For example, when Terrel and Nichelle were asked if there were others

that helped them coparent, Terrel replied, “ No...my mom helps, but I wouldn’t call her a coparent. If we have questions, or need help sometimes, she does, but ... not like that.” The pervasiveness of this theme suggests that it was important for these couples to let me know that they were parenting together, alone. It is possible that using an “us against the world” stance empowered these couples.

Determination to Have Father Present

Finally, these couples impressed upon me that it was important for them to continue having the father present in their child’s life. As Crystal discussed the influences of her family of origin, where her father was at work during the week, she states, “Yeah, I thought that was the way to do it, but yeah, it’s not, I need him here for me and for her.” Most often, individuals cited their own childhood as influencing why they believed having a father available was important. For example, Noreen states, “My parents, they were always there, they got married when I was 4, and I had both of them in the home, that’s why I try to keep us together, cause I want my kids to have a father.” Additionally, often fathers discussed steps they took to ensure that they remained in their children’s lives. For example, Jamis states,

Jamis: From the time Shay was born, I was determined to do every thing possible to make sure I’m there for her...for Shay. So that in itself is the difference, I know I’m gonna always be there. If it’s me having to back out of an argument that I know I may be right about just to keep the peace, I will do that. If it’s me just saying...what ever is best, that’s what I’m gonna do to make sure I’m here!

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This chapter will provide a discussion of the research findings and their theoretical, research and clinical implications. This chapter will also include a look at the limitations of this study, and finally a reflection from the author.

Reviewing the Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to understand the ecological factors that influence the coparenting relationship in African American families when biological parents are parenting together, but not living together. Additionally, a multicultural feminist perspective was used to explore how location within structures of power influences the coparental relationship for these families. The rationale behind this study was not to generalize to a larger population, but to begin understanding a relationship for a population that has hitherto been unexplored—specifically, to add the voices of fathers, particularly low-income, non-residential, African American fathers, into studies of the coparental relationship. As mentioned earlier, much of the research on coparenting in African American families has included information provided only by mothers. The implication of this information is that non-residential African American fathers may be difficult for researchers to access. This was found to be true in this study, and that experience will be explored further in subsequent sections.

Although frameworks for investigating the coparenting relationship are beginning to emerge in the literature, these have been based primarily on Caucasian, middle class families. Using a grounded theory approach, it was hoped that similarities and differences in this relationship would begin to emerge within the data collected in this study. Additionally, qualitative methodology allowed for investigation into what couples

believed was important in the development of their coparental relationship. These findings will be discussed in the theoretical implications section below.

Also, in using both Human Ecology Theory and a Multiracial Feminist perspective, overlap in themes were expected since experiences of oppression may occur within the layers of systems in which individuals are embedded. Both theories were crucial during this investigation; however, this study used research questions that looked at ecological factors separate from factors associated with locations of power. It should be noted that experiences of oppression and structural factors within society are located and influence every level within the ecological systems of individuals. Future studies examining coparenting in oppressed populations may benefit from exploring factors related to locations of power within the ecological levels instead of as a separate framework.

Theoretical Implications

Human Ecology Theoretical Implications

Individual Factors: Individual Beliefs and Attitudes, and Personality Traits

It was expected that individual factors that include force, resource and demand characteristics (personality, emotional stability, physical and mental health) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), internalization of oppression, and individual beliefs and values regarding the role of being a parent would influence the coparental relationship. The individual factors that were found to be influential on participants' coparental relationship were beliefs and attitudes, and personality traits.

Much of the current research has looked at parents' ideas regarding parenthood. In her study investigating the transition to parenthood, Van Egeren (2003) found that

mother's concerns about childbirth and parenthood could influence how she negotiates the coparental relationship. In the current study, the majority of participants reported that their desire to do what was best for their child was an influence on how they were working together as coparents. Related to this was the belief that men should be available for their children. This challenges the current stereotype that low-income, African American fathers are not interested in being involved in their children's lives (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Marsiglio, 1993).

Additionally, it should be noted that five of the six couples participating in this study were still maintaining a romantic relationship. Of particular interest in these findings is that those five couples also expressed a desire to live together. This may speak to the uniqueness of these families. However, much of the research on non-residential fathers does not investigate the reasons for their living arrangements. Future research may benefit by exploring why non-residential fathers are not living with their child's mother.

Although previous research has suggested qualities like flexibility and self-control (Cowdery & Knudson-Martin, 2005; Talbot & McHale, 2004; Van Egeren, 2003), these couples also talked about their ability to laugh together as important in helping them overcome difficult times. The couples in this study often noted the strengths of their partners, and talked about the respect they had for each other.

Microsystem Factors: Child Influences, Extended Family Support, and Influence

Within the microsystem, factors that were found to be influential on the coparenting relationship were child influences, extended family support, and extended family influences. Interestingly, some of the factors that were expected to be influential

in these families were not discussed. For example, although one individual mentioned that the number of members within the mother's household influenced his ability to live with the mother of his child, most couples did not talk about household structure. What participants did point out was the influence of the target child on their relationship.

Consistent with current coparenting research, couples noted that their child's personality and gender influenced their relationship (Lundberg, McLanahan, & Rose, 2007). In each interview, couples discussed their child in terms of energy and intelligence. These couples expressed pride and enjoyment in their children. Additionally, some fathers of girls disclosed their apprehension in knowing how to be an effective parent for girls. One of the couples in this study displayed a degree of friction surrounding this issue during our conversation. Many researchers have called for continued investigation of how children influence the adult coparenting relationship (Lindsey et al., 2005; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan et al., 2004). This study supports this suggestion.

Couples also talked about the support they received from their extended family. It was expected that extended family support would play an important role in these families' lives. Most researchers investigating African American parenting suggest that kin network is an important part of family life (Jarrett, 1995). The fact that these couples minimized extended family involvement in parenting suggests that it was important for them to illustrate their unity. The theme that came through in these interviews was that although extended family was important and they appreciated their help, these couples were coparenting their child together and did not consider other family members as coparents.

When participants did talk about extended family influences, learning from past experiences seemed to be most significant to them. Parents either reported that they had learned how to coparent by watching successful coparenting relationships in their family of origin, or through negative experiences from their childhood. Most often negative experiences from childhood included the absence of their own father, or traumatic experiences like abuse.

Finally, the theme of ‘strong female’ saturated the interviews. Sometimes, participants talked about a female in their extended family, usually either their mother or grandmother who “did everything”. These participants talked about how their mothers or grandmothers taught them how to relate with each other, how to be “a man”, and how to raise their children. This factor will be discussed further in the section related to issues of power.

Mesosystem Factors: The Coparental Relationship

Mesosystem factors were conceptualized as central in this study, as the coparental relationship was reasoned to lie within this system. As noted earlier, themes from this study reflected similarities to Van Egeren and Hawkins’ (2004) framework of coparenting. However, these coparenting relationships also showed some unique characteristics within these families. These distinctive features are important for furthering research of coparenting relationships in diverse populations.

Similar to the framework suggested by Van Egeren and Hawkins (2004), themes from these interviews included coparental solidarity, coparenting support, coparental undermining, and shared parenting. Subthemes that were unique in these parenting

partnerships were determination to have the father present, desire to live together, that ultimate responsibility lay with the mother, and making up for absences.

In Van Egeren and Hawkins' framework, problem solving was found under the dimension of coparental solidarity; for this analysis, it was placed under coparental undermining. This was done for clarity, as quotes that expressed coparental undermining were also rich with aspects of problem solving. Therefore, it is not the recommendation of this author to change that aspect of the original framework.

Coparental solidarity persisted in being a prominent theme for these partners throughout the interviews. In each discussion, these couples spoke very clearly about how they had been growing together since the birth of their child. During the interviews, couples displayed warmth for each other, expressions of respect and appreciation, and humor. Much of the research on African American parenting suggests that fathers' relationship with the mother of their child is important in his maintaining his involvement (Cohen, 2003; Johnson, 2001). Also, researchers have long suggested that the adult (romantic or platonic) relationship would be influential on the coparental subsystem (McHale et al., 2002). Therefore, characteristics of the adult relationship were expected to have significant implications for the coparental relationship. The unique bond these couples expressed during their interviews may play a role in helping them to maintain an effective coparental relationship. Even for the couple that did not maintain a romantic relationship, expressions of mutual respect were evident.

One important theme that was unique for these couples was the determination to have father present, and the difficulty that comes with not having the father living in the house with the children. There seemed to be an underlying understanding between these

partners that relationships are difficult, but that children need the presence of their fathers in their lives. Couples talked about the extent they would go to assure that the father remained present. This included not only changing how they interact during disagreements, but also how they would protect that presence even if their adult relationship failed. The uniqueness of this aspect is important for future research on the coparental relationship in diverse families. Coparenting research may benefit in exploring mothers and fathers attitudes and motivations toward father involvement.

Coparenting support was also demonstrated in the interviews with these couples, both through themes that emerged from the analysis, and through observations from the field notes. As pointed out earlier, these couples frequently supported each other both verbally and in their actions. One observation that was repeated within the field notes was that the children seemed to move between parents very easily. Fathers and mothers were often engaged with the children during the interviews, and their ability to work together in childcare tasks was not only talked about but also observed. This finding reinforces the importance of this dimension and the definition that currently exists in the literature (Belsky, Crnic, & Woodworth, 1995; Frank & Tuer, 1988; McHale, 1995; Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Westerman & Massoff, 2001)

Coparenting undermining has been an important element within the coparenting literature. It has been seen as important not only for its influence on children (McHale & Rasmussen, 1998), but also on the adult relationship (Fainsilber Katz & Gottman, 1996; Lindahl et al., 1997; McHale, 1995, , 1997; McHale et al., 2000). Participants in this study seemed to be aware of ways that they undermined each other, but also in how they were working through their disagreements. Most parents disclosed that they had

disagreements about how to discipline their child. One participant talked about how their relationship was not perfect, but that they were working toward the same goal. Most often, couples communicated how they worked out compromises, or worked through their disagreements. This finding suggests that coparenting partners' awareness of disagreements and problem solving strategies are important components for future investigations into coparental processes in diverse families.

Although much of the coparenting research has focused on how parents divide childcare responsibilities, this topic is particularly salient when discussing families where parents do not live in the same home. In the coparenting research, shared parenting has focused on actual and perceived fairness of division of labor, responsibility for the accomplishment of tasks, and the balance of involvement between parents (Van Egeren, 2004). In this study, these themes were identified, but subthemes emerged that point to the distinctive features of these families. Although it is common for researcher to note that mothers carry a large share of responsibility for childcare tasks, the families in this study emphasized the willingness for fathers to step in and help. This makes intuitive sense because the children in these families resided in the mother's home. However, the importance these families placed on father's willingness came not only from fathers, but also from mothers.

Additionally, while mothers were primarily responsible for childcare duties, couple also talked about how they shared the responsibility. The theme of "just do it" was repeated in almost all interviews. The implication was that mothers lived with the children and were predominantly responsible, but that when the fathers were available, they made up for their absence by being very involved. Fathers, in particular, talked

about this in two ways. First, they spoke of relieving the mother's burden, and second, they indicated that if something needed done, whoever was available, did it. Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) have suggested that successful coparenting results from a circular process between parents where mothers are willing to promote father's involvement, and fathers are able to approach child care with a sense of wanting to learn. The coparents in this study illustrate the importance of this concept. Future research examining how parents who do not live together but coparent together may benefit by exploring the meaning parents place behind how they divide child related tasks.

Exosystem Factors: Other Partner's Extended Family, and Employment

The exosystem includes those environments that the individual does not participate in, but is influential in that individual's life. As mentioned earlier, variables within this system fluctuate depending upon the unit of analysis. In African American, low-income families where parents are working together to raise a child, but do not live together, one parent may or may not be involved with the extended family of the other partner. In the interviews of this study, the other partner's extended family was an important factor in unexpected ways. First, although it was expected that extended families would offer resources for these families as kinship networks (Jarrett, 1995), what was most surprising was that extended family resources offered options for housing that allowed these families flexibility. This can be conceptualized in both positive and negative views. For the couples where the father lived with his family of origin, participants expressed appreciation for this possibility. At times, however, the mothers in these situations also expressed a desire to have the father more available.

Additionally, the option of living with his parents also included responsibilities to them. Many of the fathers in this study expressed a sense of being torn between two sets of responsibilities. Those fathers in this circumstance described being needed in both homes and experiencing stress. Furthermore, these fathers talked about the difficulty in logistics. Although some had reliable transportation, others talked about the distance they walked to maintain a presence in two homes.

Wilson et al. (2005) has suggested that the role of father is important in the African American family, and that fathers' interactions with their children reflect role flexibility and fathers' desires to be involved in raising their children. Findings from this study reinforce their suggestion. In each of these families, at least one partner was unemployed. For those partners working either part or full-time, themes emerged showing that their place of work played an important role in the coparental relationship. Travel between two homes and work, working long hours, and night shift work influenced the amount of time these couples were able to parent together. However, couples used flexibility in their interactions to manage childcare and child related tasks. Unemployed partners cared for children while employed partners worked. While for most of these couples, the mothers were unemployed, in one couple the father cared for their child while the mother worked.

Macrosystem Factors: Cultural Beliefs, and Community Resources

The factors that were found to be influential at the macrosystem level were cultural beliefs and community resources. African American fathers have often been depicted as 'hit and run victimizers' both within the dominant culture and within the literature (Applegate, 1988). However, one theme that permeated all of the interviews in

this study was that of the belief that a father figure is needed in children's lives. More specifically, these coparents stated that they wanted the biological father of their child to remain in their child's life and they frequently underscored the importance of his involvement. Again, this reinforces Wilson et al. (2005) suggestion that role of father is important in the African American family and calls into question current perspectives that neglect differences between African American fathers.

The theme of community resources was expected to be an important factor in the coparental relationship. This was found to be true in this sample as individuals discussed how they felt the community hindered them. Some couples discussed how practices in the structure of the community prevented them from living together; others talked about the lack of resources available to them. Participants talked about their desire for more support in the community including resources for their children and programs for fathers.

Chronosystem Factors: Child Development, Influences of Experience, and Transition to Parenthood

Although, at the beginning of this study, chronosystem factors were not a focus, important themes emerged that have theoretical significance. These themes included developmental aspects of the child, the influence of experience, and the transition to parenthood. Many scholars have pointed to the importance of including developmental stages in studies of the coparental relationship (McHale, Kuersten-Hogan et al., 2004). Supporting this suggestion, the couples in this study identified their children's stage of development as an important factor to the structure of their coparental relationship. They indicated that they were aware of how their communication regarding discipline would need to change as their child grew.

Influence of experience was a surprising theme as most of the coparenting research has looked at intact families with their first child. In each of the couples in this study, one parent had more parenting experience than their partner. These partners noted how this experience both helped these parents individually and as a couple. Partners associated learning from past parenting experience both with how to deal with children, but also in how to maintain a relationship with a coparent. Less experienced participants often noted how they were learning from their more experienced partner.

Additionally, the theme of the influence of the transition to parenthood supports findings in the research that suggest that this point in time is an important stage for researchers to investigate. Couples discussed how becoming a parent had changed them personally and had changed their relationship. McHale et al., (2004) report that little research has focused on the influence of the coparenting relationship on adult development and advocate future research in this area. Many participants talked about the stresses and loss of freedom that occurs during the first year of parenting an infant. Others talked about how having a child brought focus and maturity to their lives and how they were learning from each other.

Multiracial Feminist Theoretical Implications

In understanding the multiracial feminist theoretical findings from this study, it is important to review the concepts underlying this analysis. In chapter 1, it was suggested that structures of power are not only part of institutionalized systems, but are also important in determining social behavioral norms for specific groups. Analysis of race, class, and gender inequalities require looking at both the structure of social institutions and the meanings gender and race carry within particular social and historical contexts.

As suggested earlier, inequalities of power may be subtle, or hidden within daily interactions (e. g. gendered conversation, West and Fenstermaker, 1993). Glenn has suggested that power permeates all social locations, and may be difficult to detect (Glenn, 2000). She suggests that resistance to domination occurs in everyday experiences of those oppressed. Therefore, in the analysis of the data in this study, attention is given to not only the context of poverty and marginalization that encompassed these families' lives, but also subtle form of resistance.

Location Within Structures of Power: Community Resources, and Childhood Experiences

In discussing the implication of factors associated with the location of individuals and couples within structures of power, it is important to consider not only themes emerging from the data, but also recurring observations from the field notes. All interviews took place in the homes of the mother and child. The area of the community where the participants live is considered to be one of the most unsafe areas in the community. Field note observations included themes of safety, size, and condition of living areas. For example, in one residence where a mother was renting space in a house, the exterior door did not fit the frame, and the structure of the house was in disrepair. Participants often apologized for the appearance of their homes, and noted the lack of safety in the area. This is significant to note when considering the theme of community resources in relation to issues of power.

African Americans are more likely to be economically disadvantaged and have fewer education and employment opportunities. Seccombe (2000, p. 1096) notes that poverty is not easily overcome and can affect a person's social, emotional, biological, and intellectual growth and development. Therefore, although individuals may not have

talked about racial inequalities, it was still present in their lives and topics of community resources must be evaluated with it in mind. As indicated earlier, feelings of frustration were conveyed in our interviews. Couples noted the incongruity of a system where there was pressure for fathers to remain involved with their children but had barriers to prevent it. Lack of job opportunities, educational disadvantages, and systems that prevent couples from living together, not only place children at risk, but also add pressure to the already difficult challenge of coparenting together.

As Secombe (2000) suggests, it is not a lack of initiative that prevents these families from escaping poverty. In each of these interviews, the theme of wanting something different for their children was communicated. The participants noted factors from their childhood that they hoped would not be repeated for their children. These factors included educational disadvantage, poverty, abuse, and lack of their own father's involvements in their lives. These families talked about ways that they were trying to improve the opportunities for their children.

Structure of Power: Discipline, Child's Interest, Family of Origin Influence

The focus of this section is on the meanings individuals have for their experiences of marginalization and the influence those meanings had on their coparental relationship. These themes include issues of discipline, a focus on placing their child's interest first, and family of origin influences on beliefs about roles in the family. As mentioned earlier, participants often spoke about how their different philosophies in discipline were minor and that they were working toward what was best for their child. These findings may reflect the differences in participant's positions within intersections of gender inequality, while also highlighting their common struggles as minorities. Some have suggested that

for African American women, racial oppression possibly is a more important factor than gendered inequalities within the family (Collins, 1990; Kane, 2000). It may be that the mothers in this study chose to align their opinions with the father of their child in response to experiences of racial oppression. McLoyd (2006) suggests further investigation in understanding cultural variations in parenting styles. However, the findings from this study suggest that simply studying racial differences are not enough. It will be important to consider how race and gender interact to influence how parents decide to discipline their children.

What is clear, however, is that these parents were united in their desire to place their child's interest before all else. This was a primary theme running through the interviews. Of particular note for this study was the influence this desire had on the coparenting relationship. Participants described ways that they interacted to secure circumstances they felt were important for their child. This included not living together, compromising on differences, and sharing child-related tasks. This is particularly important when investigating factors associated with low-income, minority families. Assumptions that fathers are not interested in their children, or that families do not make efforts to ensure their child's welfare overlook possible strengths in families.

One final theme that illustrated how the experience and meaning of marginality influenced their coparental relationship was that of the representation of strong female family members. In every interview, the theme of the strong female family member was present. As we talked about families and relationships, most participants selected a story about a mother, grandmother or aunt that they felt had deeply influenced their lives, and in particular, how they felt about parenting, and coparenting.

Collins (1990) addresses the complicated issue of Black women's friction between racial and gendered inequality. She suggests that the portrayal of African American women as super-human, although acknowledging their achievements, may undermine society's and African American men's responsibility for family. Interestingly, while most participants acknowledged the strength of the women who had influenced their lives, they also highlighted how those strong women had taught them about being responsible. Participants talked about how mothers and grandmothers taught them how to be men, and how to be parents. They also talked about how they wanted something different for their own families. For these families, strong women are reinforced by responsible fathers.

Role of Power: Division of Labor, Extended Family Support, and Father Presence

In assessing the role of power in this study, the important aspect becomes understanding how these partners coped with inequalities both within their relationship and within the structure of the society they reside in. As previously mentioned, couples downplayed gendered inequalities in their division of labor. However, it should be noted that the mother was primarily responsible for the children. Therefore, as suggested earlier, how these coparents worked out issues of child related tasks were considered themes of resistance to racial discrimination but not gendered inequalities.

Particularly in reference to the method that couples used to define how they divided childcare labor, the theme of "just do it" is relevant. This style of dividing child related tasks suggest that these couples have egalitarian relationships. This stance also reflected the perception of unity for these coparenting teams. Conventional understandings of unmarried, low-income African American families contend that those

fathers that are not living with their children are not interested or involved in their children's lives. A multiracial feminist perspective suggests that racial and gendered oppression occur in the daily interactions of families, and that these daily interactions may be forms of resistance to that oppression. In portraying a united front, it is posited that couples may have been contesting prevailing judgments of uninterested, uninvolved fathers. Additionally, asserting that fathers made up for the time they were not in the household corroborated this position. Fathers were not only interested, but also motivated to be active within the coparental relationship

Similarly, although the participants in this study recognized ways in which they received help from their extended family, they emphasized that they were a parenting team, and that they were raising their child alone. As suggested earlier, this stance promotes not only perceptions of parental unity, but also empowerment and strength. These couples may have used expressions of unity to resist negative stereotypes regarding single parenthood and non-residential fatherhood. Resistance to oppression and negative stereotypes was also seen in the belief in having the biological father present in their child's life. Couples used different methods to convey this conviction, citing reasons and behaviors they performed to ensure the father's presence. In presenting their beliefs that challenge conventional attitudes about unmarried, non-cohabitating fathers, these couples contest perceptions of uninvolved fathers.

Clinical Implications

Research on coparenting has important implications for family therapists. This study adds to the current literature those factors that may be important for therapists to attend to in working with families with children and in particular, low-income, African

American families where the father of the children do not live with them. Little literature addresses how clinicians might incorporate findings from the coparenting research into work with families. Therefore, this section will provide an overview of pertinent issues related to the current coparenting research and address how therapists might apply findings from this and previous research into their practice. Additionally, much of the current coparenting research applies to white, middle-class, intact families and studies investigating the efficacy of incorporating a coparenting component are currently being investigated (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, & Pruett, 2007). Therefore, suggestions made here are tentative, with the caveat that research is needed in discerning which factors are beneficial for clinical work and for which populations.

As suggested earlier, the coparental relationship has been found to have a significant link with the adult relationship. Researchers suggest that the coparental relationship may offer a unique “in” when working with distressed families with children (Bonds & Gondoli, 2007; Feinberg, 2003; Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001). Additionally, there have been noteworthy implications in the research regarding the impact of coparental distress on child outcomes. In families with children, the coparental relationship may incorporate that aspect of the relationship where both parties have considerable investment. Many times, families find it easier to talk about “parenting issues” than less concrete issues. Furthermore, for single-parent families, support from coparental relationships has been found to improve parenting behaviors. As seen in the current study, families may devote considerable energy to provide for the welfare of their children.

Although many family therapists and practitioners intuitively incorporate aspects of the coparental relationship in interventions with families with children, integrating current research findings can help guide clinicians. Margolin et al. (Margolin et al., 2001) recommend that therapists regularly include assessing the coparenting relationship in working with families with children. They suggest, “A child advocacy perspective would point to the importance of evaluating the coparenting relationship even if the spouses themselves do not identify coparenting as a major concern.” The finding from the present study suggests that this may also be true for families where the father is not co-residing. Assessment of who is important in the coparenting relationship should be open to intergenerational and kinship relationships that may have important influences on the lives of children. Additionally, because of negative stereotypes prevalent in dominant culture, individuals may be guarded when talking about a coparent that does not live with them. Invitations and openness to coparents not originally presenting for therapy may provide therapists with additional avenues for intervention. Additionally, caution should be used in awareness of safety issues. Parents may choose not to include their child’s other parent for various reasons and respect should be given to these choices.

Findings from the current research project suggest that it is important to begin working with families from a systemic perspective. Most coparental research has focused on factors within the individual, microsystem, and exosystem. However, as this study shows, cultural and community structures, economic and developmental factors may influence the coparental relationship.

When working with coparents, the research suggests assessing for expressions of warmth and unity, cooperative behavior, or critical, undermining behaviors, perceptions

of how parenting responsibilities are divided, and the balance of partners engagement with the children. This assessment will help clinicians get a picture of how the families manage their coparenting relationship.

Additionally, individual characteristics that influence the development and maintenance of the coparenting relationship should be assessed. These include partners' reactivity to coparenting issues, particularly mother's reactivity to fathers, and partners' willingness to be flexible and open to new learning experiences. Findings from this study suggest that motivations and barriers for parenting may also be important factors in clients' coparental relationship.

As research suggests, the adult romantic or platonic relationship plays an important role on the coparenting partnership (McHale et al., 2002). Especially for low-income African American families, the fathers' relationship with the mother of their child has been found to be important in his maintaining his involvement (Cohen, 2003; Johnson, 2001). This indicates that it is important to assess the marital, romantic, or platonic relationship between parents. Within this relationship, awareness of disagreements and problem-solving strategies may be important components in coparental processes in diverse families. Additionally, it may be important for therapists to watch for both overt and covert behaviors (i.e., do partners talk negatively about the other parent to the children when that partner is not present or role their eyes when the other partner is talking about the children?)

Van Egeren (2003) found that father's perceptions of their family of origin's coparental relationship was associated with the development of their own coparenting relationship. For the participants in this study, experiences from childhood and absence

of father figures were reported to play an important role in influencing their coparental relationship. By incorporating information gathered about current and family of origin coparenting, couples, particularly fathers, may better understand their own responses within the coparenting relationship.

Finally, sensitivity to clients' locations within structures of inequality is important in implementing interventions for diverse families. The results of this study suggest that factors such as community resources, meanings regarding past and current experiences of oppression and coping mechanisms used to deal with those experiences influence individuals' coparenting relationship and the role it plays in their lives. Assessment of these factors may assist clinicians in intervening in effective ways. Finally, a positive coparenting relationship may be a place of strength for some families that can counter areas of difficulty. Acknowledgments of strength may be particularly empowering for low-income African American families, where historical and current subjugation and poverty can have devastating impact on self-esteem and daily functioning (Seccombe, 2000).

Study Limitations

As with any research project, this study has limitations. The first of which is sample selection. Although qualitative methodology does not strive for generalizability, it is important to address those aspects of the sample that are problematic. For this study, the sample was self-selected. Criteria for inclusion in this study required that both the biological mother and father be available for the interview. Those available and motivated to call may be significantly different than the general population. All interviews were arranged through the mothers, and therefore, their relationship with their

child's biological father could also differentiate them from the general population. Findings from this study were intended to provide an in-depth understanding of the coparenting relationship for a very specific population and may not apply to other populations.

Additionally, the decision to interview couples together may have skewed the information participants provided. Interviews of parents individually would perhaps yield other information. As discussed in previous chapters, the researcher made this decision by weighing the merit of each methodology. Conjoint interviews were chosen to offer the potential for the interviewer to observe interactions between coparenting partners. Questions regarding changes individuals would like in their coparenting relationship and areas of disagreement, may have yielded different data if couples had been interviewed separately. Findings from this study suggest that using observational methodologies as well as interviewing coparenting partners together and separately may increase our understanding of the processes that occur in the coparental relationship.

A second limitation of this study concerns differences in race and class between the researcher and participants. Although the researcher worked to acknowledge privileges and biases associated being white and middle class, participants may have had misgivings about providing honest answers. This study is suggested as a tentative beginning for understanding relationships that have traditionally been negatively depicted. Further work from other standpoints will be important for better understanding of African American coparenting partnerships.

Personal Reflections

One important facet of this research was the difficulty in finding participants. As a white, middle-class, graduate student, access into a new community in which I was not a member was difficult. As Glenn (2000) suggests, different groups are positioned in relation to one another and power for one group is based on the interaction of subordination for another group. As a white, middle class graduate student, I worked toward acknowledging the unearned privileges (McIntosh, 1998) that accompany being a member of the dominant white culture. I did not want to inadvertently continue the perpetration of subjugating African Americans' experience. I used Anderson's (2000) example of how white scholars can learn about African American experiences. What I took from her example was that I wanted to be mindful of relations of power, be real with my participants, not pretend to be an expert in their lives, and to share with them my belief that their voices had not been heard, and that I wanted to make a small step toward changing that. I am so humbled by my participants' willingness to share with me and hope that I have represented them fairly and accurately.

The initial sampling plan for this study was to contact mothers who were participants in programs in the Building Strong Families program. However, when I moved from Michigan to central New York, this became too complicated. In contacting agencies in the central New York area, I experienced many different reactions. Although descriptions of this study generated excitement, some of the community staff I contacted were skeptical. One program provider suggested that non-residential fathers were not invested in involvement with their children. However, previous research (Jones,

Forehand, Dorsey et al., 2005), and my daily experiences in observing interactions in public areas suggested otherwise.

As I think about this now, at the end of the research, I consider how much of the literature has termed low-income African American men as invisible. For even those committed to helping low-income, African American families, the men in this study were unseen. The mothers in this study were the first to contact me, they were the ones who answered the doors, and they were the first to answer questions. I noticed in all of my interviews, that the fathers were much more hesitant and that as I began to explain my belief that their voices were not heard or described and that my intent was to tell their story from their perspective, they began to talk. In one interview, the father ended up apologizing to the mother because he said he felt he had talked too much. Again, I am humbled. Using Anderson's words, "I know that my understanding of these (women's) lives will always be partial, incomplete, and distorted. I know that the Black (women) did not likely report the same things to me as they would have to a Black interviewer, but that does not make their accounts any less true" (p. 82).

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

TOGETHER WE CAN-COPARENTING-RESEARCH PROJECT

INFORMED CONSENT

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the Together We Can-Coparenting-Research Project. This research study will explore the experiences of parents of young children who are not living together, but are working together in some way to raise their child. We want to learn more about how parents who don't live together, work together to parent. We will use this information to improve how we teach families how to parent their children. We may also use the information to report general themes in professional publication.

If you agree to take part in our study, we would like to interview you and the other parent of your child. This interview will last about 1 hour and we will ask questions about what it is like to parent together. We will tape record the discussion so that we can make sure to have clear information about what you have told us. All tapes will be kept in a safe place (in a locked cabinet) and will be destroyed after we have listened to them and written down what was said.

Your answers are **confidential**. No names or information that could identify you will be used in any reports or other written materials. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

If you choose to participate in this project, you will help other parents like you by giving us important information about how to best work with families in your community. Also, we will provide participants who complete the session two \$10 gift card (\$20 total) for participating.

Your participation in this research study is completely **voluntary**. You don't have to complete the entire session, and you may refuse to answer any question. If you decide at any point that you do not want to participate, this decision will not affect any services you or your children receive.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Karen Shirer: 517-432-8703; shirer@msu.edu; 14A Human Ecology Building, East Lansing, MI 48824. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please feel free to contact Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D., Director of the Human Subject Protection Programs at Michigan State University: (517) 355-2180, fax: (517) 432-4503, email: irb@msu.edu, or regular mail: 202 Olds Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824.

To voluntarily agree to take part in this research study, you must sign on the line below.

If you sign below, you are agreeing that you have read, or have had read to you, this entire consent form, and that you have had all of your questions answered. Your signature below also indicates you agree to be audio-taped.

Participant's Printed Name

Participant's Signature

Date

APPENDIX B: PARENT DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Together We Can Research Project

Questionnaire for Parents

Please answer the following questions about yourself as honestly and accurately as possible. There is no “right” answer.

All of your responses will remain anonymous.

Thank you!

Please tell us a little bit about yourself.

_____ 1. Age

_____ 2. Sex (1) Male (2) Female

_____ 3. Number of children

4. Are you employed?

Full-time _____ Part-time _____ Unemployed _____

5. What is the highest grade in school you completed? _____

6. How many people live with you: _____

7. My annual household income is between (*please circle one*):

(1) 0 to \$10,000

(2) \$10,000 to \$15,000

(3) \$15,000 to \$20,000

(4) \$20,000 to \$25,000

(5) \$25,000 to \$30,000

(6) \$30,000 to \$40,000

(7) \$40,000 to \$50,000

(8) \$50,000 to \$60,000

(9) \$60,000 to \$80,000

(10) \$80,000 to \$100,000

(11) \$100,000 or more

APPENDIX C: ORIGINAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Sign consent form and complete demographic information

Before we get started, I have some paperwork that I would like for you to fill out. The first paper is a consent form. This form describes this study, and tells you about your rights as a research participant. It is very important that you read the entire consent form before signing it. I want you to be informed about what I am doing here. After you have read the consent form, if you decide that you would like to participate in the study, please sign and date the form. If you decide that you do not want to participate, please let me know and we will not continue. The second page is a demographic questionnaire. The purpose of this form is to provide me with some basic information about you. If you have any questions about either form, please feel free to ask.

2. Interview

Introduction:

First, I want to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I want to tell you a little about myself first, to let you know a little bit about this study. I am a graduate student at Michigan State University and I study the relationship between parents, or the co-parenting relationship. Most of the time when people think of parenting, they think of the relationship between the parent and the child, but what I'm trying to write about is the relationship between parents. So how two people work together, make decisions about how to parent together. The focus of this is on parents who don't live together. Everybody has their own upbringing, circumstances and way of doing things, and that makes up their "story". So what I'm doing is asking people to tell me their story specifically about how they parent together. Kind of what I'm looking for is your

coparenting story. I will be asking questions about your life, about where you live, and about how that came to be. Ready?

I'd like to start with just describing your "circumstance", kind of what your life is like...where you live, and why you have it arranged that way?

How many children do you (both) have?

What are the names and ages of children?

What is the best part about being a parent?

How would you describe [NAME of their child together]?

How would you describe how you parent?

If you have other kids, how is parenting (NAME) different than how you parent your other children?

Do you have other people that you "co-parent" with?

How are those relationships different than the relationship you have with each other?

What do you think makes this relationship the way it is? (i.e., the way you get along, necessity (employment, family, childcare?)

How has your relationship with each other changed since (NAME) was born? Are there things that have happened in your life or (NAME)'s life that has caused changes to this relationship?

What are the best parts of this relationship?

How would you like it to be different?

Are there other people (family, friends) who influence how you work out this parenting relationship?

What topics related to parenting do you disagree about?

How do you work through these disagreements?

Who typically initiates discussions about parenting? Tell me about how this happens.

Are there certain topics that are difficult or "touchy" to discuss with each other?

What are some of your concerns about talking with your child's other parent?

What role does your coparenting relationship play in addressing these concerns?

How do you determine who does what parental task? Do you discuss it this, or is it assumed?

When you were a kid, who did you see coparenting together?

What did you like or dislike about those relationships?

How did that affect how you are coparenting now?

Do your current opinions differ from how you were raised?

How do you feel about what we've been talking about?

Is it difficult to talk about this with your coparent here?

Would this have been easier or more difficult if he/she were not here? Why?

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