

The Experience of Parental Conflict in Parallel Parenting Custody Arrangements
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CONFLICT IN PARALLEL PARENTING

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Abstract

Within Canada, parallel parenting plans have been introduced to manage parental conflict in cases of high conflict divorce (Epstein & Madsen, 2004). Since parallel parenting plans are a relatively novel form of custody order, limited research exists pertaining to their effectiveness and impact on the lives of families. The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the experience of parallel parenting. However, since participants were reluctant to discuss this experience directly, the focus of this dissertation shifted to the experience of conflict. Individual interviews with eight participants (five mothers and three fathers) with direct knowledge or experience with parallel parenting plans volunteered to participate in this qualitative study. Interviews followed a reflexive-dyadic interview model and were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis identified three common themes across the cases: (a) Attributions of responsibility: Self versus other; participants attributed responsibility for the parenting conflict to their former partners; (b) Who knows best; participants believed that they, and only they, knew what was best for their child; neither their former partners nor the court system were recognized as being able to accurately judge this; and (c) Desire for a resolution; the participants believed that they were more motivated than their former partners to desist from conflict; their willingness to cooperate was associated with a reduction in conflict and improved the parenting relationship and post-divorce adjustment of their child. The themes held dramatically different meaning across cases depending on the context of their relationships. Overall, participants reported a reduction in conflict over time. However, the reported reduction in conflict was found to vary with the participants' level of satisfaction with the imposed arrangement, the quality of conflict in the parenting relationship, and subsequent willingness to cooperate with their former partners. How these variables relate to the parallel parenting custody arrangement remains unknown. Difficulties with research on parallel parenting custody arrangements and directions for further research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Divorce is a widely researched topic with numerous studies documenting the immediate and long-term effects of divorce, particularly those characterized by high conflict, on children (e.g., Ayoub, Deutsch, & Maraganore, 1999; Doolittle & Deutsch, 1999; Ellis, 2000; Luecken & Lemery, 2004; Reifman, Villa, Amans, Rethinam, & Telesca, 2001; Sorensen et al., 1997). However, the level of conflict in the parenting relationship, rather than the divorce per se, is associated with the adjustment of children (Deutsch & Kline Pruett, 2009; Ellis, 2000; Shaffer, 2007). Since the vast majority of divorces are resolved amicably (thereby suggesting a low level of conflict), the majority of children have little to no difficulty adjusting to the divorce (Emery, 1999; Emery & Forehand, 1994). Research on the coparenting relationship has revealed that parents who cooperate post-divorce are likely to be more responsive, empathic and concerned with the best interests of their children (e.g., Arendell, 1996; Dopkins Stright & Stigler Bales, 2003; Feinberg, 2003).

In a small number of cases, parental conflict persists following the divorce, negatively affecting the post-divorce adjustment of children (Ellis, 2000). Given the persistence of abusive and controlling behaviour in these cases and given the potential risks to children and victims of abuse of ongoing exposure to violent conflict (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Bostock, Plumpton, & Pratt, 2009; Calder, 2004; Romito, Molxan Turan & De Marchi, 2005), child health advocates have extensively debated the effectiveness and appropriateness of ameliorative strategies such as the development of a cooperative coparenting relationship, particularly in cases of spousal violence and high conflict. Researchers have failed to adequately examine how these negative consequences to children can be prevented, minimized or ameliorated. This research is a step in that direction.

Within Canada, parallel parenting plans have been introduced to manage interparental conflict in cases of high conflict divorce. These custody arrangements are highly structured and described in great detail in an attempt to manage and prevent further conflict by disengaging parents. That is, each parallel parenting plan is customized to the degree, type, and intensity of parental conflict by requiring more or less structure and specificity in the plan (Birnbaum, & Fidler, 2005). Further, parallel parenting orders allow each parent to maintain his or her decision-making authority with respect to the child when the child is with him or her, and in regards to

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core issues such as healthcare, religion, and education (Epstein & Madsen, 2004). While it may result in inconsistencies in parenting between households, this arrangement of decision-making authority is intended to limit contact between highly conflicted parents. More research on the effectiveness of such plans in managing parental conflict is required (Birnbaum & Fidler, 2005; Crossman & Mykitiuk, 1998; Epstein & Madsen, 2004; Freeman, 1998). One dimension of effectiveness is the experience of those who are under such plans. This research begins to examine the experience of conflict in the context of parallel parenting custody arrangements.

1.1 Outline

In the sections that follow, the background to and rationale for this research is described. This section begins with an overview of the divorce literature with a focus on the major findings. A description of child custody arrangements, with an emphasis on dispute resolution strategies, including parallel parenting custody arrangements follows. This section concludes with a discussion of the purpose and aims of the current study.

1.2 An Overview of the Divorce Literature

Revolutionary changes in patterns of marriage, divorce, and remarriage has created significant changes to the family unit over the past 30 years. Following amendments to the Divorce Act in 1985, the number of divorces in Canada increased more than 20 percent in two years (Statistics Canada, 2002). Although the number of divorces in Canada has remained relatively stable over the past several years (Statistics Canada, 2004; 2005), the social consequences of the changes in family structure are widespread. Variations in family structure and living arrangements have been found to be related to the financial circumstances and post-divorce adjustment of children (Shiono & Sandham Quinn, 1994). In this section, research linking divorce to the post-divorce adjustment of children is explored.

1.2.1 Children and divorce. Approximately one third of new marriages in Canada end in divorce (Statistics Canada, 2005). Although the causal effect of divorce on child adjustment has been debated in the research literature (see Amato (2010) for a detailed discussion), divorce alters the lives of children in a major way. In fact, following divorce, routines, residences, finances, and childrearing practices are frequently altered. While most children from divorced families are resilient (Emery, 1999; Emery & Forehand, 1994), many experience a number of enduring deleterious effects (Hetherington, 1993). Specifically, divorce, particularly those

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characterized by high conflict, can lead to internalizing problems (Ayoub et al., 1999; Doolittle & Deutsch, 1999; Jekielek, 1998; Reifman et al., 2001; Sorensen et al., 1997), anxiety, depression and disruptive behaviour (Doolittle & Deutsch, 1999; Ellis, 2000; Grych, 2005; Reifman et al., 2001; Sorensen et al., 1997), decreased quality and quantity of sleep (El-Sheikh, Buckhalt, Mize, & Acebo, 2006), and overall behaviour problems in children (Doolittle & Deutsch, 1999; Ellis, 2000; Kaczynski, Lindahl, Laurenceau, & Malik, 2006; Morrison & Coiro, 1999; Reifman et al., 2001; Sorensen et al., 1997). Luecken and Lemery (2004) have also found high conflict divorce to increase the development of stress vulnerability and long-term physiological stress responses in children. These findings establish a clear need to examine predictors of the post-divorce adjustment of children.

The link between high conflict and negative experiences of children has received attention in the research literature. The level of conflict between parents prior to divorce is highly predictive of child adjustment following divorce (Deutsch & Kline Pruett, 2009; Ellis, 2000; Shaffer, 2007). That is, children from high conflict divorced families have a considerably harder time adjusting to divorce than children from low conflict families.

It should be noted that similar negative influences on adjustment have been found among children from intact families which are characterized by high levels of conflict (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Jouriles, Murphy, & O'Leary, 1989; Long, Forehand, Fauber, & Brody, 1987; Long, Slater, Forehand, & Fauber, 1988; Wierson, Forehand & McCombs, 1988). These findings add support to the contention that the level of conflict in the parenting relationship, rather than divorce per se, may well be the aspect that negatively affects the adjustment of children. Additional support comes from the finding that, provided that the conflict ceases, removing children from dysfunctional, highly conflicted home environments has led to improvements rather than detriments in the well-being of children and adults (Amato, 2010).

Another significant predictor of the post-divorce adjustment of children is the adjustment of the custodial parent. Specifically, children adjust better following divorce when their custodial parent provides authoritative as opposed to authoritarian discipline, appropriate emotional support, adequate monitoring of behaviour and activities, and age-appropriate expectations (Booth & Amato, 2001; Kelly, 2000). Further, the provision of financial resources following divorce (Bernardini & Jenkins, 2002) as well as the quality of the parenting relationship

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(Ackerman, 2001; Ellis, 2000; Ram, Finzi, & Cohen, 2002; Sorensen et al., 1997) has also been found to predict the post-divorce adjustment of children.

When considering links between divorce and adjustment, it is useful to examine the attitudes of individuals who have experienced it. A growing body of literature suggests that parental divorce and the changes associated with it can alter attitudes toward marriage, divorce, and family life (Amato, 1988; Darlington, 2001; Dunlop & Burns, 1995; Landis-Kleine, Foley, Nall, Padget, & Walters-Palmer, 1995; Wallerstein, 1985). On the positive side, adult children of divorce have less idealized views of marriage and are more tolerant of alternatives to traditional family structures (e.g., single parent households) compared to those from intact families (Amato, 1988). They valued family life to the same extent as adults from intact families (Amato, 1988).

However, not all is positive. Although Amato and Booth (1991) found that individuals who experienced parental divorce as children held more positive attitudes toward divorce later in life, other researchers found that adult children of divorce are more likely to express a desire not to divorce themselves (Darlington, 2001; Dunlop & Burns, 1995; Wallerstein, 1985). For example, ten years after experiencing parental divorce, young adults were more likely to be apprehensive about repeating their parents' pattern of marriage and divorce (Wallerstein, 1985). They also did not want to expose their own children to divorce or conflict. As such, young adults reported employing a variety of strategies to prevent this pattern of divorce from occurring (e.g., adopting a realistic view of marriage and relationships; Darlington, 2001). In addition, research examining the longitudinal effects of parental divorce has suggested that parental divorce in childhood can negatively affect family formation in young adulthood (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995). That is, adult children of divorce have been found to experience difficulties with emotional intimacy and to have a greater likelihood of experiencing divorce in their own marriage (Feng, Giarrusso, Bengtson, & Frye, 1999). These difficulties are believed to be more pronounced among adult women of divorce (Amato, 1996; Feng et al., 1999; Mullett & Stolberg, 2002).

Unfortunately, many researchers examining the longitudinal effects of parental divorce on child adjustment noted above have failed to control for the level of conflict in the parenting relationship, the quality of the parenting relationship, the adjustment of the custodial parent, and the economic status of the family following divorce. Since these factors have consistently been

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identified as the best predictors of the post-divorce adjustment of children (Deutsch & Kline Pruett, 2009; Moyer, 2004; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Shaffer, 2007), the results of this body of research may not be accurate or may attribute the enduring deleterious effects noted among children following divorce to the divorce itself, rather than to these factors.

Further, research on high conflict divorce does not consistently account for patterns of abuse or violence. That is, while many studies of high conflict divorce are limited to non-abusive situations, others do not indicate whether or not abusive situations, including physical, verbal, or emotional abuse, were included in their sample. Since exposure to violent conflict has the potential to lead to more extensive long-term problems and more immediate negative reactions in children than non-violent conflict (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Margolin, 1998), research that does not separate it out may miss important findings.

In addition to the concerns noted above, there is no clear consensus in the existing literature as to what constitutes high conflict and how such conflict differs from regular conflict or abuse. Anderson and colleagues (2011) recently attempted to define high conflict based on an extensive review of the existing research literature. They reported that high conflict, in addition to existing somewhere on the continuum between low conflict and abuse, is characterized by pervasive negative exchanges and a hostile, insecure emotional environment. According to Anderson and colleagues (2011), the pervasive negative exchanges typifying high conflict relationships consist of recurrent destructive communication patterns, unremitting change attempts and continual rejections of such attempts, a rapid escalation of conflict, defensiveness and counter attacking, and negative attributions. Further, they posited that the hostile, insecure emotional environment is characterized by strong negative affect, a sense of mutual distrust, emotional reactivity, triangulation, and enmeshment. They also emphasized the importance of developing an understanding of the context of the conflict based on a couple's relationship history, family of origin experiences, and individual histories in addition to understanding a couple's style of interacting and the emotional climate of their relationship. Unfortunately, researchers frequently fail to adequately define the level of conflict studied and therefore maybe missing some important aspects of it. The need for additional research is evident.

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1.2.2 Persistent post-divorce conflict. Since conflict is one of the best predictors of the post-divorce adjustment of children (Deutsch & Kline Pruett, 2009), its continuation is likely to magnify the difficulties of children. In fact, Ellis (2000) found that, instead of becoming accustomed to parental conflict, children in these families appear to become hypersensitive to it, fearing that even a small disagreement will lead to a major dispute. With continued exposure to conflict, children reportedly find their home life to be unpredictable and out of control.

According to Ellis, this sense of unpredictability, in turn, influences children's sense of security and make them feel less positive in their relationships with their parents. In fact, Ellis found that exposure to high levels of conflict following divorce resulted in poorer relationships between mothers and their children. Further, parents who continued to experience high levels of conflict with their former partners were found to be less warm and more rejecting toward their children. Parents were also less happy and often had poor control over their emotions, in addition to having lower expectations for their children's self-control. In the presence of chronic conflict, children were found to feel helpless, to engage in self-blame, to have behavioural difficulties, and to worry (Ellis, 2000).

Persistent post-divorce conflict may be characterized by verbal and physical disagreements, denigration, and/or attempts to sabotage the other parent's relationship with the child (Anderson et al., 2011; Baker, 2005; Johnston & Campbell, 1993). In fact, in cases of high conflict divorce, it is relatively common for both parents to make hostile, hurtful, and derogatory comments about former partners to their children (Anderson et al., 2011; Jaffe, Crooks, & Bala, 2005). Attempts to enmesh their children in the conflict are also frequent (Anderson et al., 2011; Jaffe et al., 2005). Negative comments and behaviour are common in cases of high conflict divorce; they have been found to negatively impact children (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2001; Grych, 2005; Grych, Harold, & Miles, 2003; Hetherington, 1999; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Parenting in situations of high conflict has also been found to contribute to low parental self-esteem, neglectful, rigid or authoritarian parenting styles, and unclear boundaries in the parent-child relationship (Anderson et al., 2011; Baker, 2005; Johnston & Campbell, 1993). Further, while some parents react to marital conflict by becoming harsh disciplinarians (Conger et al., 1993; Erel & Burman, 1995), others become more permissive, inconsistent, and indifferent (Holden & Ritchie, 1991). Although differences in parenting styles are common among

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divorcing families, these differences have been found to become more pronounced in the face of conflict (Holden & Ritchie, 1991). Overall, ongoing conflict and abuse has been reported to negatively affect parenting capacity (Jaffe & Crooks, 2005; Jaffe et al., 2005) and the adjustment of children (Fehlberg, Smyth, Maclean, & Roberts, 2011). This deleterious influence increases as conflict persists.

1.2.3 Conflict escalation. Not every disagreement between intimate partners results in conflict. However, in the context of divorce, conflict is more likely to increase, especially when custody is at stake. While conflict can be resolved through a variety of normative means (e.g., agreement, discussion, concession, or compromise), some conflict persists and escalates (Winstok, 2008), compromising the post-divorce adjustment of children (see Section 1.2.2). In these circumstances, individuals have been found to be focused on achieving their goals (e.g., acquiring custody), to feel antagonistic toward their perceived adversary, and to not see the potential for a mutually beneficial solution (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986).

While some conflict spirals out of control over non-aggressive behaviour, other conflict escalates when individuals attempt to defend themselves against the aggressive behaviour of their adversaries (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). In both cases, contentious tactics (e.g., progressing from promises to threats and in some cases to physical assault) typically increase as individuals struggle to meet their opposing goals. While attitudes and the perceptions that accompany them tend to be similar on both sides of the conflict (e.g., mutual distrust between adversaries), the parties involved in conflict often fail to recognize or acknowledge this possibility. This lack of insight is believed to result in the escalation of conflict.

According to Pruitt and Rubin (1986), as conflict escalates, individuals become absorbed in the conflict. Specific concerns give way to grand, all-encompassing concerns; competition mounts; allies are sought; and a general desire to make the other party pay (at least more than individuals feel that they already have) emerges. This pattern of escalation is believed to be self-perpetuating (Brockner & Rubin, 1985; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Further, as the conflict persists, individuals become entrapped in the conflict, committing more and more resources to achieve their goals.

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While behaviour is regulated to a large extent by decisions based on the anticipated consequences of prospective actions (Bandura, 1973), the decision making process becomes steeped in emotion as conflict escalates (Brockner & Rubin, 1985). In these circumstances, rational decision-making is abandoned and information is processed through the lens of conflict. Through this narrowed lens, individuals tend to see only evidence that supports their course of action and confirms their preconceived notions of others. The selective processing of information strengthens the conflict by reinforcing individuals' negative expectations of others (Brockner & Rubin, 1985). Further, given these negative expectations, individuals tend to blame others for the conflict, perceive the ambiguous behaviour of others as threatening, engage in hostile communication, and have difficulty empathizing with others. Such behaviour has been found to foster misunderstandings, diminish personal inhibitions against aggression, and to contribute to the proliferation of conflict (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986).

Conflict typically escalates until one party appears to be defeated or until it becomes clear that the cost of further escalation is too high (Winstok, 2008). The latter can result in a stalemate or settlement (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). However, perceptions of costs vary depending on attitudes and values (Winstok, 2008). Rules, norms, and perceptions of power are also believed to affect perceptions of costs (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). In fact, while it is high, the cost of aggressive or violent behaviour is not fixed and is related to severity. Therefore, when the benefit is perceived to be higher than the cost (e.g., a big payoff for a minor act of violence) individuals may be more apt to use violence to resolve a dispute (Felson, 1993; Oliver, 1994; Wilkinson, 2003; Wilkinson & Hamerschlag, 2005; Winstok, 2006). Further, individuals with a need for power or control and a reduced ability for self-control have been found to be more likely to engage in violence (DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gaillot, 2007; Edelson, Eisikovits, Guttman, & Sela-Amit, 1991; Mason & Blankenship, 1987; Prince & Arias, 1994). The link between poor self-control and aggression has been found in a variety of contexts including intimate relationships (DeWall et al., 2007; Edelson et al., 1991; Mason & Blankenship, 1987; Prince & Arias, 1994). Violent people clearly have special psychosocial attributes which lead to escalation of conflict.

Given the high level of commitment and investment that characterizes escalating and entrapping conflict (Brockner & Rubin, 1985; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986), desisting from conflict can be difficult. However, once individuals have reached a stalemate (e.g., neither party can or is

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willing to escalate conflict further yet neither party is able or willing to generate an agreement), desistance or, at least, de-escalation is possible. In general, Pruitt and Rubin (1986) argued that de-escalation can occur through any of the following methods: inaction, yielding, withdrawing, or problem-solving. Inaction involves holding one's position; not pushing forward or moving backwards. This method of de-escalation is typically used as a short-term solution because it can be costly and painful to maintain. Yielding involves capitulating or conceding in order to find a compromise. Unfortunately, yielding may not be viewed as a favourable option when individuals are entrapped in conflict. In these cases, individuals may feel that they have invested too much to back down and, instead, are focused on beating their opponent. Yielding may also be viewed as surrendering in some cases. Withdrawing involves literally or psychologically moving away from the conflict. The implications of withdrawal vary depending on the situation. In some cases, withdrawal is akin to victory because the sequel is favourable. In other cases, the opposite is true. Generally, withdrawal is costly for both parties and therefore is not an attractive option. Finally, problem solving is typically used once other options have failed requires making an alliance with one's adversary. This alliance is perceived as a necessity and is believed to be able to equalize the power imbalance in the relationship. Once conflict has escalated, individuals engage in problem solving techniques only if they believe there is a chance of successfully resolving the conflict. Without the possibility of success, individuals may prefer to withdraw. Further, being too motivated to engage in problem solving behaviour may be perceived to be a weakness by an adversary, reflecting reduced confidence in the ability to "win" the dispute.

Overall, escalating conflict clearly influences the psychological functioning of individuals who are embroiled in it. Emotion-laden thinking processes spiral and are likely to impede problem solving and conflict resolution. The intensity is likely to lead to negative coping strategies prior to problem solving.

1.2.4 Spousal violence and divorce. Although the exact prevalence is not known, the majority of intractable, high conflict custody disputes are believed to be characterized by spousal violence (Anderson et al., 2011). Spousal violence is defined as "a pattern of coercive control in a partner relationship, punctuated by one or more acts of intimidating physical violence, sexual assault, or credible threat of physical violence. This pattern of control and intimidation may be predominantly psychological, economic, or sexual in nature or may rely primarily on the use of

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physical violence” (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002, p. 3). Exposure to spousal violence has the potential to negatively influence the post-divorce adjustment of children, especially if it persists.

Abusive or harassing behaviour has been found to continue at significant rates and in some cases become more severe following separation and divorce (Brownridge et al., 2008; Hotton, 2001; Liss & Stahly, 1993; Statistics Canada, 2001). In 2000, Tjaden and Thoennes found that married women living apart from their abusive husbands experienced nearly four times the frequency of physical assaults, sexual assaults, and stalking compared to women who still lived with their abusive partners. More recent research found that divorced and separated women were four to nine times more likely to experience violence respectively than were married women involved in an abusive relationship (Brownridge et al., 2008). In cases of spousal violence, children are likely to be exposed to or indeed to experience abuse themselves (Neilson, 2012).

The challenges faced by women in abusive relationships are tremendous. Given the potential for an escalation in conflict and violence, many women may opt to stay in abusive relationships in an attempt to appease their abusive partners and maximize their safety (Bostock, Plumpton, & Pratt, 2009; Clements, Sabourin, & Spiby, 2004). Bancroft and Silverman (2002) also suggested that many women remain in abusive relationships out of fear losing custody of their children. They argue that remaining in the relationship is especially true if women do not have evidence to prove that the relationship was abusive (e.g., arrest records) or if their abusers have the economic resources to pursue litigation. They explain that, through litigation, perpetrators of spousal violence may attempt to project a positive, non-abusive image of a caring, devoted father who is willing to communicate, use their former partners’ anger or mistrust to discredit them, manipulate mediation or dispute resolution, use litigation as a form of abuse, make unfounded accusations against them to create confusion or uncertainty about their parenting ability, involve new partners in the court proceedings as character references, include family members (e.g., grandparents) in the custody dispute in an attempt to reduce their former partners’ time with their children, and/or accuse them of trying to alienate their child(ren) (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, & Bala, 2008; Zorza, 1995). These are formidable possibilities.

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Given the often prolonged and endangering task of leaving abusive relationships, the process by which women are able to extricate themselves from these relationships deserves consideration. Wuest and Merritt-Gray (1999, 2001) proposed a four stage process whereby women reclaim their sense of identity and leave their abusive relationship. According to Wuest and Merritt-Gray (1999, 2001), this process involves counteracting the abuse, breaking free of the abuse, not going back to the relationship, and moving on. Kearney (2001) proposed a similar process. Specifically, Kearney (2001) posited that women initially discount any violence in the relationship in order to safeguard their commitment to the relationship but then become immobilized and demoralized by the escalating and unpredictable nature of the violence. Kearney (2001) proposed that, before women leave an abusive relationship to start a new life, they need to re-define the abusive nature of the relationship as unacceptable.

Unfortunately, the models proposed by Wuest and Merritt-Gray (1999, 2001) and Kearney (2001) have been criticized for failing to highlight the dynamics of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, and the individuals with whom they have contact (e.g., friends, family, and other agencies; Bostock et al., 2009). Specifically, Bostock and colleagues (2009) found that denial by friends, family, and community resources made it difficult for victims of abuse to recognize the conduct as abuse. Friends, family, and community resources who denied the presence of abuse also failed to challenge the behaviour of the perpetrator (Bostock et al., 2009). In contrast, offering victims of abuse understanding, empathy, shared experience, as well as effective help and protection were found to be crucial when challenging abusive dynamics and preventing the perpetuation of abusive circumstances (Bostock et al., 2009).

Of note, the severity and frequency of violence are critical considerations in a woman's decision to leave an abusive relationship (Lewis et al., 2006), with women often expressing greater apprehension about psychological violence which is harder to substantiate than physical violence (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990). Furthermore, leaving an abusive relationship is not a single event, but rather a process that extends over time and typically involves temporary breakups and preparatory stages or strategies to leave the relationship (Bostock et al., 2009; Jaffe et al., 2008; Kirkwood, 1993).

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Of the women who do leave abusive relationships, many victims of abuse continue to experience adverse emotional and physical effects, both in the short- and long-term (Bostock et al., 2009; Calder, 2004; Romito et al., 2005). Specifically, Bostock and colleagues (2009) found the experience of isolation, material hardship, and children's distress to persist long after the abusive relationship ended. Victims of abuse are also more likely to experience ongoing feelings of depression, fear, anxiety, guilt, shame, stress (Clements et al., 2004; Jaffe et al., 2008; Romito et al., 2005), symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse (Jaffe et al., 2008), poor self-esteem, lack of confidence in their parenting ability (Jaffe et al., 2008), and physical health problems (Eby, 2004), especially when the abuse is prolonged (Jaffe et al., 2008). Many women also reportedly feel responsible for the abuse and underplay its severity (Arriaga & Capezza, 2005). Experiencing abuse may also diminish the parenting capacity of the abused parent as these parents often lack self-confidence and experience ongoing psychological distress (Jaffe et al., 2008). However, not all abused parents have a diminished parenting capacity. In fact, many abused parents are more sensitive and responsive to their children than are other parents (Letourneau, Fedick, & Willms, 2007; Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, Shapiro, & Semel, 2003).

Research examining the coping strategies of survivors of spousal violence suggests that, with time, protection, and support, victims of abuse are able to re-establish effective parenting practices and improve their functioning overall (Jaffe et al., 2005; 2008), especially after the stress of court proceedings and life changes have attenuated. Specifically, Davis (2002) found that women reported relying on their sense of hope, spirituality, sense of humour, and support systems to survive, end, and move on from their abusive relationships. The women in Davis' study also reported that they attempted to reclaim their identity, build their self-esteem, develop their independence, and live in the moment to avoid being overwhelmed by fear about the future. Other studies have also found a reliance on a higher power and the belief in God to be a source of strength or comfort for victims of abuse (Gillum, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006). Unfortunately, in their qualitative study of women's experience of abuse, Bostock and colleagues (2009) found that women who left abusive relationships and successfully gained independence and safety did so at significant emotional, personal, and financial cost to themselves and their children.

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Victims of abuse have also been found to develop situational responsive strategies to cope with the ongoing threat of abuse even after they have left the abusive relationship (Lewis et al., 2006). Specifically, women reported relying on disengaged coping strategies (e.g., wishful thinking, social withdrawal, deflecting blame) when the threat of physical violence increased, but relying on engaged coping strategies (e.g., reaching out, active problem solving) when the threat of violence was nonphysical (Lewis et al., 2006). Further, Werner-Wilson and colleagues (2000) found that resistance to abuse may help battered women regain a sense of self and hope for the future. Such resistance can also model appropriate behaviour to children, sending the message that abusive behaviour is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. However, despite being a potentially adaptive response, resistance to abuse can also lead to fatal outcomes (Brownridge et al., 2008; Martin, 1997) and, in some cases, result in the criminalization the behaviour of victims (see Neilson (2012) for a review).

From the literature reviewed above, one can expect that abuse and violence may well be experienced by women who find themselves in high conflict divorce. Investigations of experiences of such women are well advised to consider the psychological functioning which may underlie the reports of their experience.

1.2.4.1 Children and exposure to spousal violence. The effect of witnessing spousal violence and abusive behaviour on children has been well documented in the literature. In fact, exposure to violent conflict has the potential to lead to more extensive long-term problems and more immediate negative reactions in children than non-violent conflict (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Margolin, 1998). Specifically, children exposed to spousal violence have been found to be more aggressive with and tend to bully and insult their peers (Graham-Bermann, 1998; Hotaling, Straus, & Lincoln, 1990; Sternberg, Lamb, Gutterman, Abbott, & Dawud-Noursi, 2006), have more behavioural problems, hyperactivity, withdrawal, anxiety, and learning difficulties (Gleason, 1995; Margolin & Vickerman, 2007), spend less time with friends, worry more about the safety of their friends, and have lower-quality friendships (Graham-Bermann, 1998). Further, boys exposed to spousal violence are more likely to be abusive in their adult relationships, while girls are more likely to be victimized (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Silverman & Williamson, 1997). Girls exposed to spousal violence also tend to display more internalizing behaviour (e.g.,

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withdrawal, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem) while boys demonstrate more externalizing behaviour (e.g., aggressiveness, hyperactivity; Yates, Dodds, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2003).

Children exposed to spousal violence may also adopt many of the beliefs and behaviours demonstrated by their abusive parent (Augustyn, Parker, McAlister Groves, & Zuckerman, 1995; Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). For example, children exposed to spousal violence tend to believe that victims of violence are to blame for the violence (Doyme et al., 1999; Hurley & Jaffe, 1990), that the use of violence is justified to impose one's will or to resolve conflicts (Doyme et al., 1999), that boys and men should be in control and women and girls should be submissive (Hurley & Jaffe, 1990), that abusers do not have to be accountable for their actions (Arroyo & Eth, 1995), that women are weak, incompetent, stupid, or violent (Roy, 1988), and that anger causes violence (Roy, 1988). The adoption of these beliefs and learned attitudes appear to alter children's perspectives of abuse in relationships, personal responsibility, sex-role expectations, and violence and aggression.

Fortunately, not all children exposed to spousal violence are negatively affected. In fact, some children develop well or are resilient (Humphreys, 1993; Rudo, Powell, & Dunlap, 1998). The reasons contributing to or hindering resilience among these children are unclear. However, the parent-child relationship, particularly the relationship between mother and child, has been identified as a potent predictor of children's adjustment and future development (Bornstein, 2002; Levendosky et al., 2003; McCain & Mustard, 1999; Shore, 1997). Additional research on the potential mediating role of the mother-child relationship on children's adjustment in cases of spousal violence is required.

1.2.5 Summary. The impact of divorce is diverse and complex. While most children from divorced families are resilient (Emery, 1999; Emery & Forehand, 1994), others have a considerably harder time adjusting post-divorce (Ellis, 2000). In these cases, the level and persistence of conflict rather than the divorce per se have been found to affect the post-divorce adjustment of children (Ackerman, 2001; Ayoub et al., 1999; Deutsch & Kline Pruett, 2009; Doolittle & Deutsch, 1999; Ellis, 2000; Luecken & Lemery, 2004; Ram et al., 2002; Reifman et al., 2001). Exposure to violent conflict is associated with more extensive long-term problems and more immediate negative reactions in children than non-violent conflict (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Margolin, 1998).

1.3 Child Custody Arrangements

This section provides an overview of the historical context that led to the existing custody arrangement literature and practices. It is followed by a brief review of what is currently known about the effect of litigation and mediation on the post-divorce adjustment of children and the impact of different custody arrangements in cases of spousal violence. Following this discussion, literature on parallel parenting custody arrangements is reviewed. This section will end with a discussion of judicial decision making and current legislation intended to protect and promote the best interests of the children involved in custody disputes.

1.3.1 Historical perspective. In order to prevent many of the adverse effects of divorce, laws have been established to ensure that the best interests of children are considered when determining child custody arrangements. Ideally, children should be placed with the most responsive, caring, and stable parent. However, which parent is best suited to meet the needs of his or her children is often difficult to determine. Prior to the 1900s, men were assumed to be better suited to protect and provide for children (Warshak, 1996). Children were automatically placed in their father's custody following divorce. In the nineteenth century mothers began to be granted rights to custody. That is, children who were still nursing were placed in their mother's care and remained in her care until they reached the age of four or five when they were returned to the custody of their father (Warshak, 1996). Eventually, mothers' rights to custody increased with the introduction of the "tender years doctrine." The doctrine asserted that mothers had a "natural ability" or a "natural superiority" to nurture and care for children, particularly younger children or children of the "tender years" (Stamps, 2002; Stamps, Kunen, & Rock-Faucheux, 1997; Warshak, 1996).

Although provincial legislation that gave paramount consideration to the welfare of the child was introduced in the 1920s within Saskatchewan and other Canadian provinces, many judges gave weight to the tender years doctrine. Specifically, it was assumed that a child under the age of seven would fare best in the custody of his or her mother. In fact, it has been suggested that a maternal preference was shown in the majority of child custody disputes from the mid-1800s until the 1960s across Canada and the United States (Kunin, Ebbesen, & Konecni, 1992; Sorensen et al., 1997; Stamps, 2002; Stamps et al., 1997; Warshak, 1996). In the 1970s, the

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Supreme Court of Canada established that the tender years doctrine was not a rule of law, but could still be applied as a matter of common sense.

Over the next decade, as more women entered the workforce and fathers became more involved in the parenting process, gender neutral legislation for child custody was developed at the provincial level. In Saskatchewan, for example, the Children's Law Act (1997) specifically states that a parent is not to be preferred on the basis of being a mother or a father. This shift to gender neutral outcomes and gender neutral legislation coincided with the advent of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (see Part I of the Constitution Act, 1982) as well as the amendments made to the Divorce Act in 1985, which emphasized maximizing contact with both parents.

Despite the development of gender neutral legislation in Canada and the United States, recent research in the United States has indicated that mothers continue to be awarded primary residential or physical custody more often than fathers (Argys et al., 2006; Peeples, Reynolds, & Harris, 2008). That is, mothers are believed to be given primary custody in approximately 85 to 90 percent of all divorces involving children (Stamps, 2002). While this may be a reflection of a maternal preference (see Kunin et al., 1992; Sorensen et al., 1997; Stamps, 2002; Stamps et al., 1997), it may also reflect the divorcing couple's preference for custody, judicial decisions based on the division of parental responsibility prior to divorce, or judicial bias (Argys et al., 2006).

In recent years, greater emphasis has been placed on shared parenting and joint legal custody arrangements. Shared parenting involves jointly sharing normal parenting authority over decisions related to the child including place of residence, school, religion, and health. The physical custody of the child is also shared with this custody arrangement, with the child dividing his or her time between households on a rotating basis. Joint legal custody also involves the division of authority or shared authority over decisions related to the child. However, it does not involve the physical sharing of the child's residence.

Although recent developments in child custody arrangements have created opportunity for both parents to remain involved in their child's life following divorce, it is often difficult for disagreeing parents to come to an agreement about joint provisions. Children frequently get embroiled in this conflict. Consequently, the need for alternative dispute resolution strategies is evident.

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1.3.2 Litigation or mediation? In recent years, the adversary settlement of custody disputes has been found to negatively affect children (Emery, Lauman-Billings, Waldron, Sbarra, & Dillon, 2001). Litigation has been criticized for encouraging polarized and positional thinking about parenting liabilities (Ellis & Stuckless, 1996; Emery, 1994; Kelly, 2002, 2003) as well as discouraging parents from focusing on their children's needs and cooperating with their former partners (Kelly, 2006; Walzer & Oles, 2003). Even though several of these claims have not been empirically examined (Beck & Sales, 2000), the legal system has responded to these concerns by providing new options for dispute resolution. A shift from litigation to mediation became possible.

As an alternative to litigation, many families are now settling issues of custody and access outside of the courtroom through mediation, a less adversarial process promoting reconciliation, compromise, or settlement. In contrast to litigation, mediation is believed to increase efficiency in the dispute resolution process, improve compliance with divorce agreements, result in a joint custody arrangement, and improve overall party satisfaction (Emery et al., 2001). In fact, Emery and colleagues (2001) reported that fathers were more satisfied with mediation compared to litigation while mothers were equally satisfied with either form of dispute resolution. While parental satisfaction has been found to decrease over time, parents who resolve custody disputes through mediation remain more satisfied than those who resolve disputes through litigation (Emery et al., 2001).

Mediation is associated with several long-term benefits compared to court-mandated outcomes (Dillon & Emery, 1996; Emery et al., 2001; Garber, 2004; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Kitmann & Emery, 1994). For example, Dillon and Emery (1996) reported increased non-residential parent-child contact and more cooperative coparenting among families who mediated rather than litigated. These results have been found to be maintained up to twelve years after the resolution of a custody dispute (Emery et al., 2001). Furthermore, improvements in family relationships, parent cooperation and flexibility have also been shown (Emery et al., 2001; Kitmann & Emery, 1994). Mediation has also been found to substantially reduce re-litigation rates, with only 11 percent of families returning to the adversarial court system when they are unable to come to a custody agreement or wish to revise their existing custody arrangement (Emery et al., 2001; Kitmann & Emery, 1994). Likewise, Peeples and colleagues

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(2008) found that mediation resolved custody disputes more quickly and resulted in more stable agreements than negotiated and litigated custody arrangements.

Further, up to twelve years after their divorce, parents who determined their custody arrangements through mediation are more likely to express concern that the separation was a mistake compared to parents who litigated (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Sbarra and Emery (2005) have argued that this may occur due to the enhanced relationship quality among former partners. That is, since parents who mediate are able to cooperate with their former partners they may begin to question why they chose to separate and divorce in the first place. Mediation has also been found to settle a large number of high conflict cases otherwise headed for court, provide efficient and cost-effective resolutions to disputes, increase compliance with agreements as well as parent satisfaction, and improve parent-child relationships and parenting relationships (Emery, Sbarra, & Grover, 2005).

Despite the reported benefits of mediation, several shortcomings have been identified. First, its efficacy among highly conflicted parents has been debated (Doolittle & Deutsch, 1999; Peeples et al., 2008; Ratner, 2001) since these parents are more likely to be inflexible and uncooperative. Second, these parents may not be willing to mediate (Emery et al., 2001; Peeples et al., 2008). The unwillingness of one parent poses a significant barrier for those wishing to settle out of court. Emery and colleagues (2005) found that educating parents about the effects of divorce and conflict on children early on in the divorce proceedings was effective in facilitating a more cooperative parenting relationship in mediation. Third, Peeples and colleagues (2008) suggested that mediation in cases of high conflict needs to be more detailed, intensive, and involved in order for it to be effective.

With regard to low and high conflict families, the reported benefits of mediation have also been criticized in recent years. Specifically, researchers have argued that due to methodological limitations in much of the published literature, it is difficult to assess the true success of mediation (Beck & Sales, 2000; Kerbeshian, 1994). For example, in many studies, researchers have failed to consistently define rates of satisfaction with mediation or to control for important differences between groups (i.e., the timing of comparisons, the level of conflict and cooperativeness before entering mediation, the number of sessions offered, the type of issues settled through mediation, and variations in mediation programs and approaches; Beck & Sales,

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2000). Research touting the effectiveness of mediation has also been criticized for having small sample sizes and nonequal comparison groups (Beck & Sales, 2000).

While a shift from litigation to mediation helped many families resolve their custody disputes, problems tend to persist in cases characterized by high conflict and spousal violence. These cases clearly require more specialized and intensive dispute resolution processes to ensure the safety and well-being of parents and their children.

1.3.2.1 Spousal violence and the determination of custody. Given the known risks of exposure to violence on victims and children (see Section 1.2.4.1), the determination of custody in cases of spousal violence has received considerable attention in recent years. The legal system has attempted to address issues of spousal violence in the determination of custody but have not always been successful. As a result, victims of abuse are often required to litigate or mediate custody disagreements, placing themselves and their children at risk of further harm.

The use of litigation has been criticized in cases of spousal violence because perpetrators of spousal violence frequently pursue custody in an attempt to intimidate, hurt, and manipulate their former partners (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Brownridge et al., 2008; Doyne et al., 1999; Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, 2005). Such behaviour potentially deepens the trauma already experienced by victims of abuse (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Jaffe et al., 2008). Further, if granted access, perpetrators of spousal violence may use visitation as a way to contact and communicate with their former partners (Sheeran & Hampton, 1999). During these exchanges, perpetrators of violence have been found to pressure for reconciliation, or harass, intimidate, or assault their former partners (Brownridge et al., 2008; Liss & Stahly, 1993). While not all perpetrators of spousal violence draw their children into the abuse, many perpetrators attempt to use their children as a weapon against their mother to force reconciliation, undermine her credibility as a parent, and/or to continue their abusive hold on her life (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Erickson & Henderson, 1998; Johnston et al., 2005; Peled, 1998).

The use of mediation in cases of spousal violence has also been criticized. Specifically, there is a growing body of literature that suggests that mediation in cases of spousal violence can be extremely detrimental to one or both of the parties, as well as to their children (Bala, Jaffe, & Crooks, 2007; Bryan, 1994; Fischer, Vidmar, & Ellis, 1993; Peeples et al., 2008; Treuthart, 1993). Since one of the most dangerous times for abused spouses is following their separation

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from their abusive partners (see Section 1.2.4), attending mediation may compromise their safety. In fact, several abused women have been killed by their estranged abusers when they arrived at the courthouse for a hearing (Fischer et al., 1993). Mediation or other scheduled court proceedings can therefore elevate a victim's risk of further victimization (Fischer et al., 1993).

Unfortunately, unless professionals are able to identify spousal violence and recommend against it, mediation may be used unwittingly. Since all couples have idiosyncratic modes of communication and abusers may use hidden symbols or nonverbal behaviour tactics, the attempts of an abusive spouse to intimidate or control an abused spouse may go unnoticed by even the most astute mediator (Fischer et al., 1993; Jaffe et al., 2005). Similar behaviour may also occur in litigation (Jaffe et al., 2008). The failure to recognize this behaviour may further victimize the abused spouse. While abused spouses have been offered alternative mediation procedures (i.e., meeting in separate rooms, meeting with the mediator on separate days, offering to have someone walk the abused spouse to her car), these attempts have been criticized since they assume that the abuse will be identified by the mediators (Beck & Sales, 2000). Research from the United States and England indicates that many mediators are not adequately trained to recognize or deal with cases involving spousal violence (Bow & Boxer, 2003; Horvath, Logan, & Walker, 2003; Logan, Walker, Jordan, & Horvath, 2002). Furthermore, Neilson (2001) found that, within New Brunswick, claims of abuse were often not acknowledged by mediators and lawyers. She also found that abused spouses were often pressured by legal professionals to abandon claims of abuse and accept generic or more typical settlements to their custody dispute.

Given the risk of further victimization, victims of spousal violence may refuse or be reluctant to communicate or cooperate with their former partners in litigation and/or mediation. Researchers have argued that such behaviour should not be seen as the abused parent's unwillingness to cooperate or as a manifestation of parental alienation (Jaffe et al., 2008). However, unless judges, mediators, and other legal professionals are aware of the subtle ways in which abuse can occur, victims may be viewed as uncooperative or "unfriendly", thereby damaging their vie for custody (Bagshaw et al., 2010; Chisholm, 2009; Fehlberg, Millward, & Campo, 2009; Zorza, 1996). Some courts and legislatures, however, have specifically recognized that "friendly parent" provisions are not applicable in cases of spousal violence. "Friendly parent" provisions are based on the premise that maintaining close contact with both parents is in

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the child's best interests and any unwillingness by a parent to facilitate access to the other parent is to be discouraged and may result in a reduction in access to the "unfriendly" parent should such behaviour persist. Within Canada, the "friendly parent" provision has been criticized because it is believed to be misleading in cases where the lack of friendliness is based on abusive and violent behaviour (Muzychka & Williams, 1994; Ontario Women's Network on Custody and Access, 2001). Within the United States, the states of Alaska, Oregon, and Vermont have amended their child custody statutes to prevent consideration of the "friendly parent" provision in cases of spousal violence (Dore, 2004).

Despite the legislative changes noted above, the legal system has struggled to identify and deal with issues of spousal violence in child custody disputes. In most cases of spousal violence, there are multiple factors to consider prior to making a determination of custody. Sturge and Glaser (2000) have argued that, in order to protect the best interests of the child and family in cases of spousal violence, a risk-benefit analysis of the available parenting plans is required. The principles guiding such an analysis include protecting children from violent, abusive, and neglectful environments; providing for the safety and well-being of parents who are victims of abuse; respecting and empowering the parents who are victims of abuse to make their own decisions and direct their own lives; holding perpetrators accountable for their past and future actions by having them acknowledge the problem and take measures to correct their abusive behaviour; and allowing and promoting the least restrictive plan for parent-child access that benefits the child, along with parents' reciprocal rights.

Building on the recommendations of Sturge and Glaser (2000), Jaffe and colleagues (2008) have suggested that, in cases of spousal violence, differentiated parenting plans that are explicitly articulated, implemented, and monitored are required. However, Jaffe and colleagues argued that to more appropriately address the needs of victims and children, these parenting plans should also be tailored to the pattern of spousal violence evident in each parenting relationship. These parenting plans can then be modified as changes in the parenting relationship occur. For example, once perpetrators of spousal violence have acknowledged their abusive behaviour and successfully taken measures to correct that behaviour, access can be modified from supervised to unsupervised if deemed appropriate. Before such changes are made, however, a careful evaluation of the abusive parent's behaviour, attitudes, and beliefs is recommended

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(Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Such changes should not be based on the perpetrators behaviour during supervised access alone since perpetrators of spousal violence are likely to be on their best behaviour and may resume their abusive behaviour when their access is unsupervised (Jaffe et al., 2008; Sturge & Glaser, 2000).

Although made to assist in the identification and handling of spousal violence within the legal system, several recommendations are not always followed (see Neilson (2012) for a discussion of this issue). Consequently, spousal violence goes unnoticed by the vast majority of legal professionals. In fact, perpetrators of spousal violence win custody of their children with greater frequency than is generally realized (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

A number of reasons have been posited to explain this phenomenon. Some perpetrators of violence are able to positively present themselves in court and convince assessors and judges to award them custody (Jaffe et al., 2008; Zorza, 1995). Moreover, in the United States and abroad, there is a general reluctance to consider a man's abusive behaviour as a reflection of his parenting or as a factor in determining custody (Eriksson & Hester, 2001).

A number of risks to granting perpetrators of spousal violence unsupervised access to their children have been identified. Specifically, during unsupervised access with the abusive parent, children may be put at an increased risk of being exposed to rigid, authoritarian parenting; of continued or intensified undermining of the mother's authority and of the mother-child relationship; of neglectful or irresponsible parenting; of psychological abuse and manipulation; of physical or sexual abuse; of inconsistent parenting; and of violence in their abusive parent's new relationships (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). There is also the risk that during unsupervised access, the children would be exposed to new threats or acts of violence toward their mother as well as the risk of abduction or of being exposed to attitudes that leads to violent behaviour toward others, particularly women, (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). In light of these risks, researchers have argued that, in the vast majority of cases, it is not in a child's best interests to be placed in the custody of an abusive parent (ABA Center on Children, 1994; APA Presidential Task Force, 1996; National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 1994). Instead, supervised visitation is recommended (ABA Center on Children, 1994; Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Jaffe et al., 2008; Sturge & Glaser, 2000), especially for the first one to two years following a separation. Visitation should be supervised by a professional familiar with the

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dynamics of spousal violence, its impact on family functioning, and the range of concerns regarding the parenting of abusive parents, including boundary violations and the subtle ways in which manipulation can occur (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). If such supervision is not available, it is recommended that contact between the abusive parent and the child should be suspended, at least temporarily, until the safety of the child can be ensured (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Jaffe et al., 2008).

Given the risks, Bancroft and Silverman (2002) suggested a tiered approach to granting perpetrators of spousal violence unsupervised access to their children. In this approach, perpetrators are gradually moved toward more “normal” contact with their children if they conduct themselves appropriately and participate in a specialized treatment program for perpetrators of spousal violence. The length of time required to progress through the various tiers is dependent on the actions, attitudes, and beliefs of the abusive parent as well as the child’s adjustment and well-being. For example, the structure of visitation should be altered or visits suspended if children are highly distressed by contact with the abusive parent (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Jaffe et al., 2008).

In their tiered approach, Bancroft & Silverman (2002) recommended that perpetrators gradually move from supervised visitation at a visitation centre through supervised visitation in the community by a trained professional to supervised visitation by friends or relatives. The final three tiers should involve unsupervised access of varying duration. Specifically, they suggested that perpetrators of spousal violence may be granted two to four hours, followed by daylong visits and, eventually, overnight visitation. However, they generally discourage overnight visitation because children often have difficulty feeling safe in their care. They also indicated that overnight visits increase the opportunity for perpetrator’s parenting problems to be revealed while limiting a child’s access to supports outside the family for a longer duration. Further, they argued that overnight visitation should be used only when the following conditions have been met: the separation occurred more than two years ago; the children are 10-years-old or older; the abusive parent is found, by evaluation, not to be a serious risk to abuse the children or to undermine the mother’s parenting; the abusive parent has completed or is in the process of completing a full year program for perpetrators of spousal violence with good participation; and the children want overnight visitation.

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While addressing the identification and handling of spousal violence within the legal system has led to a new era in dispute resolution and the determination of custody, more refinement is needed. Further, in order to protect the best interests of victims of abuse as well as their children, the recommendations of and best practices outlined in empirical research need to be reflected in family law and legal practice.

1.3.3 Parallel parenting custody arrangements. In recent years, new dispute resolution strategies to resolve custody disputes in cases of high conflict have been proposed. These developments have dramatically changed the awarding of custody. That is, since the 1990s and to families characterized by a high level of conflict, Canadian courts have begun imposing joint or sole custody orders, managed by parallel parenting plans. These custody arrangements were developed to provide parents with equal parenting rights.

Parallel parenting custody arrangements differ from joint legal and physical custody orders in that they are made specifically in cases of high conflict. They are thought to maximize parent-child contact while minimizing interparental conflict. They are based on the premise that children will benefit from maximum contact with both parents if neither parent is clearly the ‘better’ parent. As well, they differ from sole custody orders in that the physical care of the child is shared to a greater extent (can be quite substantial in some cases) and the capacity to make major decisions affecting the child’s life (e.g., which school to attend) are shared or divided between parents, rather than being the sole responsibility of one parent.

Parallel parenting custody arrangements have the potential to positively affect the post-divorce adjustment of children by limiting contact, communication, and conflict between parents. In order to make parallel parenting arrangements work in high conflict situations, the custody and access arrangements are highly structured and detailed. For example, parallel parenting orders delineate that: parents assume responsibility for the children during the time they are with that parent; a parent has no say or influence over the actions of the other parent while the children are in the other parent’s care; there is no expectation of flexibility or negotiation; a parent does not plan activities for the children during the other parent’s time; contact between the parents is minimized; children are not asked to deliver verbal messages; and information about health, school, and vacations is shared in writing usually in the form of an access book (Epstein & Madsen, 2004). Further, parallel parenting custody arrangements often include an additional set

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of rules. For example, many orders prevent parents from making unfavourable comments about each other (Epstein & Madsen, 2004).

Considerable controversy surrounds the use of parallel parenting custody arrangements (Birnbaum, & Fidler, 2005; Crossman, & Mykitiuk, 1998; Epstein & Madsen, 2004; Kisthardt, & Fines, 2005). It has been argued that, while intending to disengage parents from conflict with one another, the parallel parenting arrangements assume that high-conflict parents can cooperate with each other to a certain extent and that maximizing contact with both parents can somehow negate the impact of conflict on children. Although intended to remove the power struggle between parents, parallel parenting orders are believed to be based on the naïve optimism that parents can be compelled to cooperate in high conflict situations (Epstein & Madsen, 2004). Epstein and Madsen (2004) argued that “highly conflicted parents tend to remain in conflict or disengage from each other. They do not become low conflict, cooperative parents” (p. 26). They also stated that the numerous rules and guidelines prescribed by parallel parenting orders cannot manage conflict in such a way that it does not affect the children involved.

In contrast, others have argued that, through the process of parenting in parallel, caregiving environments become more consistent as parental tensions and attempts at alienation decrease (Garber, 2004). These changes are attributed to the structure itself since parallel parenting arrangements restrict contact and communication between parents, thereby limiting the opportunity for conflict. The structure, limiting discussion to issues pertinent to child care only, is believed to enable parents to communicate more effectively in regards to a common goal, namely optimal attention to their child’s day-to-day needs and routines (Garber, 2004). Further, in the structured environment, negative feelings are believed to subside more quickly and when required, parents should be able to communicate in a more cooperative or at least less antagonistic manner (Garber, 2004). Any decline in tension or alienation has the potential to have dramatic and rewarding benefits for the child involved.

Although advocates argue that they serve the best interests of children, parallel parenting custody arrangements have only been implemented in a handful of cases across Canada since the 1990s. In fact, according to online judgement databases, they are referenced in only 181 cases and have only been implemented in 53 of those cases. Four of these cases were later appealed and the parallel parenting plans vacated. It is important to note that, in the majority of cases

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where a parallel parenting custody arrangement was implemented, a detailed parenting plan was often not included. However, all had some limitations placed on parents' communication with one another.

Despite the controversy surrounding their use, researchers agree that parallel parenting custody arrangements should not be used in cases of spousal violence or cases with an ongoing risk for violence unless a comprehensive assessment that ensures that there is not an ongoing risk of violence to the child and/or the other parent has been completed (Bala et al., 2007; Jaffe et al., 2005). Specifically, whether or not the perpetrator of the violence has taken responsibility and successfully completed an intervention, whether or not the child has received any services or is experiencing ongoing symptoms of trauma, and the developmental stage of the child involved needs to be considered. If the use of a parallel parenting custody arrangement is deemed appropriate, monitoring is also encouraged to ensure adherence to that the custody arrangement (Jaffe et al., 2005).

Plans similar to parallel parenting custody arrangements have also been implemented in the United States. For example, to assist in the resolution of visitation and access-related issues, court-appointed parenting coordinators have been introduced. While they are only assigned to divorcing couples for a time-limited period, coordinators help to establish visitation schedules, enforce their compliance, and mediate attempts of parental alienation when it impedes visitation (Baris et al., 2000; Garber, 2004). Involvement with a parenting coordinator also minimizes the amount of time families spend in an already overburdened and adversarial court system. While the use of parenting coordinators is increasing throughout the United States, there is limited research documenting their effectiveness, particularly in instances of high conflict divorce.

Also, in a number of states, directed coparenting interventions (DCIs) have been introduced to manage high conflict family situations (Garber, 2004). DCIs are a directed, child-centred, and time-limited intervention aimed at establishing consistent boundaries, limits, and routines within and between the children's separate caregiving environments (Garber, 2004). Consistency is achieved by having parents work in parallel with each other and by prohibiting parental attempts to impose control outside of his or her environment (Garber, 2004). Similar to parallel parenting plans, the goal of DCIs is to reduce parental conflict by establishing consistency through a structured parallel process. While the effectiveness of DCIs is relatively

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unknown, preliminary results have indicated that DCIs are effective in reducing conflict between highly conflicted parents with a history of failed conjoint interventions (Garber, 2004). However, further research particularly with cases of spousal violence is required.

1.3.4 Judicial decision making. In order to assist the courts in determining what is in the best interests of children, numerous federal and provincial legislative acts have been developed. In 1968, the Divorce Act was established in Canada. This act pertains to all matters of divorce including corollary relief, spousal support, and the division of property. Despite its comprehensive nature, guidelines for determining child custody arrangements are unclear. For example, the amendments made to the Divorce Act (1985) state that the court should take the best interests of a child into consideration by examining the “condition, means, needs, and other circumstances of a child” (Divorce Act, 1985: Section 16(8)). Unfortunately, no further guidelines are provided to assist the court in determining child placement.

Clearer guidelines for determining child placement have been established in provincial legislation. This legislation aims to protect children in situations where married or unmarried parents or a person of sufficient interest petitions for custody. For example, in Saskatchewan, the Children’s Law Act (1997) highlights seven areas that need to be considered in custody and access disputes. These areas include: the quality of attachment between the proposed parent or caregiver and child; the personality, character, and emotional needs of the child; the physical, psychological, social, and economic needs of the child; the parent or caregiver’s capacity to act as a legal guardian of the child; the proposed home environment to raise the child; the proposed parent or caregiver’s future plan for the child; and the child’s wishes (Children’s Law Act, 1997). Provincial legislation throughout Canada reflects similar guidelines.

Although it is intended to be comprehensive, the aforementioned federal and provincial legislation fails to address a number of factors. For example, it has been argued that, since judges are generally unaware of the potential psychological consequences of divorce (Stamps et al., 1997) and if the best interests of children are to be protected, more psychological factors need to be reflected in child-custody legislation. Concern has also been raised regarding the lack of clear standards and guidelines for the application of child-custody legislation (Grisso, 2003; Stamps et al., 1997). For instance, making it difficult to decide which parent is best suited to meet the needs

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of his or her children given their different strengths and weaknesses as caregivers the importance of different child-custody legislative criteria is not stated.

Further, judges have tended to disagree on the importance given to different factors (Stamps et al., 1997). While preferences of children for a particular parenting arrangement has been found to directly affect judges' child custody decisions (Kunin et al., 1992; Lambiase & Cumes, 1987), recommendations for primary physical custody are often based on which parent provided for his or her child's emotional and physical needs prior to the separation (e.g., the status quo; Sorensen et al., 1997). Unfortunately, despite what is known regarding the impact of parental conflict on the post-divorce adjustment of children, judges frequently fail to take the degree of parental conflict into consideration (Sorensen et al., 1997). With the more recent introduction of parallel parenting custody arrangements in Canada, the impact of parental conflict on the post-divorce adjustment of children has been recognized; however, how judges determine when to use parallel parenting custody arrangements remains unclear.

In recent years, spousal violence has also been found to influence child custody decisions. Since the late 1980s, the Canadian justice system, including its judges, has recognized the influence of spousal violence on children and when making decisions about children has started to consider whether or not a relationship is abusive (Bala et al., 2007). However, the extent to which judges consider spousal violence in their decision-making process remains unclear. In recent years, Bala and colleagues (2007) have argued that, if the judge is satisfied that this individual was, in fact, abusive toward his or her partner, an abusive spouse is unlikely to obtain custody of the children. While proving the abusive nature of the relationship often requires the testimony of an expert witness, some judges within Canada are now prepared to take "judicial notice" of the harmful effects of spousal violence on children without expert testimony (Bala et al., 2007).

Within the province of Saskatchewan, legislation does not acknowledge the importance or impact of spousal violence when dealing with custody issues (Bala et al., 2007). In contrast, the issue of spousal violence in the determination of custody has received special attention in Newfoundland and Labrador, Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario. Within these provinces, specific legislation acknowledges spousal violence as an important factor in determining the 'best interests of a child' (see the Children's Law Act (1990) of Newfoundland and Labrador,

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Alberta's Family Law Act (2003), recent amendments to Manitoba's Family Maintenance Act (2010), as well as amendments to the Children's Law Reform Act (2006) in Ontario).

1.3.5 Summary. The award of child custody and access has changed considerably since the early nineteenth century (Kunin et al., 1992; Sorensen et al., 1997; Stamps, 2002; Stamps et al., 1997; Warshak, 1996). With an increased emphasis on joint custody arrangements, more and more children are able to maintain contact with both of their parents following divorce. Although a number of custody and access concerns have been raised, judges, when addressing the best interests of the children, continue to favour joint custody arrangements (Kunin et al., 1992; Sorensen et al., 1997; Stamps, 2002; Stamps et al., 1997; Warshak, 1996). However, since exposure to parental conflict has been shown to negatively affect children (Ackerman, 2001; Deutsch & Kline Pruett, 2009; Doolittle & Deutsch, 1999; Ellis, 2000; Jaffe et al., 2005; Ram et al., 2002), especially in cases of spousal violence (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Doyne, et al., 1999; Jaffe et al., 2008; Sheeran & Hampton, 1999), there is considerable debate surrounding the use of joint custody arrangements in cases of high conflict divorce. To reduce exposure to parental conflict, parallel parenting plans have been introduced by the Canadian Courts. With the use of parallel parenting custody arrangements increasing across Canada, more research on their effectiveness in managing parental conflict is required (Birnbaum & Fidler, 2005; Crossman & Mykitiuk, 1998; Epstein & Madsen, 2004; Freeman, 1998). It is necessary to determine whether parallel parenting custody arrangements are in the best interests of children.

1.4 Purpose and Specific Aims of this Research

Albeit a novel form of custody arrangement for high conflict families, parallel parenting plans have had only limited research pertaining to their effectiveness and impact on the lives of families. The current research intended to contribute to the literature by gaining a better understanding of the experience of parents involved with parallel parenting custody arrangements. Since research on it is nascent, it was difficult to predict what the driving forces behind the participants' experience would be. Instead of predictions, the following research questions were posed. How are parallel parenting custody arrangements experienced by parents? What meaning is made of those experiences? It was anticipated that, by inviting reflection on their experience, participants would shed light on the following questions: Are parallel parenting custody arrangements experienced as reducing the level of conflict in the parenting relationship?

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Are they experienced as likely to be followed as dictated by the courts? Further, it was thought that analysis of their experience would provide answers to the following questions: Under what circumstances do the parallel parenting custody arrangements work best? And, at what level, frequency, and intensity of parental conflict do they work, if at all?

The literature review indicates that, by the time parallel parenting plans are considered by the courts as a resolution, there has very likely been a high level of conflict in the custody dispute. Because the meaning of it varies depending on the context (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), the experience of parallel parenting was expected to be influenced by the attributes of conflict, including the length of the dispute, the nature and quality of conflict in the parenting relationship, the perspectives of the opposing parents with regard to central issues defining the best interests of the children, and the success of previous attempts at resolution. The exact influence of these factors on the experience of parallel parenting was unknown and was hoped to be elucidated in this study.

The current study was specifically designed to add to the literature in a number of ways. First, few studies have explored the experience of divorce from a qualitative perspective (e.g., Jordan, 2000; Oliphant, Brown, Cambron, & Yankeelov, 2002; Rice, 2005; Schneller & Arditti, 2004). Of these studies, few have examined the experience and meaning making process of divorce in depth or in a way that preserves the individuality of participants. Furthermore, the majority of research, both quantitative and qualitative, has focused on the perspectives of mothers, with a few studies focusing on the experience of fathers. Since both parents (mothers and fathers) were invited to participate, this research gave fathers and mothers a voice with which to express their concerns and opinions about the custody arrangements and divorce proceedings.

Few qualitative research studies have looked specifically at child custody arrangements (e.g., Baker, 2005; Manocherian, 1985). Of the studies that do exist, issues related to child custody are mentioned only in passing and there is a much greater focus on child adjustment or the mediation process in general. Since the type and level of conflict between divorcing parents can lead to some very qualitatively different experiences, more research to understand the meaning-making process associated with specific custody arrangements is required. Research on parallel parenting custody arrangements has not approached this experience from a constructivist

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perspective. That perspective seeks to understand the meaningfulness of human actions and interactions as experienced and constructed by an individual in a given context.

2. Research Design and Methodology

2.1 Methodological Framework

To achieve the goal of understanding the experience of parents involved in parallel parenting custody arrangements, eight individual interviews, framed by a constructivist (interpretivist) perspective, were completed. As an intellectual process, constructivism is built on a number of assumptions including that knowledge is not static; that people undergo change; and that contexts function to facilitate, hinder, or otherwise influence human goals and psychosocial processes (Creswell, 1998). Therefore, from a constructivist worldview, multiple perspectives are believed to exist, and multiple and alternative factors are recognized to influence practice, education, and research in positive ways in any discipline.

The constructivist paradigm of inquiry, as identified by Guba and Lincoln (1994), denotes the nature of reality to be a local and specific mental construction formed by a person. This paradigm also holds that multiple mental constructions collectively exist regarding reality (relativism). Therefore, the “knower” is subjectively and interactively linked in relationship to what can be known. Methodologically, the researcher is argued to engage in a process of inquiry that creates knowledge through interpreted constructions that are dialectically transacted in order to achieve a more informed and sophisticated reconstructed understanding of a phenomenon (Annells, 1996, p. 385). In qualitative research, the individual understanding of a phenomenon is not presumed to apply to everyone. However, the in-depth exploration of individual perspectives of a phenomenon allows others to connect to the experience and to further the understanding of phenomena.

According to Lincoln and Guba (2000), constructivist inquirers seek to understand contextualized meaning. In other words, constructivist inquirers seek to understand the meaningfulness of human actions and interactions as experienced and constructed by an individual in a given context. As such, the aim of constructivism is based on the assumption that the social world, as distinct from the physical world, does not exist independently, “out there”, waiting to be discovered by intelligent and technically expert social inquirers. Instead, the dimensions of the social world (emotional, linguistic, symbolic, interactive, and political) and their meaningfulness, or lack thereof, are believed to be constructed by agentic actors. From this perspective then, the meaning constructed from the experience of parallel parenting custody

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arrangements depends on the context in which it occurs. The experience and construction of meaning is expected to vary from one individual to the next, given the different personal contexts in which individuals live, the different contexts in which parallel parenting plans are implemented as well as each participant's unique perspective.

A number of constructivist perspectives, including cognitive, social, radical, and new constructivism exist. Cognitive constructivism is based on the work of Jean Piaget. Piaget's theory of cognitive development purports that individuals cannot be given information that they immediately understand and use. Instead, Piaget proposes that individuals must construct their own knowledge through experience. Specifically, Piaget's theory of cognitive development describes how learners develop cognitive abilities and predicts what learners can and cannot understand at different developmental stages (Piaget, 1980). Piaget's theory of development is the major foundation for cognitive constructivist approaches to teaching and learning. From this perspective then, the construction of knowledge is an individual process.

New constructivism is based on the early principles described by Dewey (1933, 1938) and led to the establishment of chaos theory. Dewey (1938) argued that discourses in practice, education, and technology are not an 'either/or' debate, but rather a 'both/and' or 'it depends' debate with many different conceptualizations of knowledge being equally important. From this perspective then, knowledge was believed to be both individually and socially constructed. These principles are consistent with chaos theory, which purports that everything is subject to debate. As a result, in determining what the unique knowledge is that has created a particular phenomenon, many conceptualizations of knowledge are believed to be equally important. For example, what it means to parallel parent may differ from one individual to the next; however, each individual's conceptualization of this experience is believed to be equally important to understanding the phenomenon of parallel parenting.

The two most comprehensive and best known constructivist approaches are radical and social constructivism (Staver, 1998). Radical constructivism holds that, among several accounts or representations of an object, there may not necessarily be any one accurate or true representation. Several individuals who experience the same phenomenon may perceive or understand it differently; however, this does not make one individual's experience any more or less meaningful than another's. Taken to the extreme, radical constructivism posits that all

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accounts or representations of an object are believed to be relative (relativism), with no particular account or representations being seen as better than the other (Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997). Given the relative or subjective nature of reality, one parent's account of his or her parallel parenting experience is not believed to be more accurate or true than another parent's account even if differences exist between their experiences. Further, from this perspective, the understanding of an account or representation can be contextualized in any number of ways depending upon the frame of reference utilized. For example, a judge imposing a parallel parenting custody arrangement may have a dramatically different understanding of the phenomenon as compared to a parent who has to live within the confines of such a custody arrangement.

Social constructivism purports that knowledge is derived from and maintained by social interaction. As Burr (1995) noted, "what we regard as 'truth' ... is a product not of objective observation of the world, but of the social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged with each other" (p.4). From this perspective then, knowledge is an invention or artefact of a particular culture or society, with each culture or society ascribing different significance or meaning to the construct. Truth, in this context, is believed to be manifested in the experience of people and is distinct from post-positivist conceptualizations of objective truth. From a social constructivist perspective, the construct of parallel parenting is likely to hold different significance or meaning to divorced parents than it would to intact families or families in other settings or cultures. Further, given the differences in their social relationships and interactions with others (e.g., their former partners, lawyers, family members, child, etc.), the experience or understanding of parallel parenting is likely to vary among divorced parents. While experiences of parallel parenting or the experience of conflict in the parallel parenting context can be described from a social constructivist perspective, objective claims of the effectiveness of these custody arrangements cannot be made.

2.2 Methodological Approach

This study, while grounded in the constructivist paradigm, was influenced by the principles of phenomenology, specifically hermeneutic and social phenomenology (Creswell, 1998; Van Manen, 1997). According to Van Manen (1997), hermeneutic phenomenology attempts to "construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld" (p.18). He argued that, in practice, a full description is impossible to achieve because "lived life is always

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more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal” (p.18). That is, the understanding of a phenomenon is bounded by a participant’s ability to articulate their thoughts and experiences (Baillie, Smith, Hewison, & Mason, 2000). These experiences, thoughts, and feelings are difficult to grasp let alone describe to another individual. Consequently, from this perspective, phenomenology is an ongoing, never ending process in which one does the best he or she can in the moment to describe and understand a phenomenon.

Social phenomenology focuses on how individuals consciously develop meaning out of social and interpersonal interactions. Since divorce is both a social and personal phenomenon, it was important to use a methodological approach that recognized and reflected the importance of exploring both the personal and social worlds of individuals.

Within phenomenology, our pre-understandings, prejudices, biases, and assumptions are believed to potentially direct the study and/or result in a premature interpretation of a phenomenon (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998; Van Manen, 1997) because “the topics we study and write about are emotion laden, close to the people, and practical” (Creswell, 1998, p.19). Subsequently, the difficulty in studying a phenomenon “is not always that we know too little about the phenomenon we wish to investigate, but that we know too much” (Van Manen, 1997, p.46). Although some researchers have argued that, in order to see and understand a phenomenon in its pure form, one must be presuppositionless (Osborne, 1994), others have argued presuppositionless knowing is not possible (Ray, 1994). Instead, Van Manen (1990) suggested that researchers “try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character” (p.47). This process is believed to lead to increased self-awareness in addition to the identification of assumptions. Consequently, my biases and assumptions, like values, need to be identified and reflected upon through consultation and writing in order to minimize and/or identify their impact on this research.

In phenomenological inquiry, interviews serve as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material from participants that may assist in the development of a richer and deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). Interviews can also be used as a means to develop a conversational relationship with a participant about the meaning of an experience or phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). By developing such a relationship, the

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individuality of the participating voices is preserved and each voice is recognized as being equally entitled to participate in the dialogue. This arrangement allows participants to feel more secure and less vulnerable as they share their personal experiences.

2.3 Method

2.3.1 Participants. Participants with direct knowledge or experience with custody arrangements managed by parallel parenting plans were sought to participate in this study. Eligible participants were identified through online public records of court judgements available through provincial law society judgment databases across three Canadian provinces. Participants were contacted if a parallel parenting custody arrangement was implemented to resolve their custody dispute. A small sample size was expected given the limited number of eligible participants. Eleven cases of parallel parenting were identified. Following approval by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board, letters and brochures of recruitment (see Appendix A and B) were mailed to the family law professionals who provided legal counsel in the identified cases. Family law professionals were asked to forward an enclosed recruitment package (see Appendix C and D) to the individuals they had represented. Therein was an invitation to contact me directly via telephone and/or email to arrange an interview. Initially, two recruitment attempts, approximately eight months apart, were made. The second attempt yielded no additional participants. After two contact attempts, it was assumed that invitees did not wish to participate.

Due to a low response rate, recruitment was subsequently expanded to include a national sample. In total, 53 cases of parallel parenting were identified across Canada. Of these, twelve individuals were self-represented and contact information was not in the public record. In an additional five cases, contact information for the eligible participants' legal counsel was not available. Consequently, 89 eligible participants from 47 cases of parallel parenting were contacted through their legal counsel.

Of the eligible participants contacted in the first two waves of recruitment, only two agreed to participate¹. However, when the recruitment base was expanded to include a national

¹ An additional participant was interviewed, however, I was unable to contact him following the interview to provide him with an opportunity to review his transcript and sign a consent form allowing the content of his interview to be used for the purposes of this research. As a result, it was assumed that he did not want to participate in the study and the data from his interview were not included in this research.

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sample, six additional participants agreed to participate². Each participant was interviewed independently. Since the eligible participants were initially identified through an online judgment database, the online judgment was also consulted.

The experience of the participants' former partners was not included in this research unless they voluntarily opted to participate when initially contacted by their former legal counsel. Additional attempts at recruiting the former partners were not attempted because it could have compromised the confidentiality of the participants and could potentially create or exacerbate the level of conflict in the parenting relationship. As a result, this research represents only one side of the target experience. If two participants from the same custody case happened to participate, their experience was presented and analyzed independent of one another.

2.3.2 Procedure. Sixteen individual interviews (two interviews for each of the eight participants), each lasting between one to three-and-a-half hours, took place between August 2007 and December 2011. Upon initial telephone and/or email contact, participants were screened for their eligibility and suitability to participate (see Appendix E for a list of screening questions). Of note, participants were asked if their relationship with their former partners was characterized by abuse (physical, verbal, or sexual). If they responded affirmatively, participants were asked if they were safe or, alternatively, had a safety plan or measures in place (e.g., participation in a Domestic Violence Emergency Response Service). If they indicated that they felt like they were potentially at risk of harm and did not have a current safety plan in place, participants were provided with a list of community resources to contact and advised that, until such safety measures were in place, participation in this research was not possible. Four participants indicated that their relationship with their former partners was characterized by abuse. These participants indicated that the abuse was either not ongoing or that they had adequate safety measures in place to protect themselves as well as their child.

² Data from one child and the new partners of two participants were also collected during the first wave of recruitment. Since this study aimed to explore the experience of parallel parenting from individuals directly involved in parallel parenting custody arrangements, the data from the child and two new partners were excluded from this study. However, their data were stored for use in future research.

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The remaining four participants indicated that their relationship with their former partners, although highly conflicted, was not characterized by abuse. However, in two cases, aspects of power and control, dynamics of abusive relationships, were reported. Since perpetrators of spousal violence are known to minimize and deflect responsibility while victims frequently deny the presence of abuse (see Neilson (2012) for a review), it is possible that these two cases were characterized by abuse. However, without additional information from participants and their former partners, the exact nature and quality of conflict in the parenting relationship could not be determined. Therefore, cases of suspected abuse were categorized according to the participants' description of their relationship, as non-abusive.

Following the screening procedure, arrangements were made to interview the eligible participants. Participants were sent a copy of the consent form prior to the interview (see Appendix F). As soon as possible, all interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim (as indicated in the consent procedure). Interviews were conducted in person or by telephone. Telephone interviews provided participants with a higher level of anonymity. For safe, secure storage and since the majority of interviews were conducted by telephone, all audio recordings were transferred onto my personal drive (or "cabinet" through PAWS) on the University's network immediately following the interview. This transfer of data eliminated the need to transport these recordings on a portable device or machine between settings (e.g., campus, office, and home).

Wanting sufficient depth and to help inform subsequent interviews, I conducted all of the interviews and transcribed the majority of them. A confidential research assistant transcribed the remaining interviews. I verified all of the transcripts by comparing the transcripts with the audio recordings. Prior to and following interviews, as well as throughout the research process, my personal thoughts and emotional reactions were recorded in a reflexive journal. Memorable events or environmental factors that may have influenced the course of the interview were also recorded.

Each initial interview lasted between one to three-and-a-half hours and was open-ended in nature. Participants were not informed if their former partners had elected to participate in this research. At the beginning, the purpose of the study, namely understanding the experience of parallel parenting, was reviewed. Next came a discussion of a possible second interview. After a

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detailed discussion, participants were asked to give written or verbal informed consent (see Appendix F) and to have their interview audio-recorded and transcribed (see Appendix G for the transcript release form). A demographics sheet (see Appendix H), used as a quick reference guide, was also completed by myself throughout the interview process. Participants were not specifically asked for the information on the demographics sheet because it was expected that it would come up spontaneously throughout the course of the interview and could also be found in the online judgment database. In order to forward an encrypted password protected copy of the interview transcript to the participants for their review, their contact information (mailing or email address) was recorded on this sheet. To protect confidentiality, general demographic information (age, sex, length of marriage and custody dispute) from this sheet was compiled to form group participant data.

Interviews were selected as the mode of data collection since they provided the flexibility to investigate important or interesting issues that arose during the course of the interview (Smith, 2004). For the first interview, participants were asked to share their story in whatever way they saw fit and therefore were given a strong role in determining how the interview proceeded. An open-ended interview format minimized possible influence of my preconceptions and expectations on the participants' storytelling. An interview guideline (see Appendix I) helped keep the probes to a minimum. This guideline was developed from literature on the goals of parallel parenting, as well as on high conflict divorce and coparenting.

At the conclusion of the first interview, the participants were invited to participate in a second interview, the purpose of which was to provide an opportunity for participants to discuss their interview transcript, to clarify any intended meanings or understandings of their experience, to gather more information, if necessary, and to provide their reactions and feedback regarding the transcript. All agreed to participate in a second interview. The consent form, including transcript release, was once again discussed. The same procedure outlined above for the consent form, including transcript release, was followed. Follow-up interviews lasted between one to three hours and were completed individually. In total, more than twenty-seven hours of interview data were collected.

At the conclusion of both interviews, the transcription process was reviewed. All participants were given the opportunity for transcript review prior to signing the release form

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(see Appendix G). However, if they declined this opportunity but wished the interview data be used for the purposes of this research, the participants' decision was accepted verbally and recorded following the interview.

Depending on their preference for either an email in an encrypted password protected document or a paper copy by registered mail, participants received a review copy of the initial and follow-up transcripts. The key/legend for the pseudonyms and associated names was sent in a separate envelope or, alternatively, in a separate email. Note that transcripts had false starts, repetitions, and paralinguistic utterances removed in order to make them more readable.

2.3.3 Analysis. Consistent with the thematic analytic strategy, data analysis of verbatim transcripts occurred simultaneously with data collection as did the accuracy check. Next, to track nuances, any additional information documented in my notes was incorporated into the transcripts to ensure its consideration during data analysis. Then convergence of evidence from different sources (e.g., online court judgments) was checked. At this point, data were ready for manual thematic analysis.

2.3.3.1 Thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used to generate descriptive cross-case themes, patterns, and findings as well as to compare and contrast the data to the published literature. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within data. Not only can thematic analysis assist in the organization and thick description of data, it can also assist in the interpretation of the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of conducting thematic analysis, described by many other authors (Boyatzis, 1998; Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Tuckett, 2005), followed the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

First, a single transcript was read a number of times. In an initial step referred to as coding, notes about any passages within the transcript that were significant or interesting were recorded electronically in the right-hand margin of a word processing file. Some passages were also highlighted electronically. The identified codes were data-driven as opposed to theory-driven. Once all data were coded, extracts were collated under each code, placed in a separate word processing file and evaluated. Information rich quotes pertained directly to the topic areas being probed or discussed and deepened the understanding of the target experience. Details within a narrative piece that did not provide new or pertinent information were excluded. Purely

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social or extraneous comments and redundant remarks were also excluded. The information rich quotes were then transferred into a new word processing file (as opposed to index cards). The participants initials or assigned pseudonym, interview number (e.g., one or two), and page number of the transcript were recorded alongside the selected quotes to facilitate referencing of the transcript when necessary.

Following the collation of data extracts and the creation of preliminary categories or themes, information was thematically grouped. Visual representations (e.g., lists) helped to sort the different codes into themes. To find the best fit with the data, the preliminary categories or themes were revised numerous times. A “bottom-up” procedure in which categories were developed from the selected quotes themselves rather than from preconceived or previously identified categories or theoretical constructs was employed. The only guiding theory was that, when asked about experiences, people report meanings they make based on their understanding of the unfolding of events. Preliminary categories were modified or collapsed to reduce redundancy.

Within thematic analysis, themes capture something important about the data in relation to the research questions and represent some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that a single theme might be given considerable attention in some data items and little or none in others. They also noted that any given theme might occur throughout a data set or only in a small portion of it.

Themes can be identified at one of two levels: semantic or latent. Ideally, thematic analysis progresses from description (e.g., identified patterns in semantic content) to interpretation where there is an attempt to theorize the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications (Patton, 1990), often in relation to previous research. At the semantic level, themes are identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data and do not go beyond what a participant has said or what has been written (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This level is descriptive and focuses on identifying patterns, descriptors, or typologies in the data. The latent or interpretative level, in contrast, goes beyond the semantic content of the data and attempts to identify or examine the underlying assumptions, ideas, and conceptualizations that are believed to shape or inform the semantic content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It involves more interpretation of the data than does the semantic approach and allows for a more

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contextualized understanding of a phenomenon. This latent approach, consistent with the aims of the constructivist paradigm, was adopted for this research.

The identified themes were examined to ensure that the data within them cohered together meaningfully and that the themes were distinct from one another. They were also reviewed to ensure that the collated extracts within each theme formed a coherent pattern. They were then checked with the original transcripts to ensure that they fit with what the participant had actually said. Further reviewing and refining of the coding schemes continued until changes to the coding scheme were minimal and more nuanced. The themes were then listed in a separate data processing file and organized into superordinate or overarching themes and sub-themes. The existing literature was then consulted to assist my understanding and interpretation of the overarching themes that emerged from the interviews.

2.3.4 Ethical considerations. To protect the anonymity of the participants, all participants were given a pseudonym and any identifying information (e.g., specific occupation position) was altered. Since eligible participants were identified from a small group of parallel parenting custody arrangements across Canada, participants may be identified through their responses. During the informed consent and transcript release procedures, all participants were notified of this possibility and were asked to review the transcript before releasing it. Even with these safeguards in place, some participants expressed reluctance or appeared to be reluctant to disclose some of their experiences for fear of being perceived as ‘unfriendly’ or of provoking conflict with their respective former partners. In response to the highly sensitive nature of the participants’ experiences and the depth of detail related in interview, some details of the participants’ custody dispute and relationship with their former partners were omitted or censored. Other additional details of their cases, revealed in Sections 3 and 4, are collated with the experiences of other participants. These procedures attempted to protect anonymity further.

An additional ethical consideration addressed participants whose relationship with their former partners was characterized by abuse. Recall that, although parallel parenting custody arrangements are intended to be used in high conflict custody disputes, their use in cases of spousal violence is contraindicated (Jaffe et al., 2005). Hence, concerns of spousal violence were initially not expected. However, in the first wave of recruitment, one of the participants related that her former partner was abusive toward her and continued to attempt to control and

manipulate her even though they had been separated for a number of years. Disclosures of spousal violence and ongoing high levels of conflict called for extra precautions to protect the participant's identity as well as to ensure her and her family's safety. Consultations with the research supervisor, the research committee, and the pertinent research literature were undertaken. Concerns were also discussed directly with the participant. The Research Ethics Board (REB) at the University was also consulted. After careful consideration, this participant was not believed to be at imminent risk of harm. In fact, given the reported changes in context, her level of risk was thought to have decreased considerably over the past few years. In light of this participant's disclosure, a spousal violence screening measure (see Appendix E) was refined and used in all subsequent recruitment.

2.4 Trustworthiness as Quality Control in Qualitative Research

The utility of qualitative research has long been debated (see Patton (2002) for a detailed discussion of the paradigms debate between qualitative and quantitative research methods). In particular, validity within qualitative research methods is a contentious issue. Since qualitative research relies upon epistemologies, philosophies, and methodologies that are quite distinct from quantitative research designs, the traditional post-positivist quality control criteria do not apply (Becker, 1996). This claim begs the question of how to evaluate qualitative research. To date, and to serve a similar purpose, a number of alternative and significantly different quality control criteria have been proposed. To ensure that the data were interpreted and presented in a manner that was an authentic and credible representation of the participants' experiences, the principle of trustworthiness was adopted.

A number of ways of establishing the trustworthiness of interpretations have been proposed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stiles, 1993; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Trustworthiness emphasizes balance, fairness, and conscientiousness through the consideration of multiple interests, multiple perspectives, and multiple realities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In general, trustworthiness can be broken down into four components: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These four criteria are used to address the 'fit' between participants' views and a researcher's representation of them, the generalizability of inquiry, the dependability or 'reliability' of the findings, and the

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believability and overall authenticity of the findings and interpretations. All four criteria were applied in the present study.

2.4.1 Credibility. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility is concerned with the nature of reality and can be established using several methods including prolonged engagement, triangulation, negative case analysis, peer debriefing, referential adequacy, member checks, and ensuring the criteria of adequacy and appropriateness are met. Internal validity within a post-positivist paradigm is the equivalent to credibility in a qualitative one.

2.4.1.1 Prolonged engagement. Prolonged engagement is having a sustained relationship with the participants through the interview and transcript review process. As detailed in Section 2.3.2, the interview process consisted of two interviews (initial and follow-up) with each participant in addition to an introductory conversation and follow-up exchange of information, by phone or in writing. Completion of interviews and transcript review took a minimum of two weeks and as long as three months. On average, this process took approximately three to five weeks. Throughout this period of time, contact with the participants was maintained by email. In several cases, given the participants' interest in the research process and findings, contact continued well beyond the conclusion of the participants' involvement in this research project.

2.4.1.2 Triangulation. Triangulation refers to gathering information from a variety of methods, theories, data sources, and observers and then examining the convergence of data across perspectives. Triangulation provides an opportunity to look at the same phenomenon in a multitude of ways in an attempt to overcome biases that are often inherent in single-method, single-observer, and single-theory studies (Denzin, 1989; Patton, 2002). For the purpose of this research, data source and investigator triangulation were used to help reinforce the trustworthiness of this study. Data source triangulation involves comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information (Denzin, 1989; Patton, 2002). This criterion was addressed by comparing my observations with the interviews, checking for the consistency of information reported by participants over time (e.g., over the course of the interview and follow-up interview), and comparing the perspectives of people from different points of view (e.g., the online judgement and other parents), when possible.

The use of data source triangulation was limited within the context of this research given the sample size. Although multiple sources of information were used (e.g., eight participants)

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and participants were interviewed a number of times, ideally additional sources of information (i.e., court records) would also have been consulted. Attempts were made to access court records (i.e., transcripts, affidavits, etc.) through the respective provincial court system for each case, however, such records were unavailable. Although the court records are part of the public record, the majority of the court proceedings had not been transcribed and it was not permissible for outsiders to do the work. To have these records transcribed in their entirety would have been inordinately expensive. Furthermore, the timeline for transcription was expected to be quite lengthy (e.g., six months to over a year per case). The expected cost of transcription was not anticipated or financially feasible for the purposes of this research. Consequently, the only available information from the public record in each case was the online judgment. As noted above, the online judgment was used as an additional source of information as well as for data source triangulation. However, the information provided in the online judgment varied from case to case. Further, the online judgments were often very brief and did not elaborate on the specific details of the conflict in the parenting relationship. Investigator triangulation was also used in this study to ensure that emerging themes were based on the data rather than my personal biases and subjectivity. Consequently, my research supervisor, committee members, and colleagues served as the external investigators in this study.

2.4.1.3 Member checking. Member checking has been identified as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.314). It involved giving the participants who gave the data the opportunity to check if what was recorded actually represented what was truly intended by that participant. In the context of this research, member checks were done throughout data collection. For example, participants were asked to review their interview transcripts to check for accuracy, clarity, and completeness. These procedures were adopted to strive towards a richer and clarified understanding and interpretation of their experience. Although the vast majority of participants wished to review the transcripts, few made any significant edits. In fact, the majority of edits simply clarified statements and did not alter the original meaning of such statements. Since English was not the first language of one of the participants, the edits of this participant focused on translating some of the statements she made in her native language. However, the meaning of such statements was not altered. Informal

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member checking also occurred during data collection in that participants had the opportunity to clarify or verify my interpretations during the interviews.

Some writers argue that member checking should extend to data analysis as well. Since participants were only familiar with their own experience and not the experiences, including the psychological content and emotional tone, of other participants, they were not involved in the review of the analysis. This aspect prevented the misinterpretation of data. However, past research has acknowledged the danger of member checks of the analysis by participants, particularly if participants have the desire to mislead the researcher or do not support interpretations that point out perceived weakness or criticism (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

2.4.1.4 Peer debriefing. Peer debriefing involves, as the name implies, consulting with peers “for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.308). Through the process of peer debriefing, self-awareness to biases and position, the testing of tentative hypotheses and the expression of emotions and thoughts can occur. I engaged in peer debriefing by consulting with colleagues familiar with qualitative research methodologies and attending meetings with my supervisor, committee members, and colleagues.

2.4.1.5 Adequacy and appropriateness of data. To ensure the credibility and rigor of the data, the criteria of adequacy and appropriateness were applied. Adequacy refers to the amount of data collected and is achieved when saturation occurs. Appropriateness refers to the selection of pertinent information according to the theoretical requirements of the study as well as the emerging themes. In qualitative research, “sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources” (Patton, 2002, p.244). Further, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), sample selection should continue to the point of redundancy, when no new information is forthcoming. This repetition or redundancy “provides concurring and confirming data, and ensures saturation” (Morse, 1998, p.76). Overall, the criteria of adequacy and appropriateness of data helped to ensure that the results of this study were rich and that the multiple realities of the participants were represented. Participant selection was discontinued when it was determined that saturation had occurred. Specifically, after interviewing eight

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participants, several recurring or redundant themes were identified through thematic analysis indicating that saturation had been reached. Participant recruitment was subsequently discontinued. The eight participants provided a rich and compelling account of the parallel parenting experience. While the eight participants shared a number of similarities, they were also different from one another in a number of respects. Although the differentiating factors between the participants' cases influenced the reported experience of conflict in the parallel parenting context, commonalities between their experiences were still evident.

2.4.2 Dependability. Dependability is akin to the post-positivist criterion of reliability. Dependability, just like reliability, is typically demonstrated by replication (Patton, 2002). Therefore, the dependability of qualitative research results relies on the replicability of the findings. In qualitative research, replication and, therefore, dependability may be established by ensuring triangulation and providing an audit trail of the research process (Campbell, 1996). An audit trail consists of a detailed chronology of research activities and processes; influences on the data collection and analysis; emerging themes, categories, or models; and analytic memos (Morrow, 2005, p.252). Within this research, the audit trail consisted of a record of written communication including email messages and letters, detailed notes from verbal meetings, personal notes, and telephone calls. Further, my preconceptions, thoughts, reactions, impressions, and interpretations about the data were recorded to enhance the dependability of the data. The data analysis and decision-making processes were also documented.

2.4.3 Transferability. Transferability is the analog to the post-positivist criterion of external validity. Transferability refers to the degree that the findings of a given study apply to other contexts or studies. Within the context of qualitative research, transferability is achieved “when the research provides sufficient information about the self (the researcher as instrument) and the research context, processes, participants, and researcher-participant relationships to enable the reader to decide how the findings may transfer” (Morrow, 2005, p.252). In order to achieve transferability, “thick” descriptive data is to be obtained and presented from the data collected through the interview process. Further, the awareness of personal biases (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998; Creswell, 1994; Kvale, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Van Manen, 1997) and their potential influence on the style of questioning used throughout interviews and the interpretations of the participants' responses and stories (Rubin & Rubin,

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1995) is to be obtained. Transferability was obtained in this study. Coming from a traditional nuclear family, I was aware that my personal views of the family may be a source of bias. In order to prevent such biases from undesirably altering the research process and to mitigate, or at least identify their impact, a journal of my thoughts, feelings, and reactions throughout the research process was maintained. I also wrote and reviewed notes pertaining to each interview and engaged in regular discussions with my research supervisor, committee members, and colleagues about the research process. I also engaged the participants in conversations about the interview process in addition to discussions about their interview transcripts, as noted above. This procedure allowed participants to offer clarity and to provide additional details.

2.4.4 Confirmability. Confirmability is the analog to the post-positivist criterion of objectivity. Gasson (2004) argued that, in order to achieve the confirmability of data, “findings should represent, as far as is (humanly) possible, the situation being researched rather than the beliefs, pet theories, or biases of the researcher” (p.93). From this perspective then, the integrity of the findings is believed to lie in the data itself. As such, the data, analytic processes, and findings must be adequately tied together so that the reader is able to confirm the adequacy of the findings (Morrow, 2005). An audit trail, triangulation, and reflexive journaling, as previously described, were completed to achieve the criterion of confirmability.

3. Findings

The findings of this study evolved from individual interviews with eight participants who had direct involvement with a parallel parenting custody arrangement. Participants were recruited on the basis of this involvement. Participants came from three Central and Western Canadian provinces and resided in six different communities. This chapter begins with a profile of each participant. This profile is followed by an in-depth presentation of three themes that emerged from interviews with the participants who shared their experiences.

The following case synopses introduce the participants. These case synopses offer a brief, censored account of the participants' relationship with their former partners and their subsequent custody dispute. Some details of the participants' cases are intentionally omitted in an effort to protect their confidentiality. The details presented throughout the discussion of the themes provides a more detailed understanding of the context and nature of the custody dispute and parenting relationship for each of the participants, allowing the reader to become more familiar with the participants and their experiences. A character map of the participants is also presented in Appendix J and can be used as a guide while reading to keep track of the participants' experience.

I made every effort to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Pseudonyms have been used and all references to organizations are described using vague but descriptive labels such as "child advocacy organization" or "retail company." References to other people, including family, friends, and professionals have also been altered to protect the anonymity of the participants. In most cases, pseudonyms or vague but descriptive labels are used to describe their role in the participants' life (e.g., "lawyer"). Specific dates or years are not used to further protect the identities of participants.

To facilitate the reading of the remaining chapters, 'child(ren)' will be referred to as 'child.' As such, 'child' will imply the presence of more than one child at times. Similarly, the term 'former partners' will be used to refer to the participants' respective former partner.

Doug

Doug and Sharon were married for eleven years. Together, they have two children, Anastasia and Malcolm, who are now both young adults. Despite separating three years prior to their divorce, they remained sexually involved with one another prior to and following their divorce. At the time of their divorce, Sharon filed for sole custody. Doug did not contest this so Sharon was granted sole custody and Doug was granted access to the children every third weekend, plus

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two weeks in the summer. Sharon moved out of province with the children shortly after the divorce was granted. Doug followed shortly thereafter. Although Doug was prohibited from contacting or coming within a mile of Sharon, she frequently brought the children over to his house for additional access time. Doug continuously expressed a desire to reconcile, but Sharon repeatedly said that she was not ready. Doug eventually grew tired of their on-again off-again relationship and ended his romantic involvement with Sharon. He filed for joint custody three years later. A parallel parenting custody arrangement was implemented at this time with their son being placed in Doug's care and their daughter in Sharon's care, both at the children's request. Shortly after the implementation of the parallel parenting custody arrangement, their daughter left home to live with a friend. Their son remained in Doug's care and saw his mother regularly. The parallel parenting custody arrangement dissolved when both children entered adulthood and started living independently. The children remain in close contact with Doug but have limited contact with Sharon.

Doug and Denise started dating three years after his divorce was finalized. They were married several years later. Denise was very involved in Anastasia and Malcolm's upbringing. This involvement has led to conflict between Sharon and Doug in the past.

Sharon and Matthew started dating two years after her divorce with Doug was finalized. Their relationship is marked by conflict and they have lived together off and on for the past several years.

Jamie

Jamie and Sam were together for six years. They were married for three of those years. Together they had two sons. Following the birth of their children, they began to experience marital difficulties. Allegations of infidelity were made by both parties. As the conflict mounted, their relationship further deteriorated. They separated after three years of marriage. Initially, both parties remained in the matrimonial home. However, after a few months, this arrangement became untenable and Sam left with the children. An interim agreement was eventually reached granting Sam sole custody of the children and Jamie access on alternate weekends as well as one or two days during the week. Jamie contested this agreement and, instead, requested joint custody. Her requests were repeatedly denied. Approximately two years following their separation, they were legally divorced. A parallel parenting custody arrangement was implemented at this time. Since this time, their relationship has continued to be marked by conflict. However, some improvements in their ability to parent with one another have been made.

Jamie and Kelly started dating shortly after Jamie and Sam separated. Because Jamie and Sam were both still living in the matrimonial home, Kelly's presence in the home resulted in considerable conflict. This conflict decreased once Sam and the children moved out of the matrimonial home. Although Sam and Kelly have limited contact with one another, Kelly's presence and involvement in the lives of the children continues to be source of conflict between Jamie and Sam.

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Sam and Alex started dating immediately after the divorce was finalized. They had been friends for several years prior to this. Alex lives and works in a different city than Sam. Despite this, Alex spends a considerable amount of time with Sam and the children. Alex's involvement in the lives of the children has resulted in conflict between Jamie and Sam in the past.

Debra

Debra started dating her former partner, Jake, approximately sixteen years ago. They married two years later. Together they had one child, Anna. Debra had two children from two previous relationships. According to Debra, Jake has a history of mental illness and abusive behaviour. Debra and Jake separated ten years ago for approximately thirteen months before reconciling. During the separation, they were able to coparent Anna successfully. They separated again shortly after reconciling and Debra filed for divorce a year later. During this period of time Jake left town and did not attempt to contact their daughter, Anna. He returned after Debra filed for divorce and a custody dispute ensued. Jake participated in a number of public demonstrations and joined a group advocating for the rights of fathers in an attempt to gain access to his daughter. He was eventually granted supervised access. The quality of the parenting relationship deteriorated during this time. The parallel parenting custody arrangement was implemented the following year, two years after their final separation. At our last contact, Debra related that her relationship with Jake continued to be strained but had improved slightly. She was hopeful things would continue to improve.

Debra and John began dating approximately seven years ago and married two years later. John has four children from two previous relationships. His two eldest children are married and have children of their own. He shares custody of his two adolescent children with his former partner. He is close to Anna and involved in her upbringing. This involvement has led to conflict between Jake, Debra, and himself.

Jake recently became involved in a new relationship. They were married approximately two years ago. Since this time, the conflict in Jake and Debra's relationship has somewhat dissipated.

Sherri

Sherri and Kurt were married for less than ten years. Both had established careers and were financially stable at the time of their marriage. Once married, Kurt took over the management of their finances and limited Sherri's access to their money. Every purchase she made had to be approved by Kurt. After several years of trying to conceive, they had a daughter. During Sherri's pregnancy, Kurt became romantically involved with a coworker. They separated three years later as a result of Kurt's continued involvement in this relationship and divorced the following year. Sherri was granted primary physical custody with Kurt exercising access on alternate weekends. Sherri and Kurt remained highly conflicted following their divorce. They continued to dispute the access agreement in addition to several other matrimonial issues. Over the next four years, they had more than a dozen court appearances to dispute minute details of their custody arrangement. During this period of time, Sherri was granted temporary custody of her niece. Her niece became very close with her daughter; the two were like sisters to one another. Kurt continued his involvement with his coworker and they eventually married. They had a son

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shortly thereafter. The quality of Sherri and Kurt's parenting relationship continued to deteriorate during this period of time. Finally, four years after their divorce, a parallel parenting custody arrangement was implemented. This arrangement was in effect for a few years. During this period of time, Kurt exercised his access sporadically, often not seeing his daughter for extended periods of time. The parallel parenting custody arrangement was discontinued when their daughter reached early adolescence. The discontinuation of the arrangement coincided with Kurt's move out of country with his "new" family. Kurt has had limited contact with his daughter since this time, only seeing her once or twice a year. However, he continues to pay child support.

Sherri has not been involved in a serious romantic relationship since her marriage with Kurt ended. Kurt remains married to his coworker. His continued involvement in this relationship has resulted in considerable conflict between Sherri, Kurt and his new partner in the past.

Mark

Mark started dating his former partner, Marjorie, approximately fifteen years ago. They moved in together later that same year. Their son, Chris, was born the following year. Shortly thereafter the relationship ended. Chris remained in his mother's care and Mark had liberal access. As time passed, this arrangement became unworkable as a result of mounting conflict. Approximately ten years ago, Mark and Marjorie settled on a joint custody agreement (60:40). This arrangement was short-lived since Mark and Marjorie continued to be at odds with each other regarding Chris's care. Following this arrangement, a temporary custody arrangement was implemented until a more permanent resolution was found. This temporary arrangement provided Mark with fairly limited access to Chris (alternate weekends and Wednesday evenings between 5:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m.). This arrangement was in place until approximately five years ago when the parallel parenting custody arrangement was implemented. Since this time, Mark reported his relationship with Marjorie years of marriage but reconciled a short while later. During their initial separation, the children has improved significantly.

Mark and Kendra began dating twelve years ago and were married the following year. Kendra is close to Chris and involved in his upbringing. This involvement has led to conflict between Marjorie, Mark, and herself in the past. At the time of our final interview, Kendra was in her second trimester of her first pregnancy. Kendra and Mark had a baby boy later that summer.

Marjorie has not been involved in a long-term relationship since her relationship with Mark ended. She has, however, had several short-term relationships one of which was characterized by violence.

Jeff

Jeff was married to his former partner, Crystal, for approximately eighteen years. Together, they had two children, Nathan and Daniel. According to Jeff, Crystal has a history of mental illness. Both claim the other party has anger difficulties. Jeff and Crystal started to experience marital difficulties approximately ten years into their marriage. The conflict escalated over the ensuing

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years and eventually they had difficulty agreeing on anything. They separated after twelve remained in Crystal's care with Jeff only seeing them on occasion. After reconciling, they remained together for another six years before separating again. Jeff remained in the family home for approximately ten months following the separation. Crystal's parents also moved into the family home shortly after the separation. As time passed, this arrangement became unworkable. Jeff had little to no privacy in the family home and his access to the children was restricted by Crystal. He eventually moved out and secured his own residence. Within a month, Jeff filed for custody because Crystal continued to restrict his access to the children. A custody dispute ensued. A parallel parenting custody arrangement was implemented a short while later, with Jeff and Crystal alternating access on a week-by-week basis. This agreement continued until both of his children reached adolescence and expressed a preference to spend the majority of their time in one residence alone. One son lived with Jeff and the other with Crystal. Jeff and Crystal both consented to this arrangement without difficulty. Any subsequent visitation or access with the non-residential child was agreed upon without major conflict as it was based on the child's wishes. Approximately one year ago, Jeff moved to another city for work-related reasons. Both children, now young adults, have resided with Crystal since this time. However, Jeff exercises regular access with the children. Although Jeff and Crystal's relationship continues to be conflicted, Jeff indicated that their relationship has improved over time, with both being more flexible in terms of the schedule outlined in the agreement.

Jeff and Diane began dating six years ago. Diane has one son, now in his late-20's, from a previous relationship. Diane's involvement in the upbringing of Jeff's two children has been limited. However, her presence in Jeff's and his children's lives has sparked some conflict between Jeff and Crystal in the past.

Crystal has been involved in one relationship since her marriage with Jeff ended. This relationship is highly conflicted. Nathan and Daniel do not get along with her new partner and have gotten into a physical altercation with him on at least one occasion.

Maria

Maria was with her former partner, Pat, for eight years. They were never married but had three children together. Maria also had two children from a previous relationship. Maria left the family home to stay with a family member after experiencing a personal crisis and an escalation in conflict in her relationship with Pat. She returned to the family home approximately two weeks later and advised Pat that the relationship was over. Pat kicked Maria and her two older children out of the house and kept their three younger children. Maria immediately filed for custody. An interim custody order was granted shortly thereafter. However, this order favoured Pat and Maria was only permitted access to the children on alternate weekends. Maria contested the interim order on three occasions over the next year but was unsuccessful each time. Maria continued to be an "every other weekend parent" for the next several years. She frequently requested additional access but Pat repeatedly denied her requests and refused to consult with her on any issues pertaining to their three children. During this period of time, Pat also filed for bankruptcy and Maria was left to pay all of the joint matrimonial debt. Four years after the interim order had been implemented, Maria had paid off the joint matrimonial debt. She immediately filed for custody and a parallel parenting custody arrangement was implemented. This agreement

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continued until Maria and Pat's children reached adolescence. At that time, Maria and Pat's three children started spending the vast majority of their time at Maria's home and only saw Pat on occasion. Although Pat was not pleased with the children's decision to reside with Maria, any subsequent visitation or access with the non-residential child was agreed upon without major conflict as it was based on the child's wishes. Although Maria and Pat's relationship has continued to be conflicted, they have been able to discuss issues pertaining to their three children, now young adults, without major difficulty. Their youngest son currently resides with Pat while their middle son resides with Maria. Their oldest son lives independently.

Maria and Morgan started dating two months after Maria and Pat's separation. They moved in together shortly thereafter. Morgan has two children from a previous relationship. Morgan's daughter remained with his former partner following their divorce while their son was placed in Morgan's care. Both of his children are now young adults and Morgan's daughter has a family of her own. Morgan was very involved in the rearing of Maria's children and Maria was very involved in the rearing of Morgan's son. This involvement has led to conflict between Pat, Maria and Morgan in the past. Interestingly, Maria's involvement with Morgan's son has not sparked any conflict between Morgan and his former partner. In fact, Morgan's former partner testified on Maria's behalf during the custody dispute.

Pat has not been involved in a relationship since separating from Maria.

Blair

Blair and Jordan started dating approximately eleven years ago and married three years later. Together, they had two children. Shortly after the birth of their children, the relationship ended. Both parties remained in the matrimonial home for a few months following the separation and, after three months, Blair left the matrimonial home with the two children and was granted interim custody. Jordan's access to the children was subsequently limited, resulting in considerable conflict. Jordan unsuccessfully contested the interim custody agreement on several occasions over the next few years. Consequently, this arrangement remained in place until approximately four years ago when the parallel parenting custody arrangement was implemented. Although Blair and Jordan's relationship continues to be conflicted, Blair indicated that the relationship has improved, albeit slightly, over time.

Blair started dating Pat approximately four years ago. Despite the long-distance nature of their relationship, Pat spends approximately every other weekend with Blair and the children. This has resulted in conflict between Blair and Jordan in the past.

Jordan and Kim started dating immediately after Blair and Jordan separated and while they were both still living in the matrimonial home. Initially, Jordan and Kim's relationship was a source of conflict in Blair and Jordan's relationship, particularly because of their living arrangement in the matrimonial home. Blair also questioned whether Jordan and Kim's relationship had started prior to their separation. To date, Kim's involvement in the lives of their children continues to be a source of conflict between Blair and Jordan.

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3.1 The Nature of the Experience

When asked directly, participants had difficulty reflecting on their experience of parallel parenting, which made the understanding of this experience and phenomenon challenging. Some participants indicated that they feared reprisals and disruptions to the current status quo if they made their views known despite the reassurance of anonymity. Other participants appeared reluctant to discuss their experience for fear of being perceived as ‘unfriendly’ (thereby being seen as a bad parent) and potentially exacerbating the level of conflict in their relationship with their former partners. In the majority of cases, participants appeared preoccupied with the conflict in their relationship with their former partners. Consequently, when asked about their experience of parallel parenting, participants deflected to their experience of conflict and spoke indirectly about parallel parenting (see Appendix K for a sample of the participants’ deflection to conflict). The participants’ tendency to focus on their experience of conflict unexpectedly altered the focus of this research. As a result, the findings reflect the participants’ experience of conflict in the parallel parenting context as opposed to the experience of parallel parenting per se.

Overall, participants perceived the conflict differently depending on the unique context of their relationship with their former partners (e.g., non-abusive high conflict, spousal violence, or suspected spousal violence). Participants from cases described as non-abusive high conflict viewed their experience of conflict differently than participants from cases alleged or suspected to be characterized by spousal violence. The lens through which participants viewed their experience provided the framework for understanding the three identified themes. The different lenses and their influence on the participants’ perceptions of conflict are discussed below.

3.1.1 Non-abusive high conflict. The essence of the participants’ (Mark and Jeff’s) experience in high conflict non-abusive relationships focused on the pursuit of custody. Participants’ believed that the competition for custody of their children resulted in uncooperative and noncompliant behaviour. Such behaviour was believed to be motivated by feelings of spite, jealousy, and anger. Although they tended to perceive their former partners in a negative light, participants acknowledged that their former partners had good intentions and were trying their best to act in the best interests of their child.

Two participants, Mark and Jeff, described their relationship with their former partners as non-abusive. However, they reported a high level of conflict. Although they believed that the conflict was “*intentional*” and “*deliberate*” at times, Mark and Jeff denied the presence of

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coercive control and manipulation in their relationships. Both believed that desiring and competing for custody resulted in feelings of jealousy, anger, and spite as motivating behaviour. Jeff explained: *“there’s a lot of jealousy and competition...I was wanting my kids to be with me. I wanted to be the good parent.”* Mark reported a similar experience. He said that he pursued custody because he did not want to be an *“every second weekend dad.”* Instead, he wanted to have *“an active role and part...in...his [child’s]...life.”* Further, he argued that *“when you want that and the other party doesn’t want that, then you’re gonna fight until somebody says – a mediator, judge, whoever – says you know what, this is what I think is fair for the child.”*

Both Mark and Jeff believed that, as they struggled with their former partners to acquire custody, engaging in conflict became the norm. Mark related that *“if I said black, she’d say white or vice versa...you get into that routine.”* Jeff stated that *“you kinda get married to the fact that you’re right and they’re wrong and... vice versa.”* Further, they believed that this competitive outlook characterized the divorce process in general and that it justified some of their own underhanded and, at times, uncooperative behaviour. For example, Jeff reported that he paid his children for doing *“chores”* at his house to teach them responsibility even though his former partner disagreed with this practice. He acknowledged that his decision may have made staying with him more appealing to his children because they had the potential to earn a significant amount of money if they helped around the house. However, he maintained that his original intent was to teach his children responsibility. Mark also reported engaging in underhanded behaviour at times. For example, he reported that he kept a diary of all of his interactions with his former partner, including recordings of their telephone conversations, to document her noncompliant behaviour. Although Mark no longer recorded their conversations, both he and Jeff reported that, in case conflict arose and they needed to return to court to resolve a disagreement, they currently used email so they could have a written record of their communication in with their former partners.

Participants also believed that their own and their former partners’ values and beliefs affected their pursuit of and desire for custody. Jeff related that *“my ex-wife and I are two almost completely different people...with different values.... different parenting approaches; different families...and that manifests itself in how you try and do parallel parenting... ‘cause you have these competing interests...very different approaches.”* Both participants reported that their competing values and beliefs frequently resulted in conflict. Despite differences in their values

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and beliefs, participants maintained that it was the emotional element of their desire for custody that characterized their experience of conflict. Jeff said that, although much of the conflict in his relationship with his former partner appeared to “*always boil down to money*” or “*values,*” he said that the conflict was actually “*just about...emotion.*” Mark described a similar experience: “*I think both sides tend to lose focus of what-what’s best for the child...And, uh, they get their emotions out and they basically, you know, they do things out of spite.*”

Mark and Jeff believed that, with the implementation of the parallel parenting custody arrangement, the issue of custody was resolved. Although they acknowledged that their former partners were not necessarily pleased with the imposed custody arrangement, they believed that it neutralized the “*power struggle.*” Mark elaborated by saying: “*There’s nothing really...to argue about anymore whether it’s money or whether it’s...access or times...*” Although Jeff reported feeling similarly, he believed that his former partner continued to perceive an “*inequity of affluence between me and [former partner].*” He said that his former partner “*constantly reminds them [their children] that I’m some filthy rich guy and she’s living in poverty, which is not true.*”

Although Mark and Jeff believed that the desire for custody was often to blame for their own uncooperative or noncompliant behaviour, they believed that they always tried to act in their child’s best interests both prior to and following the implementation of the parallel parenting custody arrangement. They reported similar thoughts about their former partners’ behaviour. Jeff explained:

I tend to always view the world as how I impact the world. Like, what do I do? Like, if-if-if there’s a...my kids are upset with me, I try, okay, what did I do?... [Former partner] sees it in a different way but I-I-I think she loves her kids and I think she wants what’s best for them. I-I’d like to believe that. I think she’s selfish but that’s an ex-partner speaking and you need to take that with a very large grain of salt.

Mark reported a similar perspective. In fact, Mark and Jeff both believed that, despite their competing desires for custody, they and their former partners were both motivated to act in their child’s best interests. However, they described their former partners’ behaviour as misguided. Further, what they and their former partners believed was in their child’s best interests varied depending on their frame of reference and personal desire for custody. For example, while Mark and Jeff believed that having greater access to their child was in their child’s best interests, their former partners did not necessarily agree.

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Overall, participants from non-abusive high conflict relationships believed that their experience of conflict had emotion underlying the competition for custody of their child. They reported disagreeing with their former partners just for the sake of disagreeing at times. While acknowledging that behaviour was uncooperative and noncompliant at times, they believed that all had good intentions and tried to act in the best interests of their child.

3.1.2 Spousal violence. The essence of four participants' (Maria, Sherri, Debra, and Doug's) experience with abusive partner relationships focused on their own self-preservation and child protection. In these cases, participants perceived their former partners' noncompliance and uncooperative behaviour to reflect their abusive and controlling personality. Financial control or intimidation, false promises, unpredictability, noncompliance and police involvement were believed to be attempts by former partners to manipulate or exert control over them. Past physical violence or the threat of physical violence was alleged but was not reported to be ongoing. Participants believed that their former partners' abusive, controlling behaviour was responsible for the majority, if not all, of the conflict in their relationship. Note that there were convictions for assaultive violence in three of the cases.

Maria, Sherri, Debra, and Doug all believed that their former partners were unable to comply with the custody arrangement, parent cooperatively, or act in their child's best interests because they were "*abusive,*" "*possessive,*" "*demanding,*" and "*controlling.*" Three participants reported that their former partners intentionally attempted to "*financially devastate*" or "*control*" them by taking them to court "*over everything*". In these cases, participants reported that this control continued for several years following their divorce, financially crippling many of the participants. Participants believed such behaviour was intentional.

All four participants believed that their former partners also intentionally restricted or interfered with their access to their child in an attempt to frustrate, manipulate, and control them, making their own and/or their child's safety and well-being a major concern. Maria said that, when she was able to exercise her access, her former partner left "*notes on my car*" or drove past her home to check up on her. She also said that her former partner "*got a hold of my husband's ex-wife and tried to set it up so that...we wouldn't have the kids on the same weekend.*" Participants also indicated that their former partners failed to conduct the exchanges at the agreed upon location, limited their telephone contact with their child, failed to pay child or spousal support regularly, and did not facilitate their child's attendance at extracurricular activities.

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Participants also reported that their former partners attempted to align others (i.e., school personnel, mediators, community organizations, media personalities, police, etc.) to their cause. For example, Doug believed that, in an effort to align herself with the local police so they would be more likely to side with her if or when she filed a complaint against him, his former partner became a member of a neighbourhood watch committee. Sherri and Debra stated that their former partners aligned themselves with their family members or parenting advocacy groups, respectively, successfully alienating them from their support networks.

All participants said that the legal system was used against them. Although they believed that their former partners frequently failed to comply with the conditions of the custody arrangement, (the participants were threatened with police involvement if they failed to comply with the custody arrangement in any way, shape, or form. In fact, Doug, Maria, Sherri and Debra said that their former partners involved the police on several occasions in regards to access and exchanges (e.g., determining holiday access, arriving too early or too late for exchanges). Doug and Debra alleged that, once they became involved with a new partner, their former partners tried to have them charged with “*kidnapping*” and “*child abandonment*”. Debra related that her former partner also made false allegations of abuse against her and her new partner. She believed that such allegations were made in an effort to continue to control and manipulate her as they could jeopardize her case for custody and could harm her relationship with her new partner.

Given their experience of their former partners’ behaviour, Sherri, Maria, Doug and Debra indicated that they occasionally attempted to stand up against their former partners. Although they acknowledged that such behaviour often resulted in noncompliance with the custody arrangement, participants believed that their behaviour was in their child’s best interests. For example, Debra reported that, even though it was listed as an approved location in the custody arrangement, she refused to conduct the exchanges at her residence because she did not feel safe having her former partner at her home. Doug, Sherri, and Maria reported similar ways of standing up to their former partners. All believed that resisting their former partners’ abusive and controlling behaviour was in their child’s best interests.

Two participants reported that their resistance to what they perceived as abusive, controlling behaviour resulted in criminal convictions. Specifically, Sherri was charged with assault after she scratched her former partner’s face during a dispute. Sherri claimed that, in an effort to have her charged with assault, her former partner then intentionally hit himself in the

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face, drawing blood,. Likewise, Doug reported being charged with assault after he pulled his former partner into a room to talk during a dispute. According to him, his former partner scratched her foot during the process and called the police. Although they were initially charged with assault, both participants had these charges reduced to a lesser charge prior to their conviction. Ultimately, Doug was granted an absolute discharge while Sherri was placed on a Peace Bond. However, Doug's former partner was granted a restraining order and Doug was required to complete a program on alternatives to violence. He willingly completed a second similar program to ensure that he acquired the appropriate conflict management skills. In contrast, Sherri was not required to complete similar programming nor did she have a restraining order against her. However, she had to abide by conditions (e.g., keep the peace and be of good behaviour) as laid out by her Peace Bond for approximately 18 months.

Several reasons for engaging in behaviour that instigated or had the potential to instigate conflict with their former partners were given by participants. They stated that their actions were motivated by a desire to protect their child's best interests and to resist their former partners' perceived ongoing attempts to control and manipulate them. Referring to their former partners' history of abusive and controlling behaviour, they perceived their former partners' actions as a malicious intent to create conflict and alienate their child from them. They also perceived the use of financial control or intimidation, false promises, unpredictability, noncompliance and police involvement as ways in which the participants' former partners attempted to manipulate, intimidate, or exert control over the participants.

3.1.3 Suspected spousal violence. The essence of participants' (Jamie and Blair's) experience in relationships suspected to be characterized by spousal violence also focused on the pursuit of custody. However, self-preservation and child protection concerns also influenced their experience. Although they described their relationship with their former partners as high conflict as opposed to abusive, these participants reported experiencing dynamics of power and control in their relationship. Despite these dynamics, they maintained that their former partners had good intentions and were trying to act in the best interests of their child. Further, they acknowledged that their own actions were often misguided and influenced by the emotional turmoil experienced in their pursuit of custody.

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Although claiming their conflict was non-abusive, Jamie and Blair, described elements of power and control in their relationships. For example, Blair described her former partner as a “*perfectionist*” and “*bully*” while Jamie implied that her former partner was deceitful and untrustworthy. Both participants believed that their former partners “*took advantage*” of or “*abused*” the parallel parenting custody arrangement at times, making cooperation with them difficult. Further, Blair and Jamie related that their perceptions of their former partners influenced their interpretation of their former partners’ behaviour. For example, when her former partner told her that she needs to “*manage her time better,*” Blair believed that she was actually being called “*frickin’ lazy.*”

Further, Jamie and Blair believed that their former partners manipulated their children by telling them negative things about them. For example, Jamie believed that her children were being told that she was “*hurting them.*” She related that her former partner filed a complaint with the provincial child protection agency alleging abuse. The investigated allegation was reportedly unfounded. In contrast to Jamie, Blair was concerned that her former partner might be hurting her children. Although she hoped that “*nothing was happening,*” she expressed a desire to “*help*” and “*encourage*” her children to talk to others if something were to happen. She reported enrolling her children in “*a prevention course*” to teach her children about “*good secrets, bad secrets...and stuff like that...to empower them so that it [abuse] doesn’t happen.*” Blair reported experiencing opposition to the program because her former partner thought that it implied that their children had been or were being abused. Alternatives to Violence programs, assuming they are knowledgeably constructed, distinguish domestic violence from conflict. They do not teach conflict management skills. Instead, they target issues associated with the minimization and deflection of responsibility for domestic violence. The participants’ characterization of the program as conflict management indicates the minimization of the seriousness of domestic violence or a misunderstanding of the program content.

Although they had self-preservation and child protection concerns, Jamie and Blair believed that, despite the conflicted nature of their relationship, their former partners had the best interests of their child at heart. Blair thought that her former partner would not put their children in “*immediate danger.*” Jamie reported a similar perspective. Both were also more willing to cooperate with their former partners than those in abusive relationships. For example, Jamie and Blair reported consulting with their former partners prior to making any major decisions

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regarding their child's care – even ones in their delegated authority. Reciprocity was not experienced. They believed that, despite “*never*” having reciprocity, such consultation kept their former partner informed about their child's health and well-being.

Similar to Mark and Jeff, Jamie and Blair reported a competitive element to the conflict with their former partners as both parties pursued custody. Jamie stated that her former partner “*was making things up*” to support her case for custody. Blair experienced similar behaviour. Both also reported engaging in conflict with their former partners intentionally at times in an effort to further their own case for custody or to prove a point. Although they argued that they had more or less stopped engaging in such behaviour, they claimed that their former partners had not. Further, they claimed that they attempted to avoid conflict. For example, Jamie said that “*if it gets out of hand – name calling or yelling – I’ll just say it’s time for me to go and I’ll stop discussing because I don’t have to deal with that anymore either.*” Likewise, Blair reported reacting similarly when her former partner became argumentative. She said: “*I just told her, I said [former partner]...I’m stopping to talk. And if you talk, I won’t answer you.*” However, they were not completely successful in avoiding the conflict. Jamie and Blair acknowledged that they occasionally reacted to rather than disengaged from their former partners’ uncooperative behaviour. Both participants believed that their emotions and general desire for custody were to blame. For example, Jamie stated that “*parents get caught up in their own emotional turmoil...and try to drag their own children into it or try to let the decision be based on their own emotion and not what’s best for the children.*”

Although Jamie and Blair described their relationship with their former partners as non-abusive, their relationships contained elements of power and control similar to those reported by those in the other two categories. While these two participants believed that their experience of conflict was fueled by their desire for custody, they also voiced self-preservation and child protection concerns. Despite these concerns, participants believed that they and their former partners had the best interests of their child at heart.

3.1.4 Summary. Participants’ perspectives of conflict emerged as an overarching theme describing their experience of conflict in the parallel parenting context. Overall, groups of participants perceived the conflict as having different qualities. Participants from non-abusive high conflict relationships perceived the conflict to reflect their pursuit of and desire for custody whereas participants from abusive relationships perceived the conflict to reflect their self-

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preservation and child protection concerns. Participants from relationships suspected to be characterized by abuse reported a combination of these concerns. However, unlike participants from abusive relationships, the latter participants believed that their former partners were capable of acting in their child's best interests.

3.2 Themes Depicting the Experiences

Based on the participants' descriptions of their experience, three themes were identified: The Attribution of Responsibility: Self Versus Other; Who Knows Best; and Desire for a Resolution (see Figure 1 for a summary of these themes and sub-themes). The participants' perspective or unique frame of reference influenced why they perceived their former partners' as responsible for the conflict, why they believed that they were personally more capable of acting in their child's best interests, and why they were willing or unwilling to desist from conflict. In addition to these themes, sub-themes are presented that draw on the participants' own words to help bring their experience to life. These sub-themes highlight the essence of each theme and the participants' experience of conflict. Each of the guiding themes presents shared experiences of the participants while the sub-themes explore individual differences. Although the experience of each participant is not shared in its entirety, the themes presented portray the essence of the participants' experience of conflict in the parallel parenting context.

The themes with embedded sub-themes are presented below. Quotations from the participants are used throughout to highlight and substantiate significant points or issues. The differences between the participants' cases are considered in an effort to better understand the social construction and enactment of meaning of the participants' experience of conflict in the context of parallel parenting custody arrangements. These differences between the participants simply offer a variation on the same theme.

3.2.1 Attributions of responsibility: Self versus other. The first theme centres on the attributions made by participants to explain their own and their former partners' behaviour following the implementation of the parallel parenting custody arrangement. Subthemes contributing to this theme included the participants' attributions of their own and their former partners' internal disposition and character flaws, mental health, involvement with the legal system, and feelings of jealousy. Participants reported that their former partners sabotaged the parallel parenting custody arrangement and intentionally created conflict in order to make their life more miserable or difficult. In the paragraphs that follow, the participants' attributions

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regarding their former partners' behaviour, as well as their own behaviour are discussed as they relate to the sub-themes.

3.2.1.1 Internal disposition/flaw in character. Participants believed that an overarching internal disposition caused their former partners to engage intentionally in conflict. Participants stated or implied that their former partners were inherently “*bad*,” “*uncooperative*,” “*noncompliant*” and intent on “*sabotaging*” the parallel parenting custody arrangement or making life more difficult. In contrast, participants attributed their own admitted uncooperative, noncompliant behaviour to external factors and not a reflection of their own internal disposition.

Several participants believed that the vast majority of the time their former partners were uncooperative (e.g., around scheduling or exercising access) just for the sake of being uncooperative and malicious. This behaviour was believed to reflect their former partners' internal disposition. For example, participants believed that, because they were inherently an uncooperative, bad person and therefore responsible for all of the difficulties in their relationship, their former partners blatantly and intentionally disregarded the conditions of the custody arrangement. Jamie said that, despite having specified times for telephone access: “*often times [former partner] won't make [the] call or, if [former partner] does, it's, like, a day later. It's kind of whenever [former partner] wants.*” With regard to her designated decision-making area, Blair described a similar experience in which her former partner: “*...at the beginning of the year she filled out forms again and I said '[former partner], school is my area. Please do not fill out the forms because then after that I don't know which forms are filled out.'*” In addition, Sherri believed that, because it interfered with his lifestyle, her former partner frequently failed to comply with the custody arrangement when he failed to show proof of income for child support purposes, did not inform her when he moved out of the country and only exercised access when it suited his schedule. Sherri believed that, because that was the kind of person he was, he tried to make her life as difficult as possible.

In contrast to attributions of a flaw in character or an internal disposition, the participants often described themselves as more cooperative or willing to set aside their differences for the sake of their children and to have a more positive, cooperative disposition. Jamie gave an example of intentionally choosing to disengage or walk away from the conflict: “*And-and if it gets out of hand – name calling or yelling – I'll just say it's time for me to go and I'll stop discussing because I don't have to deal with that anymore either.*” Identifying times when their

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former partners also chose to disengage or walk away from the conflict, several participants interpreted such behaviour as manipulative or contrived. Cooperation or attempts to avoid conflict were believed to be feigned in order to achieve or acquire some sort of secondary gain (e.g., more access or attention, attempt to reconcile). Participants implied that they were inherently good people and, ultimately, better than their former partners.

Interestingly, at times, participants felt compelled to act in a potentially uncooperative manner as a consequence of circumstances or merely a reaction to the uncooperative, noncompliant, and unreasonable behaviour of their former partners. They did not believe that their behaviour was a reflection of their own disposition or personality. For example, Jeff, Maria, Jamie, and Mark indicated that, when their former partners refused to grant them access and because they believed that it was in the best interests of their child, they exercised access anyway.

Further, Blair, Maria, and Sherri indicated that, although they were not permitted in the parenting order, they made a decision outside of their delegated authority (e.g., extracurricular activities). They maintained that they had to because their former partners failed to make a decision or, in their opinion, were not acting in their child's best interests. For example, Blair resolved to register her child in soccer since his requests to the other parent to do so were ignored for the past several years. Blair said that: "*if [former partner's] not going to do it, I will do it because [the child] wants it.*" Similarly, Maria reported registering her child in non-competitive karate because her children "*didn't want to do hockey anymore but they didn't want to tell their dad.*" Similarly failing to comply with aspects of the parallel parenting custody arrangement, Sherri stated: "*although [former partner] has never agreed to it, [daughter] has had some therapy as well which is even probably against the law...*" Again, participants, citing circumstances, differentiated the reasons for their behaviour from that of their former partners who were seen as characterologically oppositional.

In summary, participants attributed much of the difficulty they experienced in their relationship with their former partners to their former partners' internal disposition. Participants believed that, given this internal disposition, their former partners intentionally engaged in conflict and were unable to act in their child's best interests. In contrast, participants tended to perceive their own behaviour to be a consequence of or reaction to their former partners behaviour as opposed to a true reflection of their own internal disposition, values, or personality.

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Participants also interpreted their own behaviour to be a reflection of a higher moral standard (e.g., the best interests of their child) at times.

3.2.1.2 Mental instability. In some cases, participants attributed their former partners' unwillingness to cooperate and disregard of the custody arrangement to their unstable mental health. Participants believed that mental health negatively affected their former partners' ability to cooperate and to act in their child's best interests. In contrast, acknowledging mental health difficulties of their own at times, participants viewed their own difficulties in a considerably more positive light. Participants' attributions of mental instability were based on their perceptions of behaviour. It is unclear whether the behaviour being assigned the label of mental illness met the diagnostic criteria for a specific mental disorder or whether the behaviour reflected something else (e.g., another form of uncooperative behaviour). Regardless of the accuracy of the participants' perceptions, participants' believed them to be true.

Debra, Jeff, Doug, Maria, Blair and Sherri all gave examples of experiences with what they believed was mental instability that prevented their former partners from complying with the custody arrangement, parenting cooperatively, or acting in their child's best interests. They frequently referred to their former partners as "*losing it*," "*nuts*," "*paranoid*," "*unstable*," "*manipulative*," "*suicidal*," "*bizarre*," or "*depressed*". In contrast, even when discussing the emotional and psychological toll that their custody dispute and subsequent parallel parenting custody arrangement had on their own mental health and well-being, participants never questioned their own ability to cooperate with their former partners or act in the best interests of their child. Instead, participants viewed their mental health difficulties as a reaction to their former partners' uncooperative, noncompliant behaviour and other life stressors. For example, Maria said that, after her stresses during the custody dispute, she "*finally crashed and burned*" and had to see a psychologist. Other participants reported being treated for depression, anxiety, or for feeling hopeless and helpless. Blair also reported being on "*sick leave*" while Maria reported being on "*worker's comp*" for a period of time. Similarly, Sherri reported that: "*I have spent my registered retirement savings on therapy.*"

Jeff reported struggling to cope with his ongoing conflict. He reported having "*cold sweats driving up the street to pull in the driveway.*" He also reported feeling "*incredibly guilty*" for having exposed his children to conflict with his former partner. Although he denied experiencing any major mental health difficulties as a result of the conflict, Jeff said that he now

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avoided conflict and tended to overcompensate with his two children by giving them “*too much, money-wise*”. Mark and Doug did not report experiencing any mental health difficulties. However, they both described the custody dispute and their experience parallel parenting as “*trying*” and “*exhausting*” at times due to their former partners’ uncooperative and noncompliant behaviour.

Blair reported contacting “*ministers of justice,*” “*members of parliament,*” and other child advocacy organizations in an effort to advocate for her child and other children involved in child custody disputes. Overall, participants described their advocate role as rewarding and believed that it helped them recover from their own dealings with the legal system. However, Debra, among others, viewed her former partner’s involvement in child advocacy or parenting organizations negatively. They took that involvement as evidence that their former partners were manipulative, unstable, and unable to effectively parent their child on their own.

In sum, participants viewed their own mental health more positively than their former partners’. While the mental instability of their former partners was believed to negatively affect their ability to act in their child’s best interests, participants believed that their own mental health issues did not affect their own parenting ability. Participants also believed that their mental health difficulties were the result of their former partners’ behaviour rather than any personal fault or deficit of their own.

3.2.1.3 Involvement in the legal system. Participants also attributed their former partners’ perceived unwillingness to cooperate to their involvement in an adversarial legal system. Participants reported that having to litigate or mediate aspects of their custody agreement pitted them against each other. Both parties were described as arguing why they should be granted custody or access over the other. Former partners were perceived as doing whatever it took to ‘win’ the custody dispute regardless of the cost (emotional or financial) and thereby escalating the conflict in the parenting relationship. Further, participants believed that, by allowing their former partners’ uncooperative behaviour to continue without consequence, the legal system promoted conflict rather than cooperation. Central to this experience was the participants’ belief that their former partners intentionally delayed the court proceedings, filed false affidavits or lied on the stand to advance their argument for custody, made false allegations of abuse, and engaged in further litigation in an effort to financially control and ultimately exhaust the participants’ financial resources to pursue custody.

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Mark, Blair and Jamie all blamed their former partners for blatantly lying throughout the court proceedings. They believed that their former partners' behaviour was intentionally aimed at provoking conflict and reducing their (the participants') chances of "winning" the custody dispute. Mark described his experience with the legal system as: "*difficult*" given the fact "*that people would...write something, you know, which was totally-totally inaccurate and present it as this is what happened and sign it.*" Blair described a similar experience: "*[former partner's] lawyer had trained [former partner] to say I don't know, I don't recall, I don't know, I don't recall. So [former partner] said that often and obviously they lied. And then [former partner] had [former partner's new partner] on the stand and [former partner's new partner] lied.*"

Maria said that, in addition to lying throughout the court proceedings, her former partner intentionally delayed the court proceedings or attempted to litigate minute details of their agreement just to "*be an ass.*" She expressed frustration because, after further litigation, her former partner then refused to follow through on the court's recommendation. She said that: "*then we'd set up a court date and another court date and another court date and it would be like he put it off and he put it off.*" Jeff and Debra described similar experiences with their former partners delaying the court proceedings. Participants indicated that the court system eventually saw through their former partners' tactics and put an end to such behaviour. In many cases, the participants' former partners were assigned costs (e.g., they were court-mandated to pay the participants' legal fees) or "*reprimanded*" in court for wasting "*everybody's time*" as well as "*taxpayer's dollars.*" Participants indicated that, unfortunately, it often took several years for these tactics to be stopped.

Participants believed that, as a result of their former partners' behaviour, they, too, were forced to litigate for custody as well as to acquire their former partners' cooperation. For example, Mark reported that, in response to delayed court proceedings, he reported his former partner's common-law status so she no longer qualified for legal aid and had to hire private counsel. Mark hoped that, by doing this, his former partner would quit delaying the legal process so they could finally resolve their custody dispute. Although Mark acknowledged his behaviour was slightly underhanded, he believed that his former partner's behaviour necessitated such action and was in his child's best interests. Further, he believed that such behaviour was commonplace and acceptable within the legal system.

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Participants reported that, at times when they believed their former partners failed to comply with the conditions of the custody arrangement or compromised the safety of their child, they threatened legal action. They viewed their own actions as merely a reaction to their former partners' behaviour and a reflection of the circumstances. For example, Sherri stated that, after learning that her daughter was left alone in a movie theatre in an unfamiliar city in a foreign country while her former partner and his family were on a holiday, she: "*wrote him a letter and copied it to my lawyer and I said, "if you ever leave my child unattended somewhere, your access will cease to exist."*" She acknowledged that her actions could have exacerbated their conflict but felt that she had to protect the safety and best interests of her daughter. Further, she believed that, given their involvement in the legal system, her actions were justified.

In summary, participants indicated that involvement in the legal system promoted a win or lose mentality which enabled their former partners to do whatever it took to 'win' the custody dispute. Further, participants believed that the legal system promoted conflict rather than cooperation. Consequently, they believed that, by allowing their former partners to behave in an uncooperative, controlling, and manipulative manner in their pursuit of custody, the legal system exacerbated the level of conflict in the parenting relationship. Ironically, in an effort to reduce parental conflict and end their involvement in the legal system, a parallel parenting custody arrangement was ultimately implemented. Although they acknowledged that they were also motivated to win the custody dispute, they differentiated the reasons for their noncompliance from that of their former partners. Specifically, participants believed that their actions were motivated by a desire to stand up for themselves and their child while their former partners' actions were motivated by the desire to create conflict and make their life difficult.

3.2.1.4 Jealousy. Several of the participants also attributed their former partners' noncompliance and uncooperative attitude to feelings of jealous about new relationships as well as other life success (e.g., career, financial, parenting) of the participants. These positive events were believed to fuel their former partners' noncompliance with the custody arrangement and the desire to make their life miserable. However, participants denied experiencing any jealousy themselves.

Maria, Doug, Mark and Debra believed that their involvement in a new relationship caused their former partners to feel jealous. They believed that, once they became involved with a new partner, their relationship with their former partners became "*civil*" but really "*hostile and*

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heavy” under the surface, *“ugly*” and jealous that someone else was *“living his (their) life.”* They believed that this jealousy exacerbated their conflict with each other.

The participants reported that, to lessen the chance of being the recipient of jealousy and increased conflict, they tried to keep their new partners as uninvolved in the parallel parenting custody arrangement as possible. However, Debra and Doug reported that, due to either an abuse related prohibition preventing them from contacting their former partners themselves or because they feared them, participants involved their new partners in custody exchanges. This involvement increased conflict and often targeted their new partner but was believed to be necessary in order to make the custody arrangement work. For example, Debra said out of anger or jealousy: *“my ex-husband would, like, call [new partner] an asshole or whatever.....more under his breath so that [daughter] isn’t hearing it”* or *“he’ll be driving and he’ll see [new partner] and he’ll give him the finger or whatever kind of thing.”* Doug reported that his former partner also resisted his new partner’s involvement in the exchanges and attempted to get a restraining order against her because she was *“driving the kids to the end of [her] driveway.”* Although a restraining order was denied, Doug believed that the attempt was done intentionally out of jealousy as well as the desire to make his life as difficult as possible.

In contrast, Jeff, Mark, Jamie, Maria and Blair said that they did not involve their new partners in any aspect of the parallel parenting custody arrangement. Their tact was not reciprocated. In fact, they believed that their former partners’ decision to include their new partners was intentionally aimed at fostering feelings of jealousy and instigating conflict at exchanges. An example was provided by Blair.

Blair: So, and every time [former partner] would come and get the boys, [former partner’s new partner] would come with [former partner] and it’s fine. But [former partner’s new partner] would get out of the car, come right up the way, right beside [former partner] at the door, come pick up the boys and then [former partner] would bring back the boys and they would always laugh at - you know, together or... [former partner] would give me the boys and then as they’re leaving they’re like [makes giggling sounds] and they walk away.

Finally, some participants believed that their success in other areas of life (e.g., career, parenting) caused their former partners to feel jealous and to escalate conflict. Mark believed that, after he secured a permanent, well-paying job, his former partner was *“upset with his success.”* Sherri reported that, although she was not in a new long-term relationship, her former partner was jealous of her resilience and the quality of her relationship with her daughter. She

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said: *“Not that I succeeded but I think he has been sitting for 13 years waiting for the day I fail. And he just gets angrier, angrier, and angrier...he just doesn’t want me to succeed at anything.”* Similarly, Jeff believed that his former partner was jealous of his financial success following their divorce. He said that she frequently made reference to how affluent he was and *“thinks I have millions of dollars in the Cayman Islands somewhere.”*

None of the participants reported feeling jealous of their former partners’ success or involvement in a new relationship. In fact, the majority of participants indicated that they would be *“happy”* or *“ecstatic”* if their former partners experienced success in some aspect of their life or became involved in a new relationship. Further, participants hoped that their former partners’ success or involvement in a new relationship would decrease the conflict in their relationship with one another. Despite some improvement in the quality of their parenting relationship, Debra, Jamie and Blair said that their former partners remained relatively uncooperative and noncompliant once involved in a new relationship. However, they acknowledged that things were *“slightly”* or *“a little bit”* better in their relationships.

Overall, several of the participants attributed their former partners’ noncompliant, uncooperative behaviour to feelings of jealousy. However, participants denied experiencing any jealousy themselves. Central to this discussion was their involvement in a new relationship, the involvement of a new partner in the custody arrangement, as well as other life success (e.g., career, financial, parenting). Participants reported that the more involved their new partners were in the custody arrangement and in parenting of their child or the more personal success they experienced, the more likely their former partners appeared to feel jealous and angry. However, given the perceived abusive nature of their relationship with their former partners, the involvement of a third party (the participants’ new partners) was deemed necessary in some cases in order to protect the participants and their child.

3.2.1.5 Summary. Participants’ attributions of responsibility for their former partners’ behaviour as well as their own emerged as a central theme to understanding the participants’ experience of conflict in the parallel parenting context. Participants stated that their former partners were uncooperative and noncompliant with the custody arrangement in order to instigate conflict. This noncompliance was believed to reflect their former partners’ internal disposition and mental instability. Involvement in the legal system and feelings of jealousy were also believed to influence their former partners’ behaviour. In contrast, participants described their

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own behaviour in more positive terms, often feeling that their actions were justified given their former partners' noncompliant behaviour. Overall, the adaptiveness of the participants' attributions varied depending on the context of their relationship with their former partners.

3.2.2 Who knows best. The second guiding theme centres on who the participants believed was better prepared to act in their child's best interests. Sub-themes included the parenting role, ability, and style of participants and their former partners as well as the opinions of various mental health professionals. Overall, the participants believed that they were the most capable of acting in their child's best interests. Interestingly, the value participants placed on the opinions of various mental health and legal professionals (e.g., child custody evaluators, lawyers, and judges) varied depending on whether or not the professionals' opinion reinforced their personal belief regarding who was the most capable of acting in their child's best interests (e.g., the participants themselves). In the paragraphs that follow, the participants' perceptions of and reasons for determining who was the most capable of acting in their child's best interests are discussed.

3.2.2.1 Parental role. Several participants believed that, based on their parental role prior to and/or following the separation and divorce, they were the more capable parent. Central to this discussion was the participants' belief that their biological sex, status as a biological parent, and level of involvement in parenting activities reflected not only their ability to act in their child's best interests but also to provide for their family.

Several female participants believed that, given their biological sex, they were the better parent. For example, Sherri described herself as the more "*motherly type*." This sentiment was echoed by several other female participants. They also believed that their former partners were deficient in some way given their biological sex. In fact, the majority of the female participants perceived their former partners as an uninvolved, 'dead-beat' parent based on their former partners' biological sex alone. Interestingly, Jeff believed that, given the changing structure of the family, "*there's a lot more dual parents working*," resulting in a change in how parenting responsibilities are allocated in families and how fathers, in particular, are perceived. Mark and Jeff described themselves as "*active*" and "*involved*" parents who defied the traditional 'dead-beat' father stereotype. Further, they believed that, given their questionable parenting decisions and failure to put the needs of their child first, their former partners defied the traditional "*mother knows best*" stereotype.

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Most female participants who were more involved with parenting duties prior to the family breakup believed that they were the most capable parent. Maria, among others, was quick to point out that she was the “*primary caregiver*” prior to and following the dissolution of her relationship with her former partner. Sherri also identified herself as the “*primary caregiver*” and claimed that she “*100% raised [my child] on my own.*” These participants, namely female participants believed that, due to a reported lack of involvement in child rearing, their former partners were incapable of acting in their child’s best interests.

Several participants reported that they were not only responsible for the parenting of their child but also the overall household. Maria indicated that, during a brief separation as well as after the final separation, she remained responsible for both. She described her experience parenting and running the household as: “*I would take groceries there ‘cause he never did any grocery shopping. He never paid any bills. Right? He never had to do anything. So...he never paid the mortgage. He never paid any loans.*” She claimed that she “*did all that stuff.*” The implication was that she earned her status as the better parent. This sentiment was echoed by several of the other participants (Blair, Debra, Blair, Jamie). Maria also indicated that her former partner just “*wasn’t into...doing the family thing*” while Blair stated that her former partner “*didn’t want to take care of them [the children].*” In fact, Blair indicated that, when asked to assist with some of the parenting duties, her former partner “[would] *give me shit*”.

Other participants, mostly males, acknowledged that their former partners were responsible for the majority of parenting, as well as the running of the household. In defense, they explained that this arrangement was necessary because they were the breadwinner or provider for the family. They claimed that they had limited time and opportunity to be involved in the parenting prior to the separation and divorce. However, they reported that, following their separation and divorce, they altered their work schedules so they could be more involved in the parenting of their child while retaining the good provider responsibilities. Jeff reported that, following his divorce, he assumed responsibility for nearly all of their children’s expenses including cell phones, clothes, school supplies, and computers. He said that his former partner “*doesn’t pay a nickel*” and was unwilling to even drive their children to or from the airport when they flew to an alternate city, at his expense, to visit him. Given their role as the provider in addition to their willingness to alter their schedules and assume other parenting responsibilities,

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Jeff and the other male participants believed that, compared to their former partners, they were the better parent.

Debra and Maria also believed that, having raised children from previous relationships, they were more capable parents because they had previous parenting experience. Both women indicated that, as single parents previously, they had been responsible for making all of the parenting decisions and therefore were, in essence, experts when it came to knowing and understanding what was in their child's best interests.

Other participants believed that, given that they and not their former partners were the biological parent, they were more capable. Debra and Blair were the examples. They believed that their former partners did not fully understand what it meant to be a parent and, therefore, would not be able to act in the best interests of their child.

Several participants gave examples in their parenting role of putting the child's needs before their own. Doug, Jeff, Mark, Maria, and Jamie reported that, although not given interim custody of their child, they made every effort to remain actively involved in their child's life. In many cases, this involved moving "*in order to be close to the kids.*" Doug indicated that he moved across the country to remain involved in the lives of his two children whereas Maria reported that she "*bought country property*" that was "*on the same bus route*" and only "*five minutes away from where he [former partner] lived.*" Jamie, Doug, and Jeff indicated that, because they believed that was in their child's best interests to have "*two parents,*" they initially attempted to reconcile in order to "*keep the family together,*" but later recognized that it was actually in the best interests of their child to remove them from a relationship characterized by constant conflict. Further, they believed that their former partners' reluctance or resistance to collaborate and put the needs of their child first was reflective of their inferior parenting.

Overall, participants tended to view their parental role and parenting behaviour more positively than that of their former partners. Biological sex, status as a biological parent, level of involvement in parenting activities, previous parenting experience, and a willingness to put the needs of their child before their own were all identified as influencing perceptions of who was more capable of acting in their child's best interests. Overall, several participants believed that, based on their parental role prior to and/or following the separation and divorce, they were the more capable parent.

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3.2.2.2 Parenting ability. Parenting ability was also identified as influencing participants' perceptions. Overall, participants tended to view their own parenting ability more favourably than that of their former partners. Parental judgment and decision-making, the ability to focus on their child and their child's wishes rather than the conflict as well as their efforts to ensure the safety of their child were all believed to reflect the participants' superior parenting ability as compared to that of their former partners.

Many participants believed that their willingness to cooperate with their former partners or to limit their contact with one another for the sake of their child was evidence of their superior parenting ability. For example, Sherri stated that she willingly cooperated with her former partner because she believed that their child should not "*be deprived*" of having their other parent involved with them. However, Debra believed that, given his abusive and controlling behaviour, her former partner did not deserve the right to be involved in her child's life. Despite this belief, she attempted to cooperate with her former partner when she believed it was in their child's best interests. Several participants reported that they intentionally limited their communication and contact with their former partners in an effort to limit their child's exposure to parental conflict. Specifically, Jeff indicated that he and his former partner "*used to write into a log book and send it back and forth*" so they did not have to use their children as "*messengers*." Debra reported that she "*would take [their child] to another room*" as soon as their former partners became upset so their child "*would not be exposed to that*." Many of the participants indicated that these strategies were met with limited success because their former partners either refused to comply or repeatedly engaged in conflict in front of the child despite their attempts to limit such behaviour. Participants perceived their former partners' inability to put the needs of their child before their own desire to instigate conflict to be a reflection of their former partners' inferior parenting ability.

Several participants also indicated that they had better judgment than their former partners. For example, Jamie said that she tried hard not to "*get caught up in [her] own emotional turmoil...and try to drag [her] own children into it*." She said that her former partner was not successful in this regard. Specifically, she related that her former partner often "*let the decision be based on [former partner's] own emotion and not what's best for the children*." Sherri also said that her former partner displayed poor judgment by filming their exchanges and going through her garbage looking for incriminating evidence to use against her in court.

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Other participants reported learning more about how to parent effectively post-divorce. Jamie said that, after taking a post-divorce parenting course, she “*learned some tips and tricks*” on how to act in her children’s best interests and was happy to learn that “*what I was doing was the right thing.*” Jeff reported feeling similarly after taking an online parenting course. Several participants indicated that their former partners refused to take such a course. Consequently, they believed that their former partners were ill-equipped to effectively parent their child and act in the child’s best interests.

Several participants also expressed concern over their former partners’ ability to ensure their child’s safety while in their care. For example, Blair indicated that her former partner unexpectedly picked their children up from daycare one day without proper car seats. Blair stated that, given the children’s young age (approximately two-years-old), distance to the home, and weather conditions, it was “*obvious*” that her former partner “*took them [in a car] without the car seats*” and did not walk home as claimed. Blair believed that her former partner’s reckless behaviour on that particular day accurately reflected her former partner’s inability to act in their children’s best interests. Debra also voiced concerns about her daughter’s safety while in her former partner’s care given his history of abusive behaviour. Debra believed that her former partner’s reckless disregard for the rules and “*entitled*” attitude implied he was unable to act in their daughter’s best interests or to ensure her safety while in his care.

Several participants also expressed concern about their former partners’ decision-making ability. Specifically, decisions that negatively affected their child’s overall health and well-being were noted. These decisions ranged from smoking in their child’s presence to leaving their child unattended and to failing to have their child immunized or to take their required medications. For example, Doug reported that, rather than allowing him access to their children, his former partner left their children “*by themselves*” overnight so she could spend the night at her boyfriend’s house. Further, Mark related that his former partner shared “*private relationship things*” in front of their child, kept their child out late on week nights, and “*smoked in their house*” and “*around*” their child even though he had asthma. Debra and Blair expressed similar concerns about their former partners smoking around their child.

Blair and Maria also indicated that their former partners failed to attend to the medical needs of their child. Blair blamed a two week long period of hospitalization in the Intensive Care Unit approximately on her former partner’s failure to respond to their child’s medical needs.

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Although Blair's former partner eventually agreed to administer their son's medication as prescribed, Blair lost confidence in her former partner's parenting ability. That said, Blair acknowledged that her former partner was an otherwise good parent who "*won't put them [their children] in immediate danger.*" This sentiment was echoed by the majority of participants. However, participants maintained that the lapses in their former partners' judgment and decision-making were indicative of their former partners' inferior parenting ability.

Overall, participants tended to view their parenting ability more positively than that of their former partners. Further, some participants tended to use the perceived deficits in their former partners' parenting ability as evidence that their former partners were incapable of ensuring the safety and well-being of their child or of acting in their child's best interests. Sound parental judgement and decision-making, the ability to maintain a child-focus, as well as the ability to avoid conflict were all identified by participants to reflect a more positive parenting ability whereas poor judgment, a desire to instigate or provoke conflict, and a history of abusive or controlling behaviour were believed to reflect a more inferior parenting ability.

3.2.2.3 Parenting style. Participants reported that, in addition to their parental role and ability, their personal parenting style indicated a comparatively better parenting capability. A flexible, supportive, authoritative parenting style as opposed to a more rigid or permissive parenting style, was believed to depict the participants' superior parenting style. Further, several participants appeared to use the perceived shortcomings in their former partners' parenting style as evidence that their former partners were not capable of effectively parenting their child or acting in his or her best interests. Overall, participants related that the identified differences in parenting styles resulted in different expectations and rules between households. Such differences were believed to negatively affect the adjustment, academic performance, and behaviour of their child.

Several participants believed that their former partners were either too controlling or too permissive. Blair reported that her former partner "*never lets them [their children] do anything by themselves*" while Doug stated that his former partner would "*freak out*" if their children "*would walk close to the pond*" because she thought "*one of the kids could fall in.*" In contrast, the other participants reported that their child was allowed to do whatever they wanted to in their former partners' home. Jamie said that, unlike her rules, her children were allowed to "*eat what [they] want,*" "*drink as many pop as they wanted,*" "*go to bed whenever [they] want*" and watch

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age-inappropriate television shows like “*Family Guy*” while in her former partner’s care. Jamie reported that, when her children returned to her care, she looked like “*the meanie*” because of her rules. Maria, Mark and Jeff described similar experiences. Further, participants believed that their former partners’ permissive parenting style was not in their child’s best interests, especially in light of their child’s need to “*recuperate*” or “*recover*” after spending time in such an environment.

Several participants reported adopting a more authoritative parenting style (e.g., effective discipline and positive affective relationships). These participants believed that such a parenting style was more conducive to positive child adjustment and, therefore, made them the comparatively ‘better’ parent. For example, participants believed that they were more consistent, supportive, and flexible in their parenting approach. Jeff said that, after learning his former mother-in-law had stage four lung cancer, he was “*prepared to be totally flexible*” with his holiday access. He said that: “*if this is potentially the last good Christmas they have with her, I wanted them to be there to have it.*” Sherri also reported being relatively flexible in regards to her former partner’s access to their daughter since he moved out of the country. She indicated that her former partner called or emailed her to request access infrequently so she had no qualms about consenting to it, providing it did not interfere with her daughter’s schooling.

Several participants noted that, given the differences between their own and their former partners’ parenting styles, their child was often caught being shuffled back and forth between two households with very different rules. For example, a number of participants reported that, between households, various activities and chores were given different importance. A common experience reported by participants involved the different emphasis placed on academics. Blair reported that her children did better on school assignments and tests when they were in her care because she gave them “*tricks and advice*” on how to remember information or solve problems. She said that, when in her former partner’s care, the children often did poorly on their assignments because they “*don’t study*” then. Maria described a similar experience: “*their dad always told them school’s not important so they didn’t do their homework when he - when he had them for the two weeks...then I’m getting them for two weeks and sometimes they’d be almost failing.*” Similar difficulties were reported by Mark and Jeff as well. These difficulties were believed to reflect their former partners’ inability to act in their child’s best interests.

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Differences in disciplinary styles between households were also reported by several participants. Specifically, the vast majority of participants reported that their former partners would “yell,” “scream,” “threaten,” or “swear” at their child in order to discipline them. However, the participants’ current experiences at no time suggested that the children were in physical danger or subjected to physical or verbal abuse. Blair indicated that her former partner “squish[ed] [their children’s] cheeks” when upset. Jeff reported that his former partner had difficulty “setting limits” or “following through” with her disciplinary actions.

In contrast to their former partners’ disciplinary style, several participants reported that they never yelled at their child. Instead, Jeff said that he “could have tough conversations” that were “calm” and “rational” with his children. Several participants also discussed the importance of setting clear limits and establishing a consistent routine for their child to follow. Jamie acknowledged that she was not “perfect” and got “upset sometimes.” However, she indicated that she later addressed her own misbehaviour with her children and used it as a teaching opportunity to demonstrate how one should deal with conflict. Blair and Jamie both indicated that they also tried to teach their children manners when they misbehaved or were upset. For example, Blair said that she encouraged her children to “use their words” to express how they were feeling rather than walking away from the conflict or “hanging up on people” when upset. Similarly, Jamie indicated that she emphasized the importance of treating others with “respect” and being “polite,” even when upset. Taken together, participants believed that their disciplinary style was superior to that of their former partners, thereby making them the ‘better’ parent and better able to act in their child’s best interests.

Overall, participants believed that they were more capable of acting in their child’s best interests given their reported flexible, supportive, authoritative parenting style. In contrast, participants perceived their former partners’ parenting style to be too rigid or permissive. As a result, participants did not believe that their former partners were capable of effectively parenting their child or acting in their child’s best interests. Further, participants believed that their former partners’ permissive or rigid parenting style negatively affected the adjustment, academic performance, and behaviour of their child given the different rules and expectations between their households.

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3.2.2.4 Professional opinion. The final factor identified as influencing the participants' perceptions of what it means to be a 'good parent' was the opinion or recommendation of professionals, including legal and mental health professionals. Interestingly, the value participants placed on the opinions of various mental health and legal professionals (e.g., child custody evaluators, lawyers, and judges). That is, participants were more likely to value the opinion of professionals when the opinion reinforced the participants' belief regarding who was the most capable of acting in their child's best interests (e.g., the participants themselves) and to dismiss the opinion when it did not reinforce this belief.

Mark, Jamie, Jeff, Maria, and Doug all highly valued the opinions of the mental health and legal professionals assisting with their custody dispute. In these cases, the professionals advocated for these participants to have greater access to their child. Maria believed that it was the opinion of the mental health professional that "*made the difference in court*" and resulted in an increase in her access to her children. Participants also believed that the professionals' opinion recognized their superior parenting ability. Mark, Jamie, Jeff, Maria, and Doug all agreed with the recommendations of their "*expert*" and subsequently believed that the "*expert*" had acted in their child's best interests.

Participants also believed that the judge acted in their child's best interests by implementing the parallel parenting custody arrangement. Maria indicated that, prior to the implementation of the parallel parenting custody arrangement, her three children "*repeatedly asked to spend more time with me*" than her former partner allowed. Doug reported a similar experience. Doug and Maria eventually applied for custody and a parallel parenting custody arrangement was implemented, granting them considerably more access to their children. These participants believed that the court's decision to grant them more access indicated that they were the 'better' parent. As such, they placed more value on the opinion of the professionals involved in their custody dispute.

In contrast, Debra, Blair, and Sherri viewed the opinions and recommendations of mental health and legal professionals more negatively. In these cases, the professionals advocated for their former partners to have more access to their child. Debra believed that her former partner "*manipulated*" the mental health professional and judge into believing his side of the story and "*dismissing*" her claims of abuse. Sherri described a similar experience stating: "*I honestly feel he paid [child custody evaluator] to write [the report].*" Overall, these three participants did not

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believe that the professionals involved in their custody dispute were objective and unbiased. Consequently, these participants believed that these professionals were incapable of acting in their child's best interests.

Debra, Blair, and Sherri also believed that the parallel parenting custody arrangement erroneously gave their former partners more parenting time than they actually deserved. For both Debra and Blair, a key factor was because their former partners were not the biological parent of their child. Several participants also believed that, given the abusive nature of their relationship, their former partners were given too liberal access to their child. Debra believed that, given her former partner's history of abusive behaviour, she should have been granted "*sole custody*" with "*supervised visitation*" for her former partner. She said that the history of abusive behaviour was not given much weight by the judge presiding over their custody dispute. Sherri reported similar concerns. They interpreted the judge's failure to consider the abuse as evidence that the judge was incapable of acting in their child's best interests. Sherri and Blair also believed that their former partners should not have been granted such liberal access to their child because, according to Blair, "*we weren't living close to each other.*" Overall, Sherri, Blair, and Debra believed that the judge's decision to implement a parallel parenting custody arrangement was a "*political decision*" as opposed to a decision that was based on their child's best interests. Further, they did not believe that this decision recognized the fact that they, and not their former partners, were the 'better' parent.

Overall, the value participants placed on the opinion or recommendation of mental health and legal professionals varied. Participants were more likely to value the opinion of professionals when the opinion reinforced the participants' belief regarding who really was the most capable of acting in their child's best interests (e.g., the participants themselves). In contrast, participants interpreted the professionals' failure to side in their favour as evidence that the professionals were incapable of acting in their child's best interests. Central to this discussion were the mental health and legal professionals' ability to provide an objective, unbiased opinion, to act on the wishes of the child, and to protect the safety and well-being of the child.

3.2.2.5 Summary. Who Knows Best emerged as the second theme to understanding the participants' experience of conflict in the parallel parenting context. This theme centred on participants' perceptions of who knows best when it comes to acting in their child's best interests. Overall, participants consistently reported that they were the most capable of acting in

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their child's best interests compared to their former partners, however, their reasons for this varied. Specifically, participants' believed that the differences between their own and their former partners' parental role, ability, and style suggested that they were the more capable parent. Further, participants believed that mental health and legal professionals were capable of acting in the best interests of their child when the professionals' opinion reinforced their personal belief that they, and not their former partners, were the 'better' parent.

3.2.3 Desire for a resolution. The final guiding theme was the participants' desire (or lack thereof) to resolve the conflict in the parenting relationship. Contributing sub-themes included the quality of conflict in the parenting relationship, participants' satisfaction with the imposed custody arrangement, the persistence of conflict, as well as the participants' perceptions of the effect of conflict on their child's adjustment. Overall, participants who were motivated to resolve their custody dispute were more satisfied with the imposed custody arrangement, reported a less conflicted relationship with their former partners over time, and reported more positive child adjustment. In contrast, participants who were more reluctant to move on were dissatisfied with the imposed custody arrangement, primarily due to ongoing concerns regarding their child's safety and well-being while in their former partners' care. These participants also reported a more conflicted relationship with their former partners characterized by abuse, ongoing conflict and poorer post-divorce child adjustment as a result. However, the quality of the parent-child relationship was believed to offset some of these difficulties. In the paragraphs that follow, the reasons for the participants' different levels of motivation to resolve the custody dispute will be discussed in relation to the identified sub-themes.

3.2.3.1 Quality of conflict. Participants reported that their desire to resolve their custody dispute was affected by the quality of conflict with their former partners. That is, participants who described their conflict as abusive were less motivated to cooperate with their former partners than those who did not. The frequency and severity of their former partners' unpredictable, inconsistent, and manipulative behaviour, failure to take responsibility or to be held accountable for their actions, and the age of their child were central to this sub-theme.

Although all expressed a desire for the conflict to be resolved, their willingness to set aside their differences and work collaboratively with their former partners differed significantly depending on the nature and quality of that conflict. Specifically, Debra, Maria, Sherri, and Doug whose relationships with their former partners were reported to be abusive differed from that of

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Jeff, Blair, Mark and Jamie's whose were not. The former participants were more reluctant to cooperate with their alleged abusers. Debra and Sherri did not think they would ever be able to cooperatively coparent their child with their alleged abusers. Specifically, Debra felt like her former partner's abusive behaviour would continue regardless of the custody arrangement or safeguards in place to protect her and their child unless his access was restricted to "*supervised*" visits and she was given "*sole custody*." In fact, she believed that any other custody arrangement would "*tie*" her to her former partner and would fail to hold him accountable for his abusive behaviour. Sherri reported feeling similarly. These participants were reluctant to cooperate with their former partners whose reported history of noncompliant, uncooperative, and abusive behaviour was daunting.

Debra, Maria, Sherri, and Doug also stated that their former partners' unpredictable, abusive behaviour and ever changing expectations were prohibitive against coparenting cooperatively. For example, these participants reported that their former partners' expectations of them changed from one year to the next, so they never knew what to expect. Further, these participants believed that any attempt to cooperate on their former partners' behalf was feigned or contrived in an attempt to continue to control or manipulate them. For example, Debra, Maria, Sherri, and Doug reported that their former partners frequently made promises during the legal process in an effort to bolster their case for custody and present themselves in a more positive light. However, once out of the courtroom and in the privacy of their own home, participants said that their former partners failed to follow through with their promises. Debra, Maria, Sherri, and Doug also did not believe that their former partners' abusive behaviour would change. Behaviours such as blaming them (the participants) for keeping their child from their former partners, not supplying their former partners with sufficient notice to vary the access schedule for holiday time or failing to inform their former partners of their child's extracurricular activities and their associated cost occurred too frequently to expect change. They felt that for change to occur, their former partners would have to take responsibility for these difficulties and commit themselves, which was not reported to be happening. These participants also expressed frustration at the legal system for failing to hold their former partners accountable for their noncompliant, manipulative behaviour.

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Of the four in reportedly abusive relationships with their former partners, Maria and Doug were slightly less concerned about the noncompliant, abusive behaviour over time. Interestingly, these two participants had older children than Debra and Sherri. Maria and Doug related that their children, once they reached mid- to late adolescence, refused to alternate access and abide by the parallel parenting custody arrangement. Both participants related that their children's decision to vacate the parallel parenting custody arrangement ceased their involvement with their former partners as they no longer needed to discuss the custody arrangement or operate within its confines. In fact, Maria and Doug said that they no longer needed to communicate or contact their former partners for any reason, thereby reducing the opportunity for conflict as well as their exposure to their former partners' ongoing abusive behaviour.

Termination of contact by children was reported by participants with older children (Doug, Maria, Jeff, and Sherri to a lesser extent) regardless of the quality of conflict between contestants for custody. Participants with younger children (Debra, Blair, and Jamie) were optimistic that their child would choose to vacate the custody arrangement and remain in their care as he or she aged but were less motivated to desist from conflict in the interim.

The frequency and severity of conflict alone appeared to negatively influence the participants' motivation to desist from conflict. Mark, Jeff, Blair, and Jamie who were more optimistic that their former partners would desist from conflict experienced noncompliance from former partners as less frequent or severe than was the case with Debra, Maria, Sherri, and Doug. Further, these participants were able to collaborate and cooperate with their former partners at times. For example, Jeff said that his former partner frequently called him to help discipline their child. Further, Mark was able to troubleshoot various situations directly affecting their child with his former partner (e.g., how to normalize the exchanges for their son so he did not feel different from his peers at school). Similar experiences were reported by Blair and Jamie. Given the relatively more amicable nature of their relationships, these participants were more willing to cooperate with their former partners and desist from conflict.

Overall, the quality of conflict affected the motivation to desist from conflict. Based on the history of their relationships as well as their former partners' failure to take responsibility or to be held responsible for their actions, participants who described themselves as abused believed that their abuse would continue. In contrast, participants who did not feel abused and did not feel

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severely in conflict believed that their former partners were more likely to desist from conflict over time. These participants also had had more success trying to cooperate with their former partners, historically. Given the differences in the quality of conflict reported by participants, some participants were more willing or motivated to desist from conflict and resolve the conflict in their relationship with their former partners than others. However, regardless of the quality of conflict in the parenting relationship, participants indicated that the age of their child influenced their willingness to desist from conflict.

3.2.3.2 Level of Satisfaction. Participants reported that their satisfaction with the court's decision to implement a parallel parenting custody arrangement affected their desire to resolve their custody dispute. Overall, participants who were satisfied with the decision believed that they 'won' the custody dispute whereas those who believed that they 'lost' the dispute were dissatisfied with it. Based on these differing perspectives, participants reported different levels of motivation to desist from conflict in the parenting relationship. Central to this discussion was the participants' satisfaction with the structure, division of responsibilities, and access associated with the parallel parenting custody arrangement.

Five of the eight participants (Mark, Jamie, Jeff, Maria, and Doug) reported "*winning*" the custody dispute. Initially, these five participants had not been granted interim custody of their child and only had limited access as a result. However, with the court's decision to implement a parallel parenting custody arrangement, these five participants were granted equal access to their child. These participants believed that this helped to neutralize the power imbalance in their relationship with their former partners as no one individual now held all of the power in regards to determining access to their child. It is not surprising to hear these participants report that their former partners who lost access time and support payments were not satisfied with the decision and were less willing to make it work.

Mark, Jamie, Jeff, Maria, and Doug were also satisfied with the imposed custody arrangement because it had concrete expectations and guidelines for their own and their former partners' behaviour. These participants believed that the structure of the custody arrangement held themselves and their former partners more accountable than alternate custody arrangements had in the past. They reported that their child "*loved*" the structure of the custody arrangement because it was "*consistent,*" "*scheduled,*" and "*predictable.*" Several participants also believed that the implementation of the parallel parenting custody arrangement was in their child's best

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interests because it limited their communication and contact with their former partner. For example, participants indicated that exchanges typically occurred at school except for on special holidays, which limited the opportunity for conflict. Some participants reported communicating with their former partners through a third party, log book, communication book, or by email. Blair, Sherri, and Debra reported that this indirect style of communication limited the opportunity for conflict because they could “*ignore emails*” from their former partners if they were accusatory or hostile in nature. All of the participants believed that, at least to some extent, the limitations placed on their ability to communicate with their former partners were beneficial and in the best interests of their child. Further, participants were more motivated to resolve or at least limit the conflict in their relationship with their former partners given their satisfaction with this aspect of the parallel parenting custody arrangement.

Among the dissatisfied were Blair, Debra and Sherri. They were less motivated to desist from conflict as a result. These participants argued that the structure of the custody arrangement failed to hold anyone accountable for their actions. Blair described the parallel parenting custody arrangement as “*a joke*” because her former partner can “*overstep the limits*” and “*not respect*” the custody arrangement without ever facing consequences for such behaviour. However, Blair also criticized the custody arrangement for being too rigid and inflexible. Blair, Debra, and Sherri also believed that the parallel parenting custody arrangement gave their former partners too much power. Blair said that the custody arrangement put her former partner in a “*control position*.” Likewise, Sherri reported that: “*...parallel parenting has given him [her former partner] the opportunity to...veto...absolutely everything in my daughter’s life.*” Debra also stated that her former partner “*takes advantage*” of the ambiguous nature of the custody arrangement and “*uses it to control me.*” It is important to note that Debra and Sherri’s relationships with their former partners were both alleged to be characterized by abuse. Therefore, the purported unequal distribution of power holds different significance in these cases.

Several participants also believed that the designation of the ‘right of first refusal’ gave their controlling and/or abusive former partners too much power and control over them. For example, Sherri believed that this requirement allowed her former partner to remain over-involved in her life and shifted the balance of power in her former partners’ favour. This sentiment was echoed by Debra and Maria as well. Mark and Blair also believed that the ‘right of

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first refusal' hindered the involvement of other family members in their child's life. As such, several participants believed that the designation of the 'right of first refusal' was not in their child's best interests and allowed for the continuation of conflict in the parenting relationship. This belief consequently reduced the satisfaction with the custody arrangement as well as their motivation to cooperate with their former partners and desist from conflict.

Despite their displeasure and discontent with aspects of the imposed custody arrangement, Debra, Sherri, and Blair believed that the parallel parenting custody arrangement helped end their involvement with the family court system. Sherri stated that the parallel parenting custody arrangement "*worked to end...what was unfolding in the family court system*" and the "*chewing through*" of "*public funds.*" This sentiment was echoed not only by Debra and Blair, but by all of the other participants as well. Consequently, although some participants were less satisfied with the implementation of the parallel parenting custody arrangement, they were happy that the custody arrangement ceased their involvement with the family court system.

Alongside expressions of satisfaction were anticipated difficulties with the parallel parenting custody arrangement. Several participants criticized the court system for failing to consider logistical issues that directly affected the success or lack thereof of the custody arrangement. The proximity of households as well as the effectiveness of the highly structured custody arrangement for teenaged children were identified as potential pitfalls. For example, Jeff stated that "*you have to live in the same general area to do this, so the kids can go to the same schools.*" The participants reported that if they did not live in the vicinity, they ended up spending a significant amount of time transporting the child to and from school. Participants also stated scheduling holiday time was increasingly more difficult as their child got older because their child was more interested in spending time with their friends.

Regardless of whether participants 'won' or 'lost' the custody dispute, several participants stated that, despite the best intentions of mental health and legal professionals, parents cannot be compelled to cooperate. Sherri stated that: "*nobody can legislate the behaviour of a parent*" because parents choose "*how they're gonna parent their children.*" This sentiment was echoed by many other participants. In addition, Jamie stated that, although the courts believe parental cooperation is not required in parallel parenting custody arrangements, it is difficult to work in the best interests of their child if "*the other side is not cooperative.*" Sherri also believed that: "*it doesn't matter what the custody arrangements are gonna be*" if you have a high conflict

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relationship with your former partner because she believed that it “*will be challenging*” regardless of the custody arrangement. The ability to “*communicate in a positive way*” as well as “*mutual respect,*” were identified by Jamie as necessary in order for any custody arrangement to be successful. The majority of participants did not believe these two elements were present in their relationship with their former partners prior to or following the implementation of the parallel parenting custody arrangement. Consequently, many participants were skeptical that the parallel parenting custody arrangement could compel their former partners to cooperate with them and comply with the arrangement.

Overall, participants’ satisfaction with the court’s decision to implement a parallel parenting custody arrangement varied depending, in large part, on whether they believed that they ‘won’ or ‘lost’ the custody dispute. Participants who believed that they ‘won’ the custody dispute tended to view the custody arrangement in a more positive light and believed that the structure, limited contact and communication as well as the division of responsibility reflected the best interests of their child. In contrast, participants who ‘lost’ the custody dispute believed that the custody arrangement granted their former partners too much access, too much power, and failed to hold their former partners accountable for their noncompliance. Further, particular aspects of the custody arrangement (e.g., right of first refusal) were identified as affecting the participants’ satisfaction with the arrangement. Given the different levels of satisfaction reported by participants, some participants were more willing or motivated to desist from conflict and resolve the conflict in their relationship with their former partners than others.

3.2.3.3. Persistence of Conflict. Participants reported that the persistence of conflict following the implementation of the parallel parenting custody arrangement affected their desire for a resolution. In many cases, the persistence of conflict decreased the participants’ desire and motivation to desist from conflict. However, in other cases, participants indicated that they were motivated to desist from conflict despite their former partners’ persistent and ongoing noncompliance. The participants’ acceptance that their former partners were unlikely to change, exhaustion (emotional and financial), improvements in the quality of family relationships including the parent-child relationship, and overall satisfaction with their access agreement were central to this discussion.

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As indicated earlier, participant satisfaction was likely to be accompanied by former partner dissatisfaction. Several participants believed that dissatisfaction with the imposed custody arrangement decreased their former partners' willingness to cooperate with them and, ultimately, resulted in ongoing conflict in their relationship. For example, Maria related that, although the parallel parenting custody arrangement limited her contact with her former partner, she said that he wrote "*nasty things in the [communication] book.*" Similarly, Sherri said that her former partner continued to make "*accusations*" against her over the years. She described her former partner as the "*EverReady bunny. He just never runs out of power for...that kind of thing.*" She indicated that she tried to "*stand on her lips*" and ignore his attempts to instigate conflict but occasionally felt the need to stand up for herself and her child, so she responded to his accusations. Taken together, the participants believed that their former partners were content to continue instigating conflict, reducing the participants' desire to desist from conflict themselves.

Several participants indicated that, despite their former partners' ongoing noncompliance and uncooperative attitude, they tried to cooperate with their former partners following the implementation of the parallel parenting custody arrangement in order to reduce conflict in their relationship. However, participants related that their reasons for wanting to cooperate with their former partners varied. In several cases, participants indicated that they were tired of the conflict and just wanted to move on. Sherri said: "*I've dealt with this for so long and so consistently that even if it means money, I can't do it. ... I cannot fight anymore. ... It emotionally has been so harmful to me. I just want to live my life.*" Sherri described feeling "*crippled by the conflict*" and unwilling to take her former partner to court even though he owed her \$3,000 to \$4,000 in child support. Blair reported feeling similarly. Therefore, although Sherri and Blair were motivated to cooperate with their former partners, they reported doing so because they were too tired to continue to fight over the minute details of their custody arrangement. Much to their surprise, they reported that their lack of engagement in the conflict resulted in a more amicable relationship with their former partners. However, they both acknowledged there was still room for improvement.

In contrast, Jamie, Doug, Maria, Jeff, and Mark indicated that they were pleased with the imposed custody arrangement and were motivated to desist from the conflict once granted custody. Mark reported that, from the outset, he was determined to see his child and be involved

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in his life. The implementation of the parallel parenting custody arrangement afforded Mark this opportunity. He reported that, once granted access, he was less concerned about what his former partner was doing during her parenting time and, instead, focused on the time he had with his child. This change in focus resulted in a decrease in conflict in his relationship with his former partner. Doug, Maria, Jeff, and Jamie described similar experiences. Although participants expressed frustration continuing sporadic compliance and uncooperative attitudes, they reported being motivated to desist from the conflict and, instead, focus on the time they had with their children.

Maria and Mark indicated that they were also motivated to desist from the conflict because they accepted the fact that their former partners were unlikely to change. Maria said that she eventually learned not to take things “*personally*” because her former partner behaved “*that way with everybody.*” Mark described coming to a similar conclusion after he learned how his former partner behaved with her coworkers (via his new partner) and friends.

Similarly, Jamie indicated that she was motivated to desist from the conflict because she accepted that the custody arrangement, although not completely desirable, was unlikely to change. She explained: “*I would love nothing more than to have my children with me every day but that’s not what the situation is and I accept that.*” She added that, with acceptance, she has learned to better appreciate the time she has with her children, as well as the time she did not have them. She said that alternating access on a weekly basis allowed her to “*do things that I probably wouldn’t have a chance to do*” because “*I have a week that I can do other things.*” Jeff described a similar experience stating: “*you only had the kids for a week...and then you had a week you could do your own thing.*” Finally, Doug, Jeff, Mark, Maria, and Jamie also reported being motivated to desist from the conflict because the imposed custody arrangement allowed their extended family to be more involved in their child’s life.

Overall, the persistence of conflict was reported to negatively affect the participants’ desire and motivation to desist from conflict with their former partners. However, several participants indicated that they were motivated to desist from conflict in spite of their former partners’ noncompliant behaviour for various reasons. These reasons included the participants’ acceptance that their former partners were unlikely to change, exhaustion (emotional and financial), improvements in the quality of family relationships including the parent-child relationship, and overall satisfaction with their access agreement. Despite having different

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reasons for wanting to desist from conflict, participants reported that, for the most part, their attempts to avoid and disengage from conflict were successful. As a result, participants reported feeling optimistic about the future of their relationship with their former partners and the level of conflict in their relationship with one another.

3.2.3.4 Child adjustment. Participants reported that their desire to resolve their custody dispute was also affected by their desire to protect their child from ongoing conflict. Although prior to the implementation of the parallel parenting custody arrangement a variety of behavioural (i.e., internalizing and/or externalizing) difficulties were observed in their child, participants indicated that the persistence of these or related difficulties depended on their own and their former partners' desire to resolve the conflict, as well as their desire to protect their child from the conflict. The strength and quality of the parent-child relationship was also believed to offset the effects of exposure to ongoing parental conflict. Nevertheless, given the protracted nature of the custody dispute, several participants felt that, regardless of their desire to protect their child from and resolve the conflict, some behavioural difficulties in their child would persist.

The majority of participants indicated that they were willing to cooperate with their former partners in an attempt to avoid or disengage from the conflict because they believed that it was in their child's best interests. In fact, participants believed that their willingness to disengage from the conflict positively affected their child's adjustment. Blair indicated that her children became more confident in expressing their concerns with her and her former partner as the conflict in the parenting relationship decreased. For example, Blair said that her one child confronted her former partner about lying to a doctor during a medical appointment, telling her former partner to tell "*the truth.*" Likewise, Jamie, Jeff, Debra and Mark indicated that their child was no longer reluctant to acknowledge or display emotion towards them in the presence of their former partners as the conflict in the parenting relationship decreased. Other participants noted improvements in their child's academic performance, confidence, sociability, and emotional adjustment. For example, Jamie indicated that her children now "*have a lot of self-confidence ... they're both good in school. They both make friends easily. They're both...very sociable. ... they're not...overly emotional...they don't act out...they're very calm, open.*"

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Given their increased involvement in their child's life as a result of the imposed custody arrangement, a number of participants believed that the strength and quality of their relationship with their child improved. For example, Mark, Jamie, Jeff, Doug, Sherri, and Maria reported that they developed a closer relationship with their child. All but one of these participants believed that this improvement was because they had 'won' the custody dispute and gained more access to their child as desired. Jamie said that, "*I appreciate them probably more than a lot of parents who have their children all the time*" because "*they didn't have to fight for them.*" She also reported feeling "*grateful*" for the access and relationship that she has with her children. Mark reported feeling similarly, stating his involvement in his child's life would be almost "*non-existent*" if not for the imposed custody arrangement. Likewise, Jeff stated that the imposed custody arrangement "*built a much stronger bond between my two boys and...myself.*" Several participants also believed that the imposed custody arrangement helped to make them a better parent by granting them more parenting time. Although Sherri believed that she 'lost' the custody dispute, she also reported an improvement in her relationship with her child. Sherri believed that such improvements occurred because her former partner only exercised his access sporadically. Given his limited involvement in her child's life, she believed that her and her child had grown closer. She also felt like she had greater influence over her child's development and upbringing as a result. This sentiment was also shared by the participants who believed that they had 'won' their custody dispute and appeared to serve as a motivating factor to desist from conflict.

Participants also believed that the strength and quality of their relationship with their child helped counteract the negative impact of any ongoing exposure to conflict. For example, Debra and Sherri both expressed concern that, given the abusive nature of their relationship, their former partners would attempt to alienate their child from them. Sherri said that her former partner used to accuse their child of loving her (Sherri) more than him and for lying for her. Debra described a similar experience whereby her daughter was overheard saying "*nobody loves me. Only daddy loves me.*" Debra believed that her child had been told this by her former partner. As a result, both women were reluctant to cooperate with their former partners. However, both women reported having a very strong relationship with their child and believed that, given the quality of the parent-child relationship, they would be able to counteract some of the impact of

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their child's exposure to the ongoing conflict, as well as the impact of the negative messaging perpetrated by their former partners. This sentiment was also reported by the other participants.

All of the participants related that, regardless of their desire to resolve the conflict and the quality of the parent-child relationship, some behavioural difficulties in their child persisted. In the majority of cases, participants believed that this was the result of their child being exposed to years of parental conflict. For example, Maria described her youngest child as not "*really affectionate*," while Jamie described her one child as emotionally "*intense*." Jeff and Doug also observed that their children struggled with trust, confidence, and relationships as young adults. They both believed that this struggle was a result of their upbringing and prolonged exposure to conflict. Six of the eight participants also observed that their child was reluctant to voice his or her opinion at times for fear of hurting the feelings of the participants or their former partners. For example, Doug, Maria, Sherri, and Jeff said that, once they reached adolescence, their child did not want to tell them or their former partners that he or she wanted to establish a home base and to no longer alternate between households. Jamie, Blair, and Maria also reported that their child did not want to tell them or their former partners that they were no longer interested in participating in certain extracurricular activities for fear of hurting their feelings.

Overall, all of the participants expressed a desire to remove or protect their child from the conflict in the parental relationship. However, their ability to successfully do so varied. Several participants credited the structure of the parallel parenting custody arrangement as well as the strength and quality of the parent-child relationship for helping to limit their child's exposure to ongoing conflict. Participants believed that this positively affected their child's adjustment and overall behaviour, making them more willing to cooperate with their former partners as a result. Unfortunately, regardless of the participants' desire to resolve the conflict in the parenting relationship and the quality of the parent-child relationship, some enduring behavioural difficulties were observed in their child. These difficulties were believed to occur and persist in some cases given the protracted nature of the custody dispute.

3.2.3.5 Summary. The participants' desire (or lack thereof) to resolve the conflict in the parenting relationship emerged as the final guiding theme to understanding their experience of conflict in the parallel parenting context. This theme centred on the participants' motivation to resolve their custody dispute and disengage from the conflict with their former partners. Overall, participants reported that they were more motivated than their former partners to resolve the

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conflict in the parenting relationship for the most part; however, their reasons for this varied. Specifically, the quality of conflict in the parenting relationship, participants' satisfaction with the imposed parallel parenting custody arrangement, the persistence of conflict, and the participants' desire to protect their child from exposure to ongoing conflict were believed to influence the participants' desire to resolve their custody dispute. Participants who were more motivated to desist from conflict reported more positive outcomes than those who were less motivated.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the following chapter is to discuss the socially constructed (interpretivist) meaning of the phenomenon of parallel parenting as it was experienced by participants through the lens of intractable conflict to facilitate or hinder their goal of emancipation from the conflict. This socially constructed understanding is furthered through creating a more sophisticated reconstructed understanding of the phenomenon by juxtaposing the socially constructed (interpretivist) meanings of participants onto relevant scientific literature on divorce, spousal violence, child adjustment and child custody arrangements. The implications of the findings for lawmakers, legal professionals, policy and relevant theory are also discussed.

Following the principles of social and hermeneutic phenomenology, the description and understanding of conflict within the context of parallel parenting custody arrangements was limited by the participants' ability to articulate their thoughts and feelings. The involvement in intractable conflict and the desire to win custody may very well have placed limits on the articulation uncovered in the present study. It is likely that some of the participants' interpretations were biased or faulty as a result (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). See Section 1.2.3 for an explanation of how escalating and intractable conflict influences thinking processes such that they become vulnerable to error. To the extent that their conflict resembled what was described in Section 1.2.3, the meaning of the experiences made by the current participants may be quite specific to their psychological processes.

4.1 Socially Constructed Meaning

Foremost in the experience was the participants' desire to ensure the well-being and best interests of their most important possession, namely their child. The adoption of psychosocial processes to reduce the trauma associated with protecting oneself and arguing one's case in an adversarial court system was also central to this experience. The current process of inquiry created a rich knowledge of actions and interactions of participants best characterized by three themes: Attribution of responsibility: Self versus other, Who Knows Best, and Desire for a resolution. Despite differences/variations in description, the themes provided a rich and compelling account of the experience of conflict in the parallel parenting context. The participants' vigilance against exhausting intrusions on what was perceived to be appropriate and optimal care of their child and constant worry about their own psychological and physical safety required attempts to clearly understand the nature of the conflict, the actions of the opponents,

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and the maneuvers to emancipate themselves from a very frustrating, dangerous, and high-stakes battle for custody with culturally appropriate and safe strategies. Psychological processes of assigning causality to one's self and one's opponent's behaviour, of judging what content to advance and what to resist in an adversarial system, of applying known principles of child care and of completing cost-benefit analyses of strategies to desist from the conflict characterized the experience. Psychological processes of assigning the role of "villain" to the opponent and of "marginalizer" to the order of parallel parenting plans made the best meaning for participants. Several reasons were offered to support this belief (e.g., their former partners were inherently "bad," mentally unstable, and/or jealous given their constant attempts to instigate or create conflict).

Based on public information about the court case and from their own description, the participants in this study were embroiled in a highly contentious custody dispute. They had invested considerable time and money in the pursuit of custody and, in the majority of cases, the participants and their former partners were both seeking sole custody. Neither party was willing to concede or compromise for various reasons. As participants spent more time and money in the pursuit of custody, their commitment to securing custody deepened, which resulted in the expenditure of more resources and the use of contentious tactics. Over time, the conflict became consuming, altering how participants perceived, interpreted, and understood their experiences. This narrowed purview of conflict influenced the participants' attributions, parenting beliefs, as well as their willingness to desist from conflict. Consequently, conflict became the lens through which participants' perceived their experience and made meaning of that experience.

Depending on their unique frame of reference, the participants' perception and experience of the conflict varied. In cases of high conflict with no acknowledged abuse, the essence of the participants' experience appeared to focus on the participants' pursuit of and desire for custody. In contrast, the essence of the participants' experience in cases alleged to be abusive appeared to focus on self-preservation and child protection in the pursuit of custody. In these cases, the participants' pursuit of custody was more adaptive and protective in nature. While the essence as depicted through the three themes of the participants' experience in cases suspected to be abusive did not differ dramatically from those in non-abusive relationships, one has to entertain the possibility that denial, minimization and/or the deflection of responsibility minimized the participants' self-preservation and child protection concerns.

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Overall, the results from this study suggest that the experience of conflict in the context of parallel parenting custody arrangements is very complex and involves a mixture of psychological experiences. The methodological and analytical approaches allowed me to obtain detailed descriptions of the participants' perceptions, opinions, and understandings of their experience of conflict in the parallel parenting context, while also ensuring the trustworthiness and credibility of these findings. Although the lens of conflict appeared to influence the participants' attitudes and perceptions, a rich and compelling account of the experience of conflict in the parallel parenting context was elucidated.

4.2 Integration of Findings with the Literature

The participants' experience of conflict maps onto Pruitt and Rubin's (1986) account of the psychological parameters of intractable conflict. In addition to the work of Pruitt and Rubin (1986), the participants' experience of conflict supports Epstein and Madsen's (2004) criticism of parallel parenting custody arrangements. Many ideas embedded within each theme can also be further understood by comparing them with findings from previous qualitative and quantitative studies. The reliance on this research is not intended to deconstruct the participants' experience or to make claims regarding the objective truth or reality of their experiences. The experiences uncovered are simply experiences. However, since the published literature does not capture the complex and complete nature of each participant's experience, it is hoped that, by comparing the participants' experiences to these bodies of research, some of the nuances in the participants' experiences not yet fully understood or addressed in quantitative and qualitative research will be highlighted. Consistencies with and contradictions to the relevant research literature are discussed according to each theme.

Within the discussion of each theme, the context of the participants' relationships (e.g., abusive versus non-abusive) is addressed separately to provide a more contextualized understanding of the participants' construction of meaning. Throughout this discussion the terms high conflict and non-abusive conflict are used interchangeably. Overall, this separation allowed for a better understanding of the reasons for the participants' attitudes, attributions, and perceptions as well as the factors motivating them to desist from conflict.

4.2.1 The nature of the experience. As indicated above and consistent with Pruitt and Rubin's (1986) description of escalating conflict, the results of this research suggest that the participants' experience may have been framed primarily by the context of intractable conflict

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which produces a lens for perceiving, processing, and interpreting information (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). However, the participants' experience of conflict and the lens through which they viewed their life world varied depending on the quality of conflict in their relationship with their former partners (e.g., abusive versus non-abusive). Given their different lenses, participants ascribed different meaning to their experience of conflict.

In cases of spousal violence, participants can be understood to perceive, process, and interpret their own and their former partners' behaviour through the lens of oppression. Through this lens, participants understood their former partners' uncooperative, manipulative, and noncompliant behaviour to be a threat of serious danger to their own and their child's safety and well-being. They adopted a protective or defensive stance toward their former partners as a result. Safety concerns are not uncommon in cases of spousal violence. In fact, victims of abuse have been found to be at an increased risk of harm following separation and divorce (Brownridge et al., 2008; Hotton, 2001; Liss & Stahly, 1993; Statistics Canada, 2001). Recall that the risk of harm to children has also been found to be elevated during this period of time (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Erickson & Henderson, 1998; Jaffe et al., 2008; Johnston et al., 2005; Peled, 1998; Sturge & Glaser, 2000). To the extent that they are covered in the samples of this previous research, the participants' self-preservation and child protection concerns were likely warranted. Further, in this context, defensive actions, such as resistance to abuse, may help victims regain a sense of self and hope for the future while modeling appropriate behaviour to their children (Werner-Wilson et al., 2000). Therefore, the participants' resistance and general reluctance to cooperate with their former partners appeared to be an adaptive response given the abusive nature of their relationship.

In contrast, participants from non-abusive relationships can be understood to perceive, process, and interpret their former partners' behaviour through the lens of competition. These participants focused on their desire to "win" custody, regardless of the cost. Feelings of competition are not uncommon in cases of high conflict divorce. Specifically, involvement in the adversarial system has been found to foster a "win-lose" mentality characterized by polarized and positional thinking about parenting liabilities and capacities (Ellis & Stuckless, 1996; Emery, 1994; Kelly, 2002, 2003). This mentality has been found to lead parents to file legal motions and damaging affidavits against one another in an attempt to "win" custody. These previous findings are consistent with the reported experience of participants from abusive and non-abusive

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relationships. In both cases, participants believed that their actions were justified in order to secure custody. However, the participants' actions in abusive relationships likely had to be defensive and protective in nature whereas those in non-abusive relationships could be more self-serving.

Since perpetrators of spousal violence are known to minimize or deflect responsibility for their abusive behaviour while victims of spousal violence tend to minimize or deny the experience of abuse (see Neilson (2012) for a review), it is possible that participants from relationships described as non-abusive were actually involved in abusive relationships. In these cases, the participants' desire to "win" custody may have been motivated by self-preservation and child protection concerns as well. Without corroborating data from their former partners, it is not possible to know the exact nature of the participants' relationships. However, the reported experience of the abusive dynamics of power and control by two participants who described their relationship as non-abusive suggests caution about this understanding.

Although consistent with past research, the experiences of participants in the present study invite a more in-depth understanding of the role of oppression and competition on the experience of conflict in parallel parenting custody arrangements. While the participants' negative beliefs and expectations may have been warranted given the highly contentious and in some cases abusive nature of their relationship with their former partners, the lens of conflict appeared to influence the interpretation and understanding of their experience. While the accuracy of their interpretations is not known, it is likely that some of the participants' interpretations were biased or faulty given their narrowed purview of conflict. Pruitt and Rubin (1986) reported that individuals often develop tunnel vision in cases of intractable conflict (abusive and non-abusive), disregarding or excluding information that does not fit within their narrowed purview of conflict. Instead, individuals tend to focus on or look for information that supports their course of action and confirms their preconceived notions of others (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the confirmation bias. When applied to the current finding, given their unique frame of reference, participants may have been more likely to interpret their former partners' behaviour and intentions in a negative manner, confirming the participants' negative beliefs and expectations of their former partners' behaviour. Elsewhere, these beliefs and expectations have been found to perpetuate conflict and result in a self-fulfilling prophecy (e.g., others behave as expected when our expectations cause

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us to act in a certain manner toward them; Brockner & Rubin, 1985). The participants' experience should be interpreted and understood with this possibility in mind. The influence of the participants' frame of reference on their attributions, parenting beliefs, and willingness to desist from conflict is discussed in greater detail in Sections 4.2.2 to 4.2.4.

4.2.2 Theme 1: Attributions of responsibility: Self versus other. Research on conflict escalation and entrapping conflict has often relied on attribution research to understand or explain why individuals tend to blame others for the conflicted nature of their relationships. While this body of research does not capture the full experience reported by the participants, it may help further the understanding of it. For example, in cases of escalating conflict, adversaries are frequently perceived as untrustworthy, deficient in moral virtue (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986), and lacking in ability or achievement (Blake & Mouton, 1962). In contrast, individuals tend to view themselves as highly moral and more able (White, 1984). These attitudes and perceptions have been found to encourage the tendency to blame one's adversary for conflict while exempting oneself from any personal responsibility (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Further, involvement in the legal system was believed to perpetuate conflict and appeared to reinforce the participants' tendency to blame their former partner as they fought to acquire custody. This attributional style, which was also found in the present study, can be expected to be associated with the persistence and escalation of conflict (Brockner & Rubin, 1985; Fincham, Bradbury, & Grych, 1990; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986).

Generalized concerns believed to reflect an adversary's underlying disposition are common in cases of intractable conflict (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). This tendency is commonly referred to as the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977) or, more recently, the correspondence bias (Gilbert & Jones, 1986). Although these two terms are often used interchangeably, they are believed to constitute different phenomena (Hamilton, 1998; Krull, 2001). That is, the fundamental attribution error is believed to result from an underestimation of situational influences on behaviour while the correspondence bias is believed to result from the tendency to make dispositional inferences about situationally constrained behaviour (Hamilton, 1998; Krull, 2001). When applied to the current findings, the participants' tendency to attribute responsibility for their former partners' negative behaviour to internal factors (e.g., internal disposition, character, or personality) rather than the situation can be understood to be the result of the correspondence bias or fundamental attribution error. This possible misattribution may

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have been responsible for the continuation and, in some cases, escalation of conflict in the parenting relationship. Unfortunately, in the absence of additional data, the accuracy of the participants' attributions cannot be confirmed. The participants' experiences should be interpreted with this possibility in mind.

Pruitt and Rubin (1986) suggest that, in cases of intractable conflict, individuals are likely to blame conflict on others for two main reasons. First, finding fault with others is less painful than finding fault with oneself. Second, we are often more aware of other individuals' contributions to conflict than of our own. Since individuals involved in highly contentious, intractable conflict tend to view their experiences through the lens of conflict, they are more likely to attend to information that fits within their purview of conflict (Brockner & Rubin, 1985). In the current study, this selective processing of information may explain why individuals are more aware of others' contributions to conflict and are therefore more likely to blame them.

Overall, participants reported many difficulties that have been found in the research literature on divorce and spousal violence. The consistency between their accounts and the research literature suggests that at least some their attributions may have been accurate and/or warranted. Specifically, in cases of high conflict divorce, parents have been found to engage in hostile, defensive, and uncooperative behaviour at times (Anderson et al., 2011). Verbal disagreements and denigration as well as a sense of mutual distrust, emotional reactivity, and strong negative affect are also commonly reported (Anderson et al., 2011; Baker, 2005; Johnston & Campbell, 1993). Feelings of anger, hurt, and jealousy have been found to intensify conflict between parents (Bernstein, 2000; Stokes & Wampler, 2002; Walzer & Oles, 2003). There is considerable overlap of these links and findings from participants who experienced their former partners as intentionally engaged in negative behaviour and to blame for the conflict.

In addition, consistent with previous research, which shows that involvement in intractable conflict negatively affects the self-esteem and emotional control of parents (Anderson, 2011; Baker, 2005; Ellis, 2000; Johnston & Campbell, 1993), is the experience that former partners' behaviour reflected to some degree mental instability. Attributions of mental illness have been found to result in stigmatization, anger and punishing behaviour in some cases (Weiner, 1995) and pity and helping behaviour in others (Corrigan, Markowitz, Watson, Rowan, & Kubiak, 2003; Dooley, 1995; Menec & Perry, 1998; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). In the present study, participants appeared to have little empathy for their former partners' alleged mental

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health difficulties and instead perceived these difficulties as contributing to their former partners' uncooperative behaviour. There was also little evidence of the experience of pity in the present study. Difficulties with empathy are common in cases of intractable and escalating conflict (Pruitt & Rubin 1986). Here, given the protracted nature of the custody dispute and the entrenched nature of the participants' beliefs and attributions, pity, like empathy, may also be lacking.

Although they acknowledged instigating conflict or experiencing mental health difficulties at times, participants from high conflict relationships minimized the impact of their actions or simply justified their reasons for behaving in such a manner. Given the context of a high conflict custody dispute, the participants may have feared that acknowledging their mental health difficulties without emphasizing the external cause would imply something negative about them and suggest that they were not capable of parenting their child. Such an acknowledgement could have compromised their case for custody. Instead, minimizing their own difficulties and highlighting the faults of their former partners allowed participants to present themselves in the best possible light, potentially bolstering their case for custody. Many participants believed that this attributional style, although admittedly biased and self-serving in nature, was warranted and even necessary if they were to "win" custody. Brockner, Rubin, and Lang (1981) referred to a similar phenomenon as "face-saving." Such behaviour is common when individuals are embroiled in conflict, feel that they are under the evaluative scrutiny of others, and wish to present themselves in a socially desirable fashion (Brockner et al., 1981). Here, saving face may have led the participants to blame their former partners for the conflict and to present themselves as a "victim" or "defender" as opposed to an "aggressor." Further, given the protracted nature of the participants' custody dispute, the desire to present oneself in a positive manner may have become ingrained, resulting in the perpetuation of this mentality over time.

Brockner and colleagues (1981) added that role models can influence the attributional style of those embroiled in conflict. In the context of this research, lawyers who are familiar with and have expert knowledge regarding the legal system and custody litigation may be regarded as role models. As their lawyers attempted to build their case for custody, participants may have been more likely to blame their former partners for the conflict. Their ongoing desire for custody may have served to perpetuate these negative beliefs and further entrench their attributions. Therefore, acting in the legal system, participants could easily be motivated to present

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themselves in a socially desirable fashion and to become more entrapped in conflict as a result. Again, since it is possible that participants from relationships described as non-abusive were actually involved in abusive relationships, their attributions may have been motivated by self-preservation and child protection concerns within their desire for custody. The reported experience of two participants who described their relationship as non-abusive supports this possibility.

Although the attributions of those involved in abusive relationships were similar to those from non-abusive relationships, the meaning of their attributions differed. Abused participants had reportedly endured years of deceitful, coercive, manipulative, and controlling behaviour and expressed concerns about their own and their child's safety while in their former partners' care. The reasons provided for and meaning behind their attributions are consistent with research on the behaviour of perpetrators of spousal violence. Specifically, perpetrators of spousal violence have been found to engage in a variety of uncooperative, manipulative, coercive, and controlling behaviours following separation and divorce (see Bancroft & Silverman (2002) for a review). Much of this behaviour is described as intentional and is reported to occur across a variety of situations, thereby suggesting that such behaviour reflects internal as opposed to situational or external causes of behaviour. This behaviour has been found to affect the parenting capacity and practices of victims and perpetrators of abuse (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Brownridge et al., 2008; Doyme et al., 1999; Erickson & Henderson, 1998; Fish, McKenzie, & MacDonald, 2009; Jaffe, Lemon, & Poisson, 2003; Johnston et al., 2005; Letourneau et al., 2007; Peled, 1998). The impact of spousal violence on parenting behaviours is discussed in greater detail in Section 4.2.3.

Further, the persistence of conflict in cases of abuse has been linked to high levels of possessiveness among perpetrators of spousal violence (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). When victims attempt to leave the relationship (Dobash & Dobash, 1983) or become involved with a new partner (Adams, 1989; Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Dobash & Dobash, 1983), the mentality of ownership is evoked and perpetrators of spousal violence often attempt to intimidate, threaten, or pressure their former partners and children. Further, mental illness and high levels of possessiveness have been reported in a number of cases of spousal violence that resulted in homicide (Websdale, 1999). There is overlap of these previous research findings and the experience of participants who attributed conflict to their former partners' internal disposition, mental health, and feelings of jealousy. Further, given the abuse, these attributions

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may have served a protective and adaptive function. In fact, consistent with Pruitt and Rubin's (1986) description of escalating conflict, the participants' defensive stance is not surprising given the high level of distrust characterizing their relationship.

Victims of spousal violence have been noted to experience a range of lasting mental health difficulties (Bostock et al., 2009; Calder, 2004; Clements et al., 2004; Eby, 2004; Jaffe et al., 2008; Neilson, 2012; Romito et al., 2005). Although participants in the present study acknowledged experiencing feelings of depression, fear, anxiety, and stress, they were quick to blame their mental health difficulties on their former partners' behaviour. In light of what these participants had to experience in their relationship with their former partners, it is not surprising that they experienced some form of psychological distress.

Although acknowledging that they instigated conflict and experienced mental health difficulties at times, participants minimized the impact of their actions or simply justified their reasons for behaving in such a manner. Since perpetrators of spousal violence often attempt to discredit their victims and create confusion or uncertainty about their victims' parenting ability (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Jaffe et al., 2008; Zorza, 1995), the participants' acknowledgement of mental health difficulties or uncooperative behaviour, no matter how minor, could have been used against them throughout their involvement in the legal system. Consequently, the participants' attributional style may well have been protective and adaptive given the context of their relationship and involvement in the legal system.

Participants from abusive relationships also justified their reasons for engaging in conflict. Recall that resisting abuse and engaging in perpetrator blame has been found to be important for victim recovery (Bostock et al., 2009; Davis, 2002; Kearney, 2001; Lewis et al., 2006; Werner-Wilson et al., 2000; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999; 2001). Although they occasionally described themselves as "victims" or may have considered themselves to be "victims" in the past, the participants' desire to protect their child and themselves suggested that they no longer viewed themselves as victims. Instead, they may be described as "fighters" or "survivors" given the tenacity with which they pursued custody and advocated for the best interests of their child. Their tendency to externalize blame to their former partners in these circumstances appeared to be an adaptive response important to their personal recovery. Unfortunately, resistance to abuse is often perceived to reflect an unwillingness to cooperate or as a manifestation of parental alienation within the legal system (Jaffe et al., 2008), rather than a

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victim's effort to reassert independence and resist an abuser's controlling and manipulative behaviour (Bostock et al., 2009; Davis, 2002; Kearney, 2001; Lewis et al., 2006; Werner-Wilson et al., 2000; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999; 2001). In the present study, participants expressed concern that their resistance was misinterpreted by others (e.g., legal and mental health professionals) because their motives (e.g., child protection) were not clearly understood. In fact, in many cases participants' believed that their motives were perceived as "unfriendly" and abusive (see Neilson (2012) for a discussion of the criminalization of resistance to abuse) rather than protective and adaptive. In some cases, participants believed that this misinterpretation compromised their case for custody. In light of this finding, it is apparent that allegations of spousal violence need to be taken seriously by those in the legal system and dealt with accordingly (see Neilson (2012) for recommendations on how spousal violence should be dealt with within the legal system). A failure to do so may compromise the safety and well-being of victims of abuse and their children.

Although the participants' attributions appeared similar on the surface, the reasons for their attributions seemed to differ dramatically. The differences in the history, nature, and quality of conflict influenced how the participants' perceived their former partners' behaviour as well as the constructed meaning of their attributions. Despite reasons for blaming opponents, Pruitt and Rubin (1986) argued that externalizing blame may serve to perpetuate conflict and result in faulty attributions. Overlap with experiences here may have a similar explanation. However, since the participants' experiences were consistent with the results of research on high conflict divorce and spousal violence, at least some of their attributions may have been accurate and indeed warranted.

Based on the findings of this study, it is apparent that the depth and intensity of attributions needs to be considered in the context of intractable conflict since these attributions are likely to be deeply ingrained and resistant to change. These attributions are also likely to be influenced by the lens through which individuals perceive their experience (e.g., abusive versus non-abusive). In order to better understand the attributions of those involved in parallel parenting custody arrangements, it appears to be essential that the nature and quality of the conflict be considered. Because of the perceived danger reported by participants in abusive relationships, pressuring parents to alter their attributions, to forgive their former partners, and to comply with a custody arrangement such as parallel parenting may be very difficult to accomplish and, more

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importantly, inappropriate to suggest or recommend. Therefore, a greater appreciation for what participants had to endure and rise above in order to stay safe and healthy must be acknowledged within the legal system to prevent the misuse of custody arrangements, including parallel parenting custody arrangements.

4.2.3 Theme 2: Who knows best? According to Pruitt and Rubin (1986), negative attitudes and perceptions are believed to result in the externalization of blame (see Section 4.2.2) and influence expectations of behaviour. These attitudes, perceptions, and expectations result from and contribute to the escalation of conflict (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Further, once established, these negative attitudes and perceptions tend to endure due to the selective processing of information. Here, participants experienced having deep seated beliefs regarding who was the most capable of acting in their child's best interests.

Across cases, participants believed that their former partners had poorly developed parenting skills and, subsequently, were unable to act in their child's best interests. Several reasons were offered to support this belief, including their former partners' noncompliance, poor judgment, rigid or permissive parenting, the desire to instigate or continue conflict, parental status, and the use of punitive disciplinary techniques. The lens of conflict is believed to influence the appraisal of behaviour (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). The participants' perceptions and understanding of their own and their former partners' parental role, expectancies, and behaviour can be understood as coming through such a lens. Recall that adversaries are frequently regarded as lacking in ability or achievement, untrustworthy, and deficient in moral virtue while individuals view themselves as highly moral and more able (see Section 4.2.2). Further, participants may have been motivated to present their former partners in a negative manner in order to bolster their pursuit of custody. In doing so, the participants may have minimized aspects of their behaviour and embellished others in order to present themselves as the 'better' parent.

Participants' experiences overlapped with findings in the research literature on parenting practices in cases of high conflict divorce as well as spousal violence. The consistency between their accounts and the research literature suggests that at least some of their perceptions and beliefs may be understood as being expected and/or warranted given their situation. Specifically, high levels of conflict have been reported to negatively impact parenting capacity (Jaffe & Crooks, 2005; Jaffe et al., 2005) and the adjustment of children (Fehlberg et al., 2011). In this

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context, parents tend to be less warm, less happy, and more rejecting toward their children (Ellis, 2000). They also tend to have poorer control over their emotions and lower expectations for their children's self-control (Ellis, 2000). High levels of conflict have also been found to contribute to low parental self-esteem, neglectful, rigid, or authoritarian parenting styles, permissive, inconsistent, and indifferent parenting, unclear boundaries in the parent-child relationship and harsh disciplinary behaviour (Anderson et al., 2011; Baker, 2005; Conger et al., 1993; Erel & Burman, 1995; Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Johnston & Campbell, 1993). To the extent that these previous findings could generalize to the current study, the participants' belief that their former partners were incompetent or deficient parents could be understood as justified. Further, given their abusive relationships, participants can be understood to have realistic concerns about their self-preservation and child protection.

There is also overlap between the research literature and participants' concerns about the conflict negatively affecting the parenting capacity of their former partners, but not their own. Participants reported feeling highly confident in their ability to meet their child's needs and to act in their best interests. Confidence in one's ability to meet the needs of a child, also known as parenting efficacy, is associated with a number of positive outcomes for both parents and children (Coleman & Karraker, 2000; Donovan, Leavitt, & Walsh, 1997; Wells-Parker, Miller, & Topping, 1990; Williams et al., 1987). Based on their descriptions of their personal parenting ability, participants from high conflict relationships reported having high parenting self-efficacy and believed that they were the 'better' parent as a result. As discussed in Section 4.2.2, if participants had acknowledged that their parenting ability had suffered as a result of the conflict, they may have compromised their case for custody. Further, such an acknowledgment may have negatively affected their parenting self-efficacy. In light of the potential risks of such an acknowledgement, the participants' belief could be understood as being self-serving and possibly adaptive given the circumstances. Further, their reported high parenting self-efficacy may explain why many participants refused to give up their fight for custody and remained resolute in their belief that they were the 'better' parent. Yet some of the participants noted that their custody fight had been resolved

While it is unlikely that their parenting capacity was completely unaffected by the conflict, participants did not report experiencing any such difficulty. It is possible that the effect was undetected in some cases or largely unaffected or simply not reported by the participant

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given their desire to present themselves in a positive manner. In previous research, individuals, particularly those in abusive relationships, have been found to compensate for their experience of conflict so that their parenting is unaffected (Letourneau et al., 2007). Since some of the non-abusive cases may actually have been characterized by abuse, the effect of conflict on their parenting behaviours may have been minimal or went undetected. It is also possible that the lens of conflict affected how participants perceived their own and their former partners' behaviour (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). As such, the context of high conflict custody disputes may create a stronger perception of parenting ability than would be the case in other contexts given parents' desire to "win" custody. By comparison, this perception may be strengthened further in cases of spousal violence given parents' greater self-preservation and child protection concerns.

Despite their perception of a possible prejudice of better parenting toward the female sex, both male and female participants maintained that they were the 'better' parent. Consistent with the experience of participants, the opinions of mothers are typically given greater weight when it comes to their children because they are assumed to know what is best, while fathers are not – even when they defy the '*dead-beat*' dad stereotype fathers (Goodman, Sharma, Thomas, & Considine, 1995; Phares, 1997). However, as fathers assume more of the parenting responsibilities as a result of changes to the structure of families, confidence in their ability to act in their children's best interests is likely to increase as well (DeGarmo, Patras, & Eap, 2008). The participants' experience can be understood as an emerging trend.

Contrary to the experience of some participants from high conflict relationships who believed that they were the 'better' parent given their status as the biological parent (recall that two participants conceived by donor insemination), previous research has found that alternative family structures, including single and dual-adoptive parent family structures, do not significantly differ in parental investment and ability from family structures in which there are two biological parents (Hamilton, Cheng, & Powell, 2007). In fact, children from single and dual-adoptive parent family structures, including same-sex and heterosexual family structures (Hamilton et al., 2007; Rosenfeld, 2010), have been found to be just as well-adjusted as children from intact, biological family structures (Stewart, 2010). In certain cases, alternative family structures, including same-sex and adoptive family structures, actually contributed to greater parental allocation of resources to children, resulting in more positive outcomes (Hamilton et al., 2007; Rosenfeld, 2010). Since parents have been found to construct and maintain child-rearing

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beliefs across time regardless of evidence concerning their perceived or continued accuracy (McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1992), it is possible that the participants' beliefs can be understood as self-serving in that it may bolster their case for custody and/or the result of their narrowed purview of conflict. As suggested by Pruitt and Rubin (1986), given the protracted nature of their custody dispute, these beliefs may have become entrenched and resistant to change over time, regardless of their perceived or continued accuracy.

Two other participants bolstered their competency argument by claiming that they were the more capable parent because they had previous parenting experience since they had raised children from previous relationships. However, the link between previous experience with children and parenting ability is not well established in the research literature (Leerkes & Burney, 2007). Again, this belief may have reflected the participants' narrowed purview of conflict and been used as evidence to support their case for custody, regardless of its perceived or continued accuracy.

Participants from high conflict relationships also held strong beliefs about the competency of mental health and legal professionals involved in their custody dispute. The construction of these beliefs was based, in large part, on the participants' perceived success in the custody dispute. Research on the willingness to accept court decisions has found that individuals are more willing to accept the decisions of police officers, mediators, judges, and other third-party authorities when they think those authorities are acting in a fair manner (Kitzman & Emery, 1993; Lind, Kulik, Ambrose, & de Vera Park, 1993; Paternoster, Brame, Bachman, & Sherman, 1997; Tyler, 2001; Wissler, 1995). In the present study, the participants' perceptions of fairness in cases of high conflict were relative and appeared to be contingent upon their perceived success in the custody dispute (e.g., being granted custody or more access) and whether or not the decision of custody reinforced their belief regarding who was the 'better' parent. Consistent with Pruitt and Rubin's description of escalating conflict (1986), professional opinions that reinforced the participants' belief regarding their superiority as parents served to strengthen and further entrench their beliefs. Surprisingly, professional opinions that countered the participants' beliefs also served to strengthen and further entrench the participants' belief in their superiority as parents. In these cases, participants attempted to discredit the professional involved in their case for being biased, uneducated, ill-informed, or incompetent in order to maintain their positive view of their own parenting prowess. Consistent with this experience,

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research on entrapping and escalating conflict suggest that individuals often become more committed to their course of action and beliefs when met with resistance in an attempt to save face and, ultimately, prove others wrong (Brockner et al., 1981; Brockner & Rubin, 1985).

Although the perceptions of those involved in abusive relationships were similar to those from non-abusive relationships, the meaning of their perceptions differed. Like their attributions, their parenting beliefs can be understood to be more protective and adaptive given the reportedly abusive nature of their relationship. The reasons provided for their beliefs are generally consistent with research on the parenting behaviour of perpetrators and victims of spousal violence.

The parenting abilities of perpetrators of spousal violence have received considerable attention in the research literature (see Bancroft & Silverman (2002) for a review). Consistent with the experience of participants, past research has found the behaviour and attitudes of perpetrators of spousal violence to negatively affect their parenting practices (Arroyo & Eth, 1995; Augustyn et al., 1995; Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Doyne et al., 1999; Neilson, 2004). Specifically, perpetrators of spousal violence have been described as harsh disciplinarians, rigid, authoritarian, inconsistent, neglectful, irresponsible, controlling and manipulative parents (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Other research has found individuals who physically abuse their partners to frequently abuse their children as well (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Further, perpetrators of spousal violence have been found to use litigation as a means to draw their children into the conflict, often using their children as a weapon against their mother to force reconciliation, undermine her credibility as a parent, and/or to continue their abusive hold on her life (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Erickson & Henderson, 1998; Johnston et al., 2005; Peled, 1998). Perpetrators may also use contact with their children to frighten, monitor, harass, or abuse their former partners and children (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). There is considerable overlap between these previous research findings and the experiences of participants who believed that their former partners were incompetent and therefore incapable of acting in their child's best interests. Likewise, their concerns about the safety and well-being of their child while in their former partners' care were likely justified as well.

While the experience of abuse has been found to diminish the parenting capacity of some abused parents (Jaffe et al., 2008), others are more sensitive and responsive to their children (Letourneau et al., 2007). Further, victims of abuse have been found to re-establish effective

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parenting practices and improve their overall functioning with time, protection, and support (Jaffe et al., 2005; 2008). In the present study, although participants reported struggling to cope with the ongoing psychological distress of having to parent and interact with their abusive former partner, they continued to view their own parenting capacity as superior to that of their former partners. At no time did these participants report that the parenting capacity of their former partners exceeded their own. Such an admission may have jeopardized their case for custody by providing their former partners with the opportunity to undermine their credibility as parent (see Bancroft & Silverman (2002) for a review). However, it is more likely that the participants' unwavering belief that they were a 'better' parent can be understood to reflect their ongoing concerns regarding the safety and well-being of their child while in their former partners' care as well as their desire for custody.

Like participants from high conflict relationships, participants from abusive relationships also believed that they were the 'better' parent given their biological sex. Since men have historically been identified as the perpetrators of spousal violence (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002), the beliefs of female participants may have been warranted. Some participants also believed that their status as the biological parent and their previous parenting experience made them the 'better' parent. Having a child from a previous relationship has been found to increase the risk of violent behaviour among perpetrators of spousal violence (Hilton et al., 2004). These findings lend support to the participants' beliefs that they were the 'better' parent since the behaviour noted above clearly compromises the safety and well-being of victims of abuse as well as their children.

Consistent with the experiences of those from non-abusive relationships, participants from abusive relationships also held strong beliefs regarding the competency of mental health and legal professionals to act in their child's best interests. However, their reasons for these beliefs varied given the potentially high risk of harm to the participants and their children in cases of abuse. Researchers have argued that, in the vast majority of cases, it is not in a child's best interests to be placed in the custody of an abusive parent (ABA Center on Children, 1994; APA Presidential Task Force, 1996; National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 1994). Although provincial legislation has been developed throughout Canada to assist with child placement in cases of high conflict (e.g., see the Children's Law Act, 1997), legislation in many jurisdictions does not specifically acknowledge the impact of spousal violence on child

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custody decisions (Muzychka & Williams, 1994; Ontario Women's Network on Custody and Access, 2001). Likewise, Neilson (2001; 2012) found that claims of abuse are either not acknowledged by mediators and lawyers or parents are pressured to abandon their claims of abuse to accept a more typical settlement to their custody dispute.

Interestingly, issues of power and control were given limited consideration in the online legal judgments. For example, although abuse was mentioned in the four self-identified abusive cases, it was only mentioned in passing and appeared to be given little weight in the judgment itself. In fact, two participants believed that the abusive nature of their relationships was overlooked or minimized by those in the legal system. They also believed that the custody decision was made in an attempt to make peace where peace was not possible. Consequently, it is not surprising that these participants lacked faith in the legal system's ability to act in their child's best interests, particularly given the disparity between what the participants believed was in their child's best interests and the actual court decision. Further, the legal system's failure to recognize the abusive nature of their relationship appeared to reinforce the participants' belief that they were the 'better' parent and the *only* one capable of acting in their child's best interests. The maintenance of this belief appears to be highly adaptive in these cases given the child protection concerns noted by these participants as well as the known risks associated with granting perpetrators of abuse unsupervised access (see Bancroft & Silverman (2002) for a review). The failure to recognize or acknowledge claims of abuse potentially places victims of abuse as well as their children at risk of further victimization (see Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Jaffe et al., 2008; Sturge & Glaser, 2000). These research findings give additional weight to the defensive and protective concerns voiced by the participants from abusive relationships.

In contrast, two participants from abusive relationships viewed professionals in the legal system more positively. In these two cases, their claims of abuse were given more weight, resulting in the award of custody that favoured the participants. Since the custody decision reinforced the participants' belief that they were the 'better' parent and quelled some of their child protection concerns, these participants had more faith in the legal system's ability to act in their child's best interests. Again, the experience of participants is consistent with past research on escalating and entrapping conflict (Brockner et al., 1981; Brockner & Rubin, 1985; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986).

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Similar to the findings from the first theme, participants had deep seated beliefs regarding who was the most capable to act in their child's best interests. Although these beliefs appeared similar on the surface, the reasons for the participants' beliefs differed dramatically given the differences in the history, nature, and quality of conflict in their relationship with their former partners. Further, like their attributions, these factors appeared to influence how the participants' perceived and understood their former partners' behaviour. This explanation maps onto Pruitt and Rubin's (1986) description of conflict.

Based on the findings of this research, it is apparent that the existing body of research fails to adequately address the impact of conflict and the subsequent involvement in the legal system on perceptions of parenting competence and self-efficacy. In order to better understand the attitudes and beliefs of those in parallel parenting custody arrangements, it appears essential that the nature and quality of the conflict be considered. Since parallel parenting custody arrangements tend to be implemented once other custody and access arrangements have been exhausted, by the time these custody arrangements are implemented, parents have been advocating for the best interests of their child for years. While such advocacy may be warranted and necessary, especially in cases of abuse, prolonged involvement in the legal system appears to strengthen and entrench the beliefs of parents as they attempt to bolster their case for custody. Unfortunately, given the strength of the participants' beliefs, expectations of cooperation and compromise, as in custody arrangements like parallel parenting, are likely unrealistic and, more importantly, inappropriate in cases of abuse.

It is important to note that, in cases of high conflict, the participant's former partners were arguably more capable of being a positive role model and engaging in more positive parenting than those whose relationship with their former partners were characterized by abuse (see Arroyo & Eth, 1995; Augustyn et al., 1995; Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Doyne et al., 1999; Neilson, 2004). In fact, although participants were concerned about their former partners' parenting ability, participants from non-abusive relationships were more understanding of their former partners' parenting difficulties. Participants from non-abusive relationships also believed that their former partners were trying to act in their child's best interests, but just did not know how to do so. Consequently, participants interpreted the parenting ability of their former partners differently based on the nature and quality of conflict in their relationship (e.g., abusive versus

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non-abusive). These interpretations then influenced the participants' willingness to cooperate with their former partners (see Section 4.2.4) and the experience of conflict as a whole.

4.2.4 Theme 3: Desire for a resolution. When embroiled in conflict, the possibility of a resolution is hard to imagine. However, Pruitt and Rubin (1986) argued that conflict cannot continue to escalate forever. Over time contentious tactics fail to produce the desired effect, resources (e.g., time, energy, finances) are exhausted, costs mount, and the support of others dwindles. A stalemate or resolution is eventually reached, resulting in the eventual de-escalation of conflict. Consistent with this description of conflict, participants' experience was that, although it continued to persist in many cases, the conflict changed over time depending on their perceived success in achieving their goal (e.g., custody).

Believing that their former partners were responsible for the conflict, were incompetent parents, and that their child was at risk, many participants were hesitant to desist from conflict unless doing so reduced the chances that their child was exposed to ongoing conflict. Although viewing themselves as more willing than their former partners to desist from conflict, participants understood the meaning and significance of these views differently depending on the unique context of their relationships (abusive versus non-abusive). This perspective may have been framed by a lens which made them vulnerable to biases about their own and their former partners' willingness to desist from conflict as suggested by previous research findings (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986).

Overall, participants from high conflict but non-abusive relationships viewed their former partners as less willing to desist from conflict as compared to themselves. According to Pruitt and Rubin (1986), contentious behaviour may continue, at least initially, when a stalemate is reached. However, they argued that conflict eventually subsides when both parties realize that their desired outcome (e.g., sole custody) is not attainable. This finding is consistent with the experience of participants here. They believed that their former partners became slightly more cooperative over time. In fact, those who reported the most difficulty had been separated or divorced for the fewest number of years (e.g., less than five to a maximum of ten years). Since conflict following divorce has been found to decrease over time (Kaslow, 1995; Kitson, 1992), the experience of these participants is not that surprising. Although time may help to diminish the strength and salience of parents' attributions and beliefs, it is evident that time alone is not necessarily sufficient for individuals to recover from divorce and the associated conflict.

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According to Pruitt and Rubin (1986), holding one's position to wait out the conflict (inaction) is costly and ineffective in most cases of high conflict, necessitating the use of alternate de-escalation strategies.

Participants experienced a relationship between willingness to desist from conflict and having been granted more custody or access. Interestingly, the satisfaction of mothers and fathers who contested custody and pursued legal recourse is negatively correlated (Emery et al., 2005). That is, parents who felt they 'won' the custody dispute reported greater satisfaction than those who felt they 'lost.' Research examining the connotations of custodial versus non-custodial custody has found similar results. Specifically, Patrician (1984) found that custodial parents were often viewed as powerful, strong, dominant, and 'winners' compared to non-custodial parents. Consistent with these findings, participants believed that their former partners continued to instigate conflict in an effort to be perceived as powerful, strong, and dominant after 'losing' the custody dispute.

Consistent with the findings of past research (Emery et al., 2005; Patrician, 1984), participants from non-abusive relationships who believed that they 'won' the custody dispute reported greater satisfaction with the parallel parenting custody arrangement and were subsequently more willing to desist from conflict and cooperate. Since the attributions and parenting beliefs of these participants could be understood to be more self-serving in nature (see Sections 4.2.2. and 4.2.3), they may have been more willing to desist from conflict once granted custody because their goal (e.g., being granted custody) had finally been achieved. This explanation is consistent with Pruitt and Rubin's (1986) description of conflict.

Although all of the participants from high conflict relationships 'won' their custody dispute and were granted increased access as a result, one participant, in particular, was highly critical of several aspects of the parallel parenting custody arrangement. This participant's relationship with her former partner was suspected to be characterized by abuse. The potentially abusive nature of her relationship may explain her critical attitude because she may have felt that the custody arrangement failed to address her child protection and self-preservation concerns. Her task may be to resist rather than to desist from the conflict. Despite this criticism, she believed that the parallel parenting custody arrangement helped end her involvement in the legal system.

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Satisfaction with child custody disputes have been found to differ based on gender, with women reporting higher levels of satisfaction than men (Bonach, Sales, Koeske, 2005). The experience of high conflict participants was inconsistent with this research finding. In fact, both male and female participants alike reported feeling satisfied with the parallel parenting custody arrangement, providing that they believed that they had ‘won’ the custody dispute. Consequently, perceptions of ‘winning’ appeared to outweigh any effect of gender. This finding may be unique to the parallel parenting experience.

Despite the persistence of conflict, several participants from high conflict relationships indicated that they were willing to desist from conflict and attempt to cooperate with their former partners, or at least work within the confines of the parallel parenting custody arrangement. While their reasons for this varied (e.g., emotional and financial exhaustion, acceptance, greater appreciation of access and involvement in child’s life), the majority of participants related that they wanted to focus on their relationship with their child rather than the conflict with their former partners. Overall, this decision could be understood as the participants’ acceptance of their situation. That is, they appeared to accept the fact that their former partners were unlikely to change, so it would be up to the participants’ to make things work. This strategy is akin to yielding in Pruitt and Rubin’s (1986) description of conflict.

While it is possible that the change in the participants’ attitude and behaviour may be related to the passage of time alone, it is also possible that, as they attempted to cooperate with one another, participants began to focus on the successes rather than the failures in trying to cooperate (e.g., being able to schedule their child’s extracurricular activities or holiday access without conflict). This shift in focus may have reduced the salience and/or recall of past negative experiences, thereby promoting feelings of forgiveness and helping to reduce conflict. Forgiveness has been found to play an integral role in helping parents overcome negative feelings toward their former partners, develop a cooperative coparenting relationship (Bonach & Sales, 2002; McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Trainer, 1981), and reduce conflict (Huang & Enright, 2000; Yaben, 2009). In fact, participants in the present study believed that, when they started ignoring their former partners’ attempts to instigate conflict, their former partners eventually quit trying to instigate conflict with them. This change in their former partners’ behaviour resulted in a reduction of conflict and increased the participants’ willingness to continue to desist from conflict themselves. Such behaviour could be viewed as an attempt, albeit

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a cautious one, at problem solving. In fact, Pruitt and Rubin (1986) reported that hinting at compromise by modeling the desired behaviour (e.g., cooperation) can prompt one's adversary to respond in a similar manner. However, this strategy can also result in the escalation of conflict if one's adversary perceives this attempt as a sign of weakness and therefore an opportunity to assert their dominance and "win" the conflict. The latter did not appear to be the case among highly conflicted participants.

Alternatively, the change in the participants' attitude and behaviour may have been due to burnout, a consequence of the depth and duration of conflict experienced by participants. Burnout is characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion, a sense of depersonalization in relationships, and a decreased sense of personal accomplishment (Gross, Mead, Ford, & Klag, 2000; Meier, Back, & Morrison, 2001; Shanafelt, 2005; Shanafelt, Sloan & Habermann, 2003), poor judgement, cynicism, guilt, and feelings of ineffectiveness (Meier et al., 2001; Spickard, Gabbe, & Christensen, 2002). Consistent with these findings, participants reported feeling emotionally, physically, and financially exhausted given the depth and duration of conflict leading up to the implementation of the parallel parenting custody arrangement. They also reported feeling cynical at times, particularly about the legal system's ability to act in their child's best interests. In contrast to past research, participants did not report experiencing a sense of depersonalization, a decreased sense of personal accomplishment, or poor judgement. Instead, and as noted in Section 4.2.3, participants believed that their judgment was superior to that of their former partners. It is possible that the burnout experienced by participants resulted in the acceptance of a stalemate. Since a stalemate eventually leads to the de-escalation of conflict (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986), it is possible that the change in the participants' attitude and behaviour was the result of conflict de-escalation.

Another possible explanation is that the necessity of having such entrenched attributions and beliefs may have diminished once the participants' involvement in the legal system ceased. Since parallel parenting custody arrangements are typically imposed once parents have exhausted all other viable custody options, these participants may have been more willing to forgive their former partners and move on with their lives. This explanation maps onto Pruitt and Rubin's (1986) description of conflict and likely altered the lens through which participants' viewed their experience. Finally, some participants may have been more motivated to desist from conflict given the age of their children. In fact, consistent with the experience of participants,

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parents with older children have been found to be more successful in disengaging from conflict following divorce (Arendell, 1996; Fish et al., 1992).

The persistence of conflict following divorce is associated with a number of emotional and behaviour problems in children (El-Sheikh et al., 2006; Grych, 2005; Jekielek, 1998; Kaczynski et al., 2006; Morrison & Coiro, 1999), particularly when the conflict involves the children and occurs in their presence (Emery, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Further, an individual's attitude and willingness to resolve the conflict in the parenting relationship as well as the nature and quality of the conflict have been found to play a significant role in the post-divorce adjustment of children (Arendell, 1996; Boyojko, 2000; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Gable, Crnic, & Belsky, 1994; Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1990; Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999). When those research results are applied to the present study and given the participants' belief that they were the more competent parent, it is not surprising that participants were willing to desist since doing so could be in their child's best interests. Desisting was particularly evident in the experience of high conflict but non-abused participants who experienced improved relations with their child. It is unclear why their desire to act in their child's best interests prevented them from desisting from conflict sooner. One possible explanation is that, given their quest for custody, participants were more willing to desist from conflict once they had been awarded custody or achieved greater positive involvement with their child. This explanation is consistent with Pruitt and Rubin's (1986) description of conflict described earlier. In addition, past research has reported that increased involvement of parents with children can buffer conflicts with former partners and improve the post-divorce adjustment of children (Kline Pruett & Baker, 2009; Ram et al., 2002).

Participants from abusive relationships were significantly more reluctant to desist from conflict. Their reluctance can be understood by comparing it with the literature. Since abusive or harassing behaviour has been found to continue at significant rates and in some cases become more severe following separation and divorce (Brownridge et al., 2008; Hotton, 2001; Liss & Stahly, 1993; Statistics Canada, 2001) and since the legal system frequently fails to hold perpetrators of spousal violence accountable for their actions, grants them too much power, and forces victims of spousal violence to maintain a relationship with their abusive former partner (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Brownridge et al., 2008; Jaffe et al., 2008; Liss & Stahly, 1993; Sheeran & Hampton, 1999; Zorza, 1995), the participants' focus was to resist rather than to

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desist from conflict. In fact, like their attributional style and parenting beliefs, the participants' resistance and reluctance to cooperate with their former partners can be understood to be an adaptive, protective response rooted in the participants' desire to ensure the safety and well-being of their child.

Given the negative effect of exposure to violence on children, parallel parenting custody arrangements are contraindicated in cases of spousal violence (Jaffe et al., 2005; Kitmann, Gaylord, Hold, & Kenny, 2003; Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith & Jaffe, 2003). It is not surprising that participants from abusive relationships were dissatisfied with the imposed custody arrangement and attempted to resist their former partners' attempts to instigate conflict as a result. Recall that two of the four participants from abusive relationships did not believe that the implementation of this custody arrangement addressed their safety concerns or held their former partners accountable for their continued noncompliance. Further, they believed that they had 'lost' the custody dispute because they had not been granted sole custody. In these cases, the participants' resistance can be understood as adaptive given their ongoing child protection concerns and elevated risk of harm. Although women tend to report higher levels of satisfaction with child custody dispute decisions than men (Bonach et al., 2005), here the two participants who were the most critical and dissatisfied with the imposed custody arrangement were women.

Interestingly, two abused participants were satisfied with the custody arrangement because they felt like they had 'won' the custody dispute. These participants believed that their increased access limited their former partners' access and helped to equalize the balance of power and control in the parenting relationship. Therefore, although satisfaction with the parallel parenting custody arrangement was negatively related to the quality of conflict, the participants' belief that they 'won' the custody dispute appeared to have a greater influence on their level of satisfaction and subsequent desire to resist becoming engaged in conflict with their former partners. This experience is not captured in the existing literature on high conflict divorce, spousal violence, or custody disputes. However, the equalization of power noted by the participants in these cases may have helped to quell any ongoing concerns regarding child safety. According to Pruitt and Rubin (1986), parity is commonly associated with a reduction in conflict and the use of more productive conflict resolution strategies. Consistent with the participants' experience, this change commonly results in a shift in how individuals perceive, interpret, and

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process their experience. However, parity cannot be achieved easily in cases of domestic violence.

In addition to their satisfaction, the participants' resistance to becoming engaged in conflict could also reflect the length of time that they had been separated and divorced. In fact, the participants who were the most satisfied and willing to escape from conflict had been separated and divorced longer than any other participants (e.g., between 15 and 20 years). As previously noted, since conflict in the parenting relationship following divorce has been found to decrease over time (Kaslow, 1995; Kitson, 1992), the experience of these participants is not surprising. Further, the passage of time may have reduced the strength and salience of these participants' negative attitudes and beliefs regarding their former partners.

Despite the abusive nature of their relationship and ongoing child protection concerns, several participants indicated that they were willing to at least work within the confines of the parallel parenting custody arrangement because they were too tired to continue fighting. These participants appeared to accept that their former partners were unlikely to change so they tried to do whatever was in their power to protect themselves and their child. Alternatively, this decision may have been due to burnout. Regardless of the reason, participants focused their energy on their relationship with their child rather than the conflict with their former partners. Participants were hopeful that the quality of their relationship with their child would offset the impact of their child's exposure to ongoing conflict. As previously noted, the parent-child relationship has been found to moderate the impact of conflict on the post-divorce adjustment of children (Kline Pruett & Barker, 2009; Ram et al., 2002).

Although the participants' child protection concerns appeared valid given the known risks of exposure to violence on the adjustment of children (see Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Gleason, 1995; Graham-Bermann, 1998; Jaffe et al., 2005; Kitzmann et al., 2003; Wolfe et al., 2003), some participants were reluctant to continue their fight for custody given their disappointment in and dissatisfaction with the imposed custody arrangement. These participants felt like their claims of abuse were dismissed, misinterpreted, or invalidated throughout their involvement in the legal system, and were subsequently resigned to the fact that, even with their continued advocacy for their child, nothing would change.

In summary, although their desire for a resolution was influenced by their perceptions of responsibility as well as their parenting beliefs, participants' willingness to desist from or resist

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becoming engaged in conflict differed depending on the context of their relationship (abusive versus non-abusive). Since individuals involved in highly contentious, intractable conflict tend to view their experiences through the lens of conflict (Brockner & Rubin, 1985), the willingness to desist from conflict suggests a shift in this lens. This shift may have resulted in more objective appraisals of their own and their former partners' behaviour as their purview of conflict was expanded. However, it is possible that this lens continued to result in the selective processing of information. Since the participants' experiences were consistent with the results of research on high conflict divorce, at least some of their perceptions influencing their willingness to desist from conflict may have been accurate and indeed warranted. Pruitt and Rubin's (1986) theory applies to such cases. The situation of domestic violence calls for resisting abusive behaviour so the theory is not directly applicable.

Based on the results of this study, it is evident that the implementation of a parallel parenting custody arrangement alone was not sufficient motivation for participants to escape from conflict. Therefore, if parallel parenting custody arrangements are to succeed, greater attention needs to be given to the influence of power imbalances, child protection concerns, attributions, parenting beliefs, satisfaction, and the nature and quality of conflict in the parenting relationship. In the present study, participants spent years embroiled in intense conflict with their former partners and they were repeatedly subjected to their former partners' uncooperative, noncompliant, and, in some cases, abusive behaviour. Expecting parents to cooperate and escape from conflict is likely unrealistic and inappropriate, particularly in cases of abuse. Consequently, it is imperative that issues of spousal violence and abuse be given greater attention in the context of high conflict divorce and child custody disputes to help ensure the safety and well-being of parents and children. Further, attending to the unique dynamics of parental relationships will provide professionals with a better understanding of why some parents desist from conflict while others do not.

4.3 General Discussion

Several research questions were identified at the outset of this research. These questions guided the research process and provided a framework from which to understand the participants' experiences. Although this research initially set out to explore the experience of parallel parenting, participants had difficulty reflecting on this experience, preferring instead to discuss their experience of conflict in the context of parallel parenting custody arrangements.

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Although the findings of this study did not specifically focus on the experience of parallel parenting custody arrangements, answers to the research questions were embedded within each of the identified themes, to a limited extent, and are briefly discussed below.

How are parallel parenting custody arrangements experienced by parents? Despite the indirect style of communication, it was apparent that the participants' experience of parallel parenting varied depending on their satisfaction with the imposed custody arrangement, quality and persistence of conflict in their relationship with their former partners, and the perceived impact on their child's adjustment. Of these factors, participant satisfaction and the quality of conflict (e.g., abusive versus non-abusive) in the parenting relationship appeared to be the most influential. Participants who were more satisfied with the court's determination of custody viewed the parallel parenting custody arrangement more positively than those who were dissatisfied, regardless of the quality of conflict in their relationship with their former partners.

Do parallel parenting custody arrangements reduce the level of conflict in the parenting relationship? The findings from this study do not provide answers to this question. Since this study only provided a partial perspective of the parallel parenting experience, further research is required to determine whether parallel parenting custody arrangements can help reduce conflict in the parenting relationships. However, it is clear that the experience of conflict in the context of parallel parenting custody arrangements is very complex and influenced by numerous factors. While it is difficult to identify exactly how or why some participants experienced a reduction in conflict while others did not, it appeared that being heard or at least feeling like they could voice an opinion propelled participants to desist from conflict. While the parallel parenting custody arrangement may afford parents the opportunity to express their wishes or opinions to the court, it does not necessarily mean that their wishes or opinions will be taken into consideration. Further, having the opportunity to express one's wishes or opinions is not unique to parallel parenting custody arrangements. In fact, seeking input from contesting parties is characteristic of involvement in the legal system as a whole. Consequently, the reduction in conflict reported by participants appeared minimally related to the imposed custody arrangement.

How likely are parallel parenting custody arrangements to be followed as dictated by the courts? Participants expressed frustration over their former partners' failure to comply with the parallel parenting custody arrangement. In fact, participants identified noncompliance as one of the major sources of conflict and as one of the biggest obstacles to successfully parallel

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parenting. Although they reported that, at times, they were also noncompliant themselves, participants justified or rationalized their behaviour. This strategy, although defensive in nature, may have been an adaptive response as participants engaged in the perceived struggle to protect their parenting rights and ensure the safety of their child. Monitoring was recommended by participants to improve compliance and to hold each party responsible for his/her actions. Otherwise, several participants believed that the structure of the parallel parenting custody arrangement would be rendered useless and would negate any potential benefits of the custody arrangement. This recommendation is discussed in greater detail in Section 4.4.

Under what circumstances do parallel parenting custody arrangements work best? More specifically, at what level, frequency, and intensity of parental conflict do parallel parenting custody arrangements work, if at all? The participants involved in this research reported a wide range of difficulties in the parenting relationship. Some relationships were described as abusive while others were not. Conflict also persisted in some cases more than others. While further research is required to determine the circumstances under which parallel parenting custody arrangements work best, if at all, participants viewed parallel parenting more favourably in non-abusive situations where the conflict was less frequent and less intense. Ironically, however, the legal system has been criticized for failing to recognize or differentiate high conflict situations from abusive or violent situations. Failing to recognize or differentiate the level and quality of conflict in the parenting relationship is likely to result in the misuse of parallel parenting custody arrangements, especially if these custody arrangements are contraindicated in cases of spousal violence.

Although this research attempted to explore the experience of parallel parenting, what emerged was an in-depth description of the experience of conflict in the parallel parenting context. Based on the findings of this research, it is apparent that the study of parallel parenting custody arrangements is very difficult: the population is small, the specter of spousal violence is central and the risk of adding to an already tense situation is great. It is apparent that individuals involved with parallel parenting custody arrangements have a very complicated experience and it will take several studies to fully unravel this experience. Further study and refinement of parallel parenting custody arrangements appears to be warranted to adequately understand the impact of the magnitude of conflict on parents and their children within this context.

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4.3.1 Conclusions. The current research provided an in-depth look into the experience of conflict in the context of parallel parenting custody arrangements. While the results of this research cannot state whether parallel parenting custody arrangements are effective or in the best interests of children given the limited sample size used, some initial suppositions can be offered. First, several participants reported a reduction in conflict as well as improvements in their relationship with their former partners over time. While it is possible that these improvements were the result of the parallel parenting custody arrangement, it is more likely that other factors (e.g., the passage of time alone, desire to protect their child from exposure to ongoing conflict, level of satisfaction) not directly related to the structure of the parallel parenting custody arrangement were responsible. If the latter is true, the improvements noted by participants may have been achieved regardless of the imposed custody arrangement (e.g., sole, joint, shared, parallel parenting).

Second, given the results of this research, it is apparent that, prior to making a determination of custody, greater attention needs to be paid to the dynamics of power and control which are central features of abusive relationships. In fact, a parallel parenting custody arrangement was implemented in a number of cases alleged or suspected to be abusive, even though their use in such circumstances is contraindicated (Jaffe et al., 2005; Kitzmann et al., 2003; Wolfe et al., 2003). While it is unclear why such a custody arrangement was imposed in these cases, failing to recognize or give weight to these dynamics may put victims of abuse as well as their children at risk of further victimization (see Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Jaffe et al., 2008; Sturge & Glaser, 2000). Greater attention needs to be paid to the dynamics of relationships prior to the determination of custody to better protect the safety and well-being of victims of abuse as well as their children.

Third, greater attention also needs to be paid to the dynamics of relationships prior to the determination of custody because a failure to do so may result in the misuse of parallel parenting custody arrangements and skew research examining its effectiveness. Specifically, if parallel parenting custody arrangements are implemented in cases of spousal violence, the persistence of conflict may be attributed to the custody arrangement's failure to effectively manage conflict rather than the dynamics of the relationship. Attending to these dynamics will also allow for a better understanding of the lens through which individuals perceive and interpret conflict. It is also apparent that greater attention needs to be paid to resistance to abuse prior to the

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determination of custody. Such resistance, although adaptive in cases of spousal violence, may compromise a parent's case for custody under the "friendly parent" provisions of the Divorce Act (1985) if it is misinterpreted as uncooperative behaviour. The misinterpretation of this behaviour is more likely to occur when the dynamics of relationships are not taken into consideration.

Fourth, a number of factors were identified as influencing the participants' desire to desist from conflict. These factors included the participants' satisfaction with the custody arrangement, the desire to protect their child from exposure to ongoing conflict, the nature and quality of the conflict in the parenting relationship, as well as the persistence of conflict. These factors, particularly the participants' satisfaction with the imposed custody arrangement, appeared to influence the willingness of both parties to cooperate with one another, which, in turn, affected their experience of conflict. Further, the participants' level of satisfaction with the custody arrangement appeared to trump the impact of the depth, duration, and quality of conflict experienced by participants.

Fifth, although parents can be forced by the courts to collaborate, as in parallel parenting custody arrangements, parents need to be willing to admit shortcomings and to work together to limit the influence of shortcomings in order to achieve the greatest benefit for themselves and their children. Participants believed that, without cooperation, conflict is likely to persist following the implementation of any custody arrangement. In order to foster the willingness to cooperate among parents, the factors noted above, particularly those relating to satisfaction and the quality of conflict, need to be taken into consideration and addressed to equalize the distribution of power in the parenting relationship and to ensure the safety and well-being of victims of abuse and their children. Further, participants who felt that their opinion was acknowledged or valued by the legal system reported being more satisfied and motivated to desist from conflict.

Sixth, although participants reported having different motivations for engaging in conflict, they tended to rationalize or minimize their contributions to conflict in the parenting relationship. Specifically, they attributed responsibility to their former partners for the continuation or escalation of conflict and downplayed or denied any personal wrongdoing, whether it may have been justified or not. Although the participants' tendency to blame their former partners for their ongoing relationship difficulties may have been an adaptive response

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(e.g., resistance to abuse) or a direct consequence of their involvement in the legal system (e.g., to bolster their case for custody), this polarized view of self and other appeared to contribute to the level of conflict in the parenting relationship and impede forgiveness (see Bonach & Sales, 2002). Albeit, in some cases, the participants' resistance to their former partners' ongoing attempts to manipulate and control them helped send the message that such behaviour was unacceptable while also modelling appropriate, assertive behaviour to their child and potentially boosting their own self-confidence.

Finally, participants reported that involvement in the adversarial system served to exacerbate the level of conflict in their respective parenting relationships. Since litigation can result in polarized and positional thinking (Ellis & Stuckless, 1996; Emery, 1994; Kelly, 2003) and discourage parents from focusing on their children's needs and cooperating with one another (Kelly, 2006; Walzer & Oles, 2003), the participants' experiences are not that surprising. However, participants also reported feeling torn between the expectations of the parallel parenting custody arrangement and wanting to protect themselves from their former partners' uncooperative, noncompliant, and, in some cases, abusive behaviour. This dilemma was very difficult, if not impossible, for participants to reconcile given the quality of conflict in their relationship with their former partners and their belief in the court's failure to acknowledge the dynamics of power and control in their relationship.

4.4 Recommendations and Implications

The current study provided a rich description of the experiences of eight parents who had direct involvement with a parallel parenting custody arrangement. While the participants' accounts focused more on the experience of conflict rather than on the experience of parallel parenting as originally intended, understanding these experiences from the perspective of parents is important for those who are interested in this area of research, as well as professionals (e.g., legal and mental health professionals) who work with individuals involved in high conflict custody disputes. These professionals help to determine when and how specific custody arrangements are used, which subsequently impacts the development and administration of law and policy. Several aspects of the participants' experiences are pertinent to the work of these professionals and suggest that refinement to current family law and policy to manage parental conflict in high conflict divorce is required.

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The following recommendations include a blend of my thoughts and those of the participants. These recommendations are offered with the goal of demonstrating to professionals and parents how parental conflict could be better addressed in the context of custody arrangements, including parallel parenting custody arrangements. Recommendations for alternative dispute resolution strategies and ways in which the court process could be improved are also discussed.

4.4.1 Parallel parenting custody arrangements. A number of participants believed that, the parallel parenting custody arrangement would have worked better with monitoring to ensure compliance and accountability of former partners (e.g., supervised exchanges and/or access, communication via a third party, etc.). While it is recommended in cases of parallel parenting (Epstein & Madsen, 2004; Jaffe et al., 2005), monitoring communication and contact between parents is not always possible given the financial and practical costs associated with such a commitment. However, outlining clear enforceable consequences for noncompliance (i.e., reduced access) may promote greater compliance with the court ordered custody arrangement and regulate the level of conflict in the parenting relationship particularly in cases of spousal violence. Greater monitoring may also help to manage or eliminate some of the difficulties reported in regards to exchanges. It may also hold parents more accountable for their behaviour. Unfortunately, unless compliance is monitored by a professional familiar with the dynamics of spousal violence, its impact on family functioning, and the range of concerns regarding the parenting of abusive parents, abusive behaviour and noncompliance may persist (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002).

Removing the expectation of cooperation in parallel parenting custody arrangements and, instead, ordering individuals to parent completely independently of one another may also eliminate some of the difficulties (e.g., noncompliance) reported by participants. However, the removal of this expectation would essentially make parallel parenting custody arrangements akin to sole custody arrangements and may result in more inconsistencies between households which, in turn, may negatively influence child adjustment. Further, this strategy likely does not address the entrenched attributions of parents or the persistence of conflict.

Several participants believed that the quality of conflict with their former partners needed to be taken into consideration prior to the determination of custody. A number of participants felt that the parallel parenting custody arrangement granted their allegedly abusive former partners

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too much power likely to be used to continue the abuse. The perceived unhealthy distribution of power reduced the participants' willingness to cooperate. In order to accurately assess the quality of conflict in the parenting relationship and to ensure that there is not an ongoing risk of violence or abuse to children and/or the other parent, a comprehensive assessment should be completed by a professional familiar with the effects of spousal violence on family interaction patterns prior to the implementation of parallel parenting custody arrangements (Bala et al., 2007; Brownridge et al., 2008; Hotton, 2001; Jaffe et al., 2005; Liss & Stahly, 1993; Statistics Canada, 2001). Such assessments should also be completed when spousal violence or child abuse are alleged. Since parenting capacity assessments often fail to identify or adequately assess for spousal violence or dynamics of power and control, these pre-custody assessments should consider the complete context of the relationship rather than parenting capacity alone (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Neilson, 2004). See Appendix L for the requirements of a comprehensive assessment of spousal violence proposed by Bancroft and Silverman (2002).

Based on the experiences of participants in this study and to prevent resistance to abuse from being misinterpreted as uncooperative behaviour and potentially compromising a victim's case for custody, consideration of the 'friendly parent' provisions in cases of spousal violence also needs to be altered. While some courts and legislatures have recognized that these provisions are not applicable in cases of spousal violence, not all courts and legislatures have amended their child custody statutes to prevent their application in such cases. If the safety and well-being of victims of abuse as well as children are to be protected, amendments to these provisions are required. However, even if an amendment is made, its success hinges on the proper assessment and identification of spousal violence, reinforcing the need for the comprehensive assessment noted above.

In addition to a comprehensive assessment and where deemed appropriate (e.g., where the risk of harm is manageable), Bancroft and Silverman (2002) recommended a tiered approach to visitation in cases of spousal violence. Such an approach is believed to protect the best interests of the children and family and allows perpetrators of spousal violence to gradually move toward more "normal" contact (e.g., sole or joint custody or another suitable alternative) with their child if they conduct themselves appropriately and participates in a specialized treatment program. See Section 1.3.2.1 for a more detailed discussion of the tiered approach to visitation.

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Specific to the structure within the parallel parenting custody arrangement, participants reported that it was difficult to schedule activities during one parent's parenting time alone. Further, parents appeared to be protective of their parenting time and did not want their former partners to dictate how they used that time (e.g., to attend extracurricular activities). In the majority of cases, participants alternated custody with their former partners on a week-by-week basis. One participant alternated custody every two weeks, with one weekend during that two week period spent with the other parent. Few, if any, extracurricular activities for children run biweekly or every two weeks. One participant had her child the vast majority of the time (approximately 70 per cent of the time) and her former partner had access roughly three weekends a month (Thursday to Sunday). While such an arrangement would be easier to accommodate in terms of scheduling extracurricular activities, many activities are twice a week and/or have recitals or competitions on the weekend.

As a result, participants expressed a desire to either alter the custody arrangement to facilitate their child's attendance at extracurricular activities or to grant one parent the decision making authority to enrol their child in whatever activities they wanted regardless of whose parenting time it fell in. Unfortunately, such an arrangement may instigate more conflict because parents may feel as though their parenting time and rights are being infringed upon. Further, such an arrangement may exacerbate the power imbalance that already may exist in cases of spousal violence.

4.4.2 Alternatives to dispute resolution. For the most part, participants reported that the conflict prior to the parallel parenting custody arrangement was motivated by a desire for greater access. It may be beneficial to implement a parallel parenting custody arrangement or suitable alternative sooner to prevent the continuation and/or escalation of conflict in the parenting relationship. Assuming a comprehensive assessment which has declared safety to the child and other parent (Bala et al., 2007; Jaffe et al., 2005), it may also prevent the attributions of parents from becoming too entrenched and help to equalize the power imbalance between them.

Given the high cost of involvement with the court system reported by participants (i.e., \$40,000 to \$115,000 on legal fees alone), the findings of this study suggest that legal services and custody arrangements such as parallel parenting may only be accessible to those with greater financial means. The high cost of involvement with the court system may prevent the best interests of children from being served among families with limited financial means. As such, the

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development of apposite alternatives to litigation for high conflict families or greater tolerance for self-represented litigants have been proposed. Such alternatives could provide low-income families with the same opportunities for dispute resolution as high-income families, but at a lower cost. Although an increase in the number of self-represented litigants in the court system has occurred in recent years (Robertson & Corbin, 2005), proponents of self-representation frequently fail to consider the feasibility of this approach. The legal system is a highly complex system that requires specialized knowledge on the use and applicability of various laws and statutes. Expecting a lay person to understand such a highly complicated process while trying to act in the best interests of his or her child is likely unreasonable and unrealistic. In fact, several participants in this study believed that legal representation was required in order to be heard in court and to advocate for the best interests of one's child. Participants conveyed that, although such representation can be costly, it ensures that someone is supporting your cause and fighting for your rights as a parent. Ideally, they related that acquiring legal representation would result in a determination of custody that is fair and representative of one's concerns as a parent.

Unfortunately, acquiring legal representation does not ensure a positive outcome (Jaffe et al., 2005), nor does it necessarily facilitate dispute resolution.

In addition, self-representation may put victims of spousal violence at risk of further victimization. Researchers have suggested that self-represented perpetrators of spousal violence may attempt to subtly berate and intimidate their former partners in the courtroom unless an astute judge or mediator intervenes (Fischer et al., 1993; Jaffe et al., 2008). However, since mediators and lawyers frequently fail to acknowledge or recognize spousal violence (Beck & Sales, 2000; Neilson, 2001; 2004; 2012), subtle abusive behaviour is likely to go unnoticed, potentially resulting in further victimization. Similar concerns have been voiced about mediation in cases of spousal violence (Bala et al., 2007; Bryan, 1994; Fischer et al., 1993; Grillo, 1991; Jaffe et al., 2005; Treuthart, 1993).

While it is clear that the current cost of custody litigation is exorbitant, shifting from litigation to mediation or self-representation may not necessarily improve the accessibility of the court system, facilitate dispute resolution, or be in the best interests of children, particularly in cases of spousal violence. Consequently, changes may be required to how legal professionals bill for service, particularly since the applicability and effectiveness of alternatives to litigation have been extensively debated in cases of high conflict (Beck & Sales, 2000; Doolittle & Deutsch,

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1999; Kerbeshian, 1994; Peeples et al., 2008; Ratner, 2001) and spousal violence (Bala et al., 2007; Bryan, 1994; Fischer et al., 1993; Grillo, 1991; Jaffe et al., 2005; Treuthart, 1993).

4.4.3 Additional support and education. Educational strategies aimed at managing the different sources of conflict (e.g., jealousy, desire for greater access, etc.) in the parenting relationship may also be beneficial. To increase awareness of how spousal violence, including some of the more subtle aspects of power and control, affect children and victim opponent parents, specialized education programs are required in cases of spousal violence. Such educational programming could also highlight the risks and benefits of resisting abuse. In the current study, the majority of participants reported that they were required by the court system to participate in a parenting course on how to parent following divorce. Others voluntarily took parenting courses in an effort to better themselves as a parent. However, several participants stated that their former partners refused to participate in such programming. They also stated that little to no attention was paid to the dynamics of abusive relationships in these courses. Although the majority of participants reported being aware of the effect of abusive and non-abusive conflict on children, they appeared to be less aware of the impact of indirect exposure to such conflict on children. Educational strategies targeting this knowledge deficit has the potential to effect positive change in the behaviour of parents. With increased awareness of how their actions may potentially be harming their child, parents may be motivated to set aside their differences and focus on the best interests of their child, particularly since all of the participants expressed a desire to limit their child's exposure to conflict in the parenting relationship.

In order for these strategies to be effective, parents would need to have insight into how they are potentially contributing to conflict and be willing and motivated to change. However, parents who are forced or compelled to participate in such programming may not have or develop insight into their behaviour or be motivated to change. Although several Canadian provinces have made participation in parenting courses compulsory for all divorcing parents, no particular consequences have been identified or consistently applied to parents who fail to complete such programming. If the failure to complete programming was tied to the imposed custody arrangement and resulted in reduced access, parents may be more willing or, at least more likely, to complete the courses. Unfortunately, even with such education, conflict may persist, especially in cases of spousal violence.

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In light of the participants' tendency to rationalize or minimize their role in perpetuating conflict in the parenting relationship, attempts to mediate issues of custody and access may prove to be difficult. Further, attempts to collaborate, parallel parent, or focus on the best interests of the child may also prove difficult since parents may minimize or rationalize their noncompliance and contributions to the conflict. As result, after screening domestic violence cases from the process, educational and intervention strategies targeting the development of coping, conflict management, and communication skills may be beneficial. These strategies may help parents reflect on their patterns of communication and conflict management skills and facilitate the development of more adaptive, prosocial skills in this regard. These strategies may also assist the development of a more balanced, unbiased view of their former partners and facilitate feelings of forgiveness. Such strategies have the potential to effect positive change in the parenting relationship, assist in conflict management, and enhance the effectiveness of parallel parenting custody arrangements. In domestic violence cases, however, specialized domestic violence intervention and parenting programs are recommended to address the perceptual distortions, minimization patterns and parenting problems that are associated with coercive domestic violence.

Jaffe and colleagues (2005) also suggested parents may benefit from therapy to deal with their feelings of anger and hostility towards each other. Some research (Bernstein, 2000; Stokes & Wampler, 2002; Walzer & Oles, 2003) has suggested these feelings promote or intensify conflict between parents. Similarly, Emery and colleagues (2005) suggested parents should address any underlying emotional issues (i.e., hurt and grief) in order to facilitate the development of a more cooperative parenting relationship. Although such interventions could help the parallel parenting relationship evolve toward a more cooperative coparenting relationship, it may not be possible due to the level of commitment and cost involved with such an intervention (Jaffe et al., 2005) as well as the nature and quality of the conflict in the parenting relationship. Unfortunately, the social cost of continued litigation is considerably higher than the personal cost of attending therapy which may not in fact reduce the need for further litigation.

Training was also recommended for those within the legal system (i.e., lawmakers, assessors, lawyers, and judges). Jaffe and colleagues (2005) have highlighted the need for appropriate education about spousal violence among family law professionals, including an

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understanding of its effects on children. Given the known risks of exposure to spousal violence on children (see Bancroft & Silverman for a review), such training is critical in order to protect the best interests of children. Specific knowledge on abusive relationships and the dynamics of these relationships is required. See Neilson (2001, 2004, 2012) and Bancroft and Silverman (2002) for a review of the tactics used by perpetrators of spousal violence in the litigation of child custody and access as well as recommendations on how to deal with claims of spousal violence within this context.

4.4.4 Summary. From experience, a number of changes were recommended by the participants to improve parallel parenting, involvement in the legal system, and parenting after divorce. While recommendations varied, the need for reform was continually emphasized. Specific to parallel parenting custody arrangements, several participants expressed a desire for greater accountability for their respective former partners' noncompliance and greater decision-making authority for themselves. More generally, changes to the legal system itself were also recommended. These recommendations included greater accessibility and predictability regarding involvement with the adversarial system, increased support for self-represented litigants, and additional training opportunities for family law professionals and parents regarding spousal violence and high conflict divorce. See Figure 2 for a summary of these recommendations. Although the implementation of such changes may be challenging and costly, participants argued that these changes would reduce the overall societal and personal cost associated with adversarial system involvement and result in better dispute resolution, increased parent satisfaction, and better compliance with the imposed custody arrangement.

4.5 Personal Reflections

When I first started this research project many, many, *many* years ago, I knew very little about divorce. Growing up in an intact family in a rural community, divorce was somewhat of a foreign concept to me. Although some were divorced and remarried, most of my relatives lived in the 'big city' and the details of their divorce were not discussed. The topic of divorce was not taboo per se; there were just other things to talk about. Or maybe I was just too busy playing with my cousins and missed out on these conversations. I don't know.

In many respects, I think my naivety about divorce benefitted my research because I was eager to hear the participants' experiences and learn from them. However, I did not anticipate how difficult it would be to recruit participants. I eventually came to learn that the participants'

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reluctance to discuss their experience stemmed from their fear of compromising their access and instigating conflict with their former partners should they discover their participation in this research. Despite these concerns along with reassurance from me that I would make every effort to protect their confidentiality and anonymity, several participants felt compelled to share their experience because they wanted to help other parents going through similar situations. I feel privileged that these individuals willing shared some of their deepest, darkest hurts with me, along with some of their most cherished successes. I did not expect this research to be so emotionally exhausting. I did not expect to forge such close bonds with the participants. However, I now realize that such research requires this level of involvement, this level of commitment, this level of intimacy because without it, details integral to understanding individuals' experience of conflict in the parallel parenting context would be lost.

Ironically, when I first started this research project, I had just gotten engaged and was in the midst of planning our wedding. Years later, as this project draws to a close, I am a new mother, with a nine-month old sleeping beside me as I scramble to write down my last few thoughts and impressions. I would be lying if I said that the experiences of participants did not weigh heavily on our decision to get married and, years later, start a family. The intensity of conflict as well as the emotional and financial cost incurred by participants throughout their custody dispute was unfathomable to me and I did not want to end up in a similar situation. But how can you predict the future? Life is only worth living when you take risks and starting a family with my husband – my best friend – was a risk I was willing to take. The experiences of participants, although heartbreaking and illuminating at times, have influenced by beliefs about family, marriage, and relationships. They have also made me forever grateful for the relationship I have with my husband, with my family, and now with our newborn son. I cannot thank them enough for that. Their strength, endurance, and desire to help others going through similar experiences are only something I can aspire to achieve in my own life.

4.6 Strength and Limitations

As with any study, a discussion of its limitations is warranted. However, it is important to note that, in many respects, the weaknesses of this study are, in fact, its strengths. The first limitation of this study was that, although enough to reach saturation, the limited sample size did not meet post-positivist criteria for generalization. Therefore, the themes that emerged from the

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interviews cannot be generalized to other persons or populations. However, it is likely that the depth and richness of each theme is experienced by others, to varying extents.

A second limitation of this study was that, given participants' difficulty reflecting on their experience of parallel parenting, this research was unable to provide a complete understanding of it independent of the conflict they experienced. However, this research was able to provide a better understanding of the experience of conflict in the context of parallel parenting custody arrangements, it provided an initial glimpse into the experience. Since parallel parenting is a phenomenon that has received limited attention in the research literature to date, the in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences of conflict within the context of parallel parenting custody arrangements furthered our understanding of this phenomenon. Reasons as to why conflict persists in these cases were also elucidated. However, it is important to note that since participants tended to view their experience through the lens of conflict, their perceptions and interpretations of conflict were influenced by their unique frame of reference.

A third limitation of this study was that it relied on the assumption participants are conscious of and able to articulate their experiences of parallel parenting. While it is impossible to obtain direct or complete access to another individual's world, my ability to access the participants' worlds may have been compromised by my personal conceptions, as well as the participants' ability to express their experiences (Annells, 1996; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Further, the content that was discussed throughout the interviews was dependent on their abilities to remember their past experiences as well as their willingness to share those experiences with me. The participants' willingness to disclose the details of their experience of conflict and parallel parenting may have been limited by the fear of exacerbating the current level of conflict in their parenting relationship or by their desire to present themselves in a positive light. Alternatively, they may have been afraid of being perceived as uncooperative since one's willingness to cooperate with and facilitate contact between one's child and the other non-custodial parent is a factor in determining custody itself. This fear may have also prevented other eligible participants from participating in this research.

A fourth limitation of this study was that the recruitment of participants depended on the cooperation of family law professionals. Given their demanding schedules, it is possible that some family law professionals did not forward the recruitment packages on to the identified eligible participants. For the most part, family law professionals were contacted approximately

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one week after the recruitment package had been mailed to confirm its delivery. At this time, the vast majority of family law professionals expressed interest in the research project and agreed to forward the recruitment package on to their former clients. Unfortunately, in some cases, a considerable length of time had passed since the implementation of the parallel parenting custody arrangement and the family law professionals did not have the current contact information and/or no longer served as the individual's legal representative. In these cases, the recruitment package was mailed to the individual's last known address or returned to me.

As previously mentioned, eligible participants were identified through an online judgment database and contacted through their lawyer. Although this recruitment process was adopted to protect the identities of eligible participants and to prevent coercion, it posed many challenges. For instance, eligible participants who did not acquire legal representation were unable to be contacted through a family law professional. As a result, attempts were made to contact organizations (e.g., those involved in the advocacy of father's rights, etc.) with which these individuals may have been involved. Attempts were also made to contact the last known legal representative of these individuals in the hope that the recruitment package could be forwarded to them.

A fifth limitation of this study was that, although the online judgment was consulted and used to identify eligible participants, a systematic review of court records was not undertaken due to time and financial constraints. As noted in Section 2.4.1.2, although these documents are part of the public record, the majority of these documents had not been transcribed and would cost thousands of dollars per case to become so. The timeline for transcription was also expected to be quite lengthy. Consequently, the online judgment was the only other additional data source consulted. Unfortunately, the quality of the online judgments varied between cases with several only providing a cursory review of the case. In the majority of cases, a detailed explanation of the sources of conflict in the parenting relationship and critical factors weighed in the decision to implement a parallel parenting custody arrangement were not provided. Consequently, a full understanding of the context of the participants' relationships, particularly those perceived to be characterized by abuse, was not possible. Although participants were asked questions directly pertaining to the patterns of power and control in their relationship over time (see Neilson, 2004 for a discussion on indicators of power and control), ideally, multiple sources of information, including court records, friends, family, children, and their former partners, would be in

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transcripts and could have been consulted to more fully understand the context of their relationship with their former partners.

A number of factors were also identified as influencing the experience of conflict in the context of parallel parenting and could have received corroboration from transcripts. These factors included: satisfaction with the imposed custody arrangement, the desire to protect their child from exposure to ongoing conflict, and the quality of conflict in the parenting relationship, to name but a few. A number of these factors varied between the cases in this research, potentially differentially affecting the participants' experience as well as the results of this research.

Finally, since participation in this research was not contingent on both parents participating, only one side of the custody dispute, conflict, and parallel parenting experience was heard in the majority of cases. In the absence of objective, corroborating data as well as data from each participant's former partner, this research cannot remark on the objective impact of parallel parenting custody arrangements on the experience of conflict in the parenting relationship and the best interests of children. The inclusion of alternate perspectives could have provided a deeper, more complete understanding of the experience.

4.7 Future Directions

Given the results of this study, additional research to further our understanding of the parallel parenting experience and the circumstances under which these custody arrangements are used is warranted. To achieve this level of understanding, court records, parenting assessments, as well as child custody evaluations should be examined to help determine when and why such custody arrangements are implemented. Research examining the experiences of family law professionals (e.g., lawyers, mediators, and judges) is also required. Such research could lend itself to a better understanding as to why few cases of parallel parenting custody arrangements exist across the jurisdictions studied and Canada more generally, as well as why only a limited number of family court judges appear to implement such custody arrangements.

The inclusion of children's perspectives and experiences would also be beneficial since parallel parenting custody arrangements are intended to serve their best interests and benefit them the most out of all of the parties involved. Research examining the influence of gender and satisfaction on the outcome of custody disputes as well as the influence of different family structures, including biological and non-biological parents as well as same-sex family structures,

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on the experience of parallel parenting is also recommended. Such research would deepen our understanding of this phenomenon and the circumstances under which parallel parenting custody arrangements work.

Longitudinal research documenting families' involvement with the legal system from the initial divorce hearing and following the implementation of a parallel parenting custody arrangement would also be beneficial. Longitudinal research would provide a better understanding of families' journey to parallel parenting and the circumstance under which parallel parenting custody arrangements are used. In order to achieve such an understanding, cooperation on behalf of the court system would be required. Longitudinal research should also examine whether the experience of parallel parenting changes over time and how it impacts the children involved to determine if such custody arrangements are in the best interests of children. Researchers should also investigate whether the experience of parallel parenting differs from the experience of other forms of custody arrangements (i.e., sole, joint, or shared custody alone). The results of these investigations could identify which form of custody arrangement or intervention is the most effective in managing conflict in the parenting relationship as well as which is most beneficial to the children involved.

An additional area of research warranting further exploration is the use of parallel parenting custody arrangements in cases of spousal violence, including cases of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Generally, the use of parallel parenting custody arrangements is not recommended in cases of spousal violence. However, participants in this study were in the abuse category and further research in this regard is required. Based on the results of this research, the experienced conflict among participants with abusive former partners varied depending, in large part, on the participants' level of satisfaction with the imposed custody arrangement. Further, the impact of child protective concerns on the persistence of conflict is not adequately addressed in the research literature and bears further consideration given what is at stake in these cases: custody and the well-being of children.

Research examining the impact of different family sizes on the parallel parenting experience is also required. The use of parallel parenting custody arrangements in custody disputes involving older children (those over the age of 12) should also be more thoroughly examined since these children are often asked to state with which parent they would prefer to live. Since parents are more likely to disengage from conflict in families with older children

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(Arendell, 1996; Fish et al., 1992), further research is required to examine whether parallel parenting custody arrangements may be better suited to families with older children.

Research examining how different parenting styles influence child adjustment in cases of parallel parenting is also recommended. For example, authoritative but not authoritarian parenting has been found to be associated with more positive child adjustment following divorce (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Kelly, 2000), while a conflicted relationship with the primary residential parent is associated with more negative child outcomes (Kelly, 2000). Future research examining parents' perceptions of their parenting styles is warranted, particularly in cases of high conflict and spousal violence, given the disparity between the participants' perceptions of their own and their former partners' parenting ability. In addition, further research on the impact of child protection concerns on parenting beliefs and ability is warranted as well.

Based on the results of this study, further research is required to better understand how the parent-child relationship impacts parents' motivation to desist from conflict. Other factors affecting parents' motivation to desist from conflict also bear further consideration. Specifically, participants reported feeling torn between two competing desires to desist from conflict: the desire to fight to keep themselves and their child safe and the desire to limit or prevent their child's exposure to ongoing conflict. The influence of these two opposing factors on parents' motivation to desist from conflict is not captured in the existing body of literature and bears further consideration if parallel parenting custody arrangements are to be improved. Research on the role of forgiveness is also required since forgiveness has been found to play an integral role in helping parents overcome negative feelings toward their former partners, develop a cooperative coparenting relationship (Bonach & Sales, 2002; McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Trainer, 1981) and reduce conflict (Huang & Enright, 2000; Yaben, 2009).

While the effect of remarriage on the parenting relationship has received limited attention in the literature, the introduction of a new partner has been found to exacerbate feelings of hurt and rejection which are frequently reported following divorce, and may cause one parent to feel jealous of the other. These feelings have been found to promote or intensify conflict between parents (Bernstein, 2000; Stokes & Wampler, 2002; Walzer & Oles, 2003). Consequently, research is required to evaluate the impact of remarriage on the parenting relationship.

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Throughout this research, select attribution research and the theory upon which the research was based was used to understand the experiences of participants, more so in the cases of non-abuse. However, that research, at least as it currently exists, was unable to account for or explain all aspects of the participants' experiences and does not appear to be directly applicable to cases of domestic violence. As such, future research must account for the influence of personal investment, feelings of jealousy, as well as the nature and quality of conflict that parents have to contend with on the strength of parents' attributions when involved in protracted custody disputes. Also, separately for abuse cases, greater consideration of personality as well as other situational or contextual factors is also required in attribution research on cases of high conflict custody disputes. Finally and again separately for abuse cases, attribution research should also examine the adaptability of certain attributions in different contexts. For example, attributions made in cases of high conflict may be more adaptive given what is at stake in these cases, custody and the well-being of a child, compared to others. In cases of domestic violence, the attributions may be an accurate assessment of safety. Thus, the role of the self-serving bias, fundamental attribution error, and learned helplessness on such attributions also bears further theoretical consideration. See Appendix M for a summary of the recommendations for future research outlined above.

Although the need for further research on parallel parenting custody arrangements remains, this study has laid the foundation for future research and has helped to increase our understanding of the parallel parenting experience, as well as the ways in which individuals make sense of this experience.

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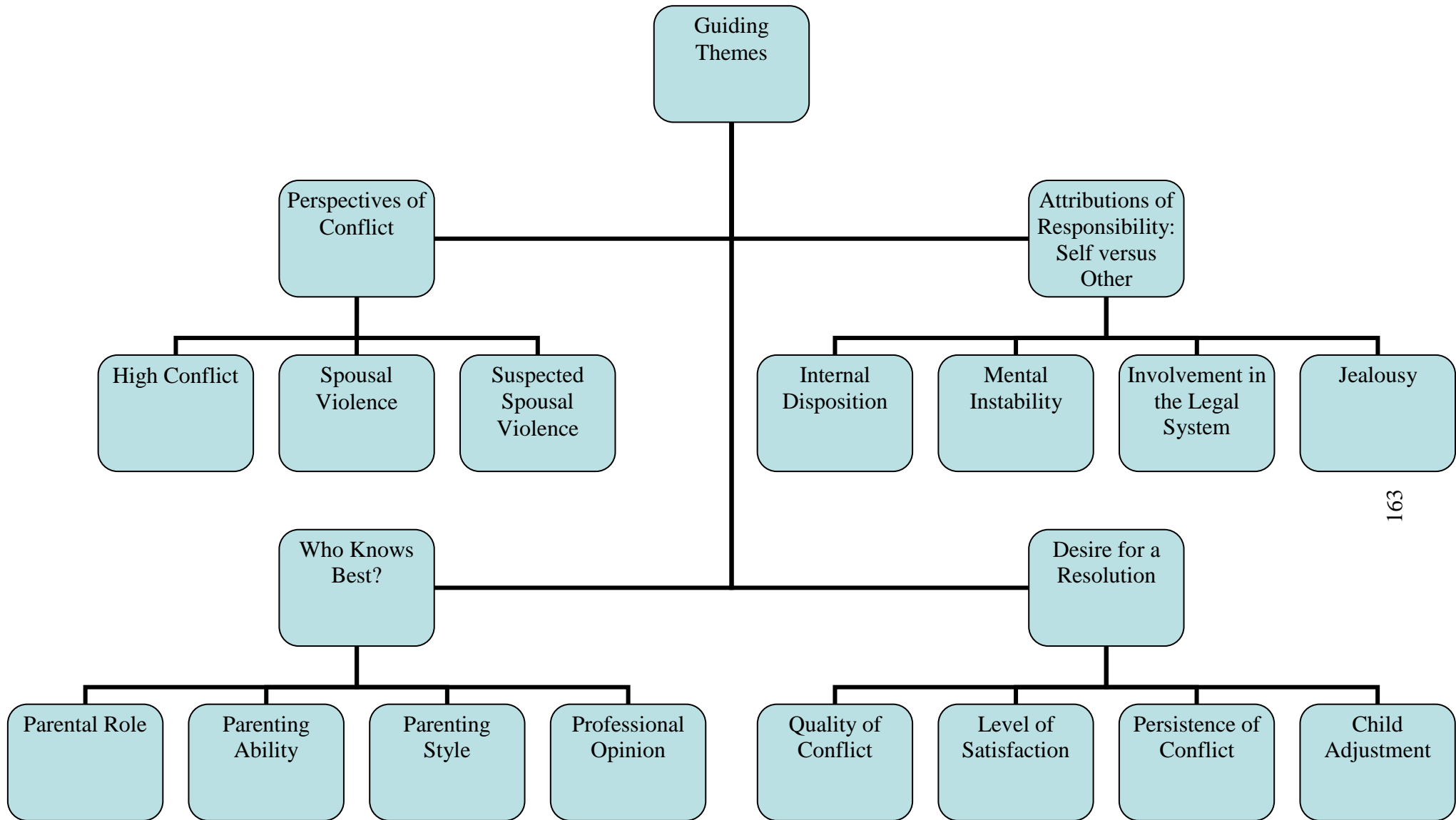


Figure 1: Summary of Overarching Themes and Sub-themes

CONFLICT IN PARALLEL PARENTING

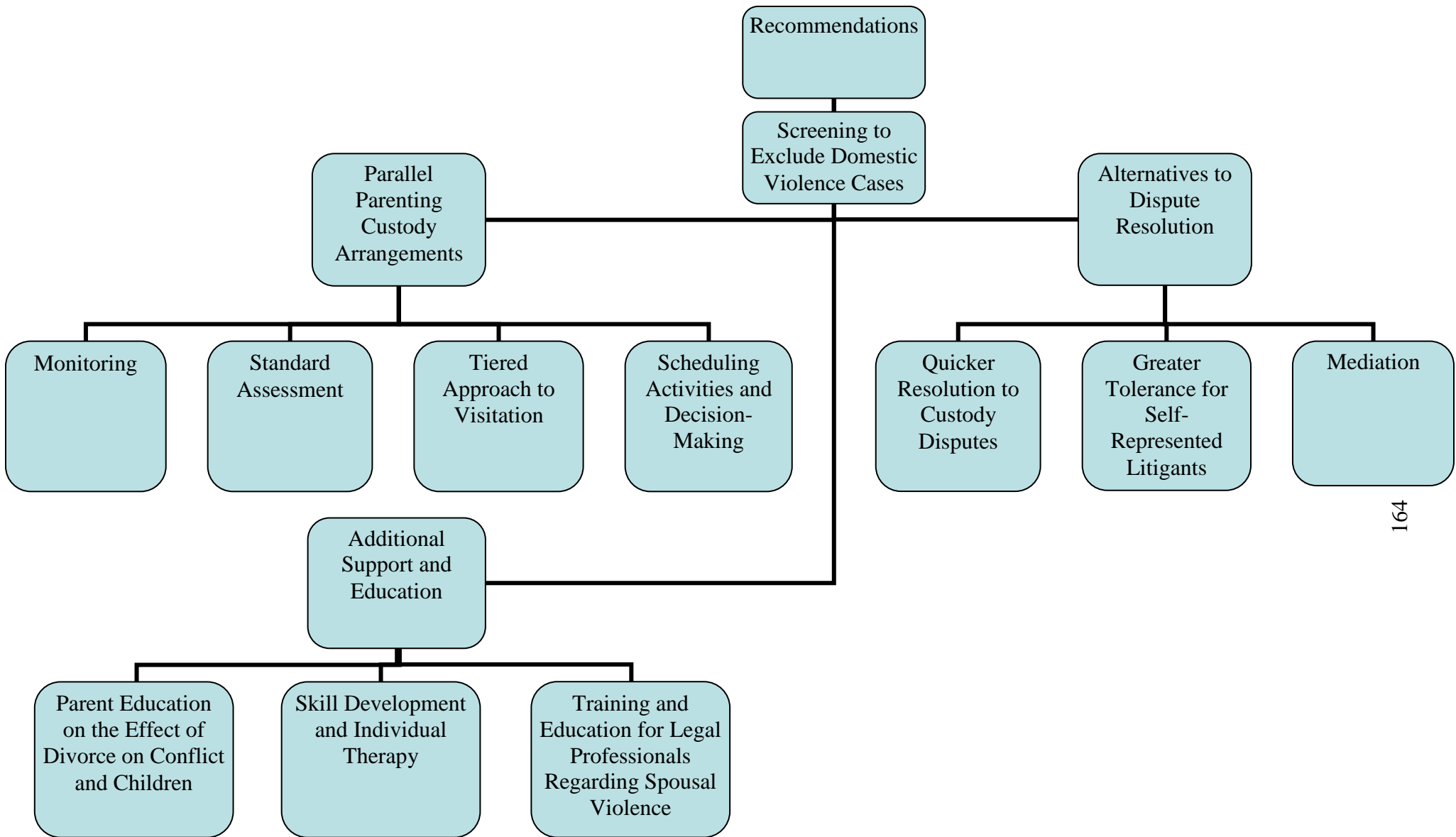


Figure 2: Summary of Recommendations

Appendix A: Family Law Professional Recruitment Letter

My name is Lindsay Robertson, and I am a Ph.D. student in clinical psychology at the University of Saskatchewan working under the supervision of Dr. Gerry Farthing. I am conducting a qualitative study, approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of Saskatchewan, examining the experiences of parents involved with parallel parenting custody arrangements. Given the limited amount of research examining parallel parenting plans, it is difficult to know how these arrangements are perceived by families and whether they are in the best interests of children. I hope this research will begin to address some of these questions.

You are being contacted because, as indicated in the CanLii online judgement database, you or your firm have acted as legal counsel in the (insert name) vs. (insert name) divorce proceedings. A custody arrangement managed by a parallel parenting plan was enacted in this case. I am interested in talking to parents involved in (either currently or in the past) a custody arrangement managed by a parallel parenting plan and I would appreciate it if you would forward the enclosed information to these individuals (e.g., letter explaining the study as well as a brochure).

This study will involve one-on-one individual interviews with parents who currently have, or have had a custody arrangement managed by a parallel parenting plan. During the interview I will ask participants to share their views, perspectives, and experiences of parallel parenting. All interviews will be conducted confidentially by telephone and are expected to take between one to three hours; however, interview length will vary depending on each participant. Interviewing parents with these custody arrangements will allow for a better understanding of how and under what circumstances parallel parenting plans work. This in turn, may help to inform policymakers and practitioners about which interventions are best suited to which families.

Participants for this research are being recruited from across Canada, rather than specific provinces. By widening the recruitment base for this research to Canada as a whole, the pool of participants will be larger, making each individual case more difficult to identify. However, some participants may be identifiable to other people on the basis of what they have said. To ensure anonymity, participants will be given a pseudonym and all identifying information (e.g., specific occupation position, home province, and city,) will be removed from all research data.

CONFLICT IN PARALLEL PARENTING

Thank you for your interest in this study. If you are interested in learning more about this study, please call me at 306-XXX-XXXX or contact me or my supervisor via email at lindsay.robertson@usask.ca or gfarring@stmcollege.ca and more details will be provided.

Sincerely,

Lindsay Robertson

Appendix B: Family Law Professional Recruitment Brochure

Evaluating Parallel Parenting Custody Arrangements



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ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

- Lindsay Robertson (Schroeder) is a Ph.D. student in clinical psychology at the University of Saskatchewan. Her research is supervised by Dr. Gerry Farthing, R.D. Psych.
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http://www.forcounsel.com/productDetails_c.asp?productid=1265

CONFLICT IN PARALLEL PARENTING



WHY AM I BEING CONTACTED?

I am doing a qualitative study of custody arrangements managed by parallel parenting plans in order to gain a better understanding of how these custody arrangements are perceived by families. It is intended that this research will begin to elucidate how and whether or not parallel parenting plans are effective, the circumstances under which they are effective and potential barriers to their use.

This brochure has been sent to you because you have acted as legal counsel in the (insert name) vs. (insert name) divorce proceedings. A custody arrangement managed by a parallel parenting plan was imposed in this case. I am interested in hearing from parents and children who have or have had a custody arrangement managed by a parallel parenting plan and I would appreciate it if you would forward the enclosed information to these individuals.

THIS RESEARCH

This study will involve one-on-one interviews with parents who currently have, or have had a custody arrangement managed by a parallel parenting plan. During the interview I will ask participants to share their views and perspectives in whatever way they see fit. I am particularly interested in how family members view parallel parenting custody arrangements, whether (and how) family members were able to make sense of the parenting arrangement and divorce, and whether the parenting plan has changed the family members' relationships with one another or affected their views and beliefs. All interviews will be conducted individually.

Interested participants will be asked to meet for an audio-taped interview. It is anticipated that this interview will be approximately 1 to 3 hours in length; however, interview length will vary depending on each participant.

Some time after the interview participants will receive a copy of the interview transcript. A second meeting will then be arranged to provide participants with an opportunity to share their feedback, comments, and any other thoughts that they may have had after the interview. This will be done in an attempt to identify discrepancies or missing pieces in the transcript.



GOALS OF THIS RESEARCH

- This research aims to understand:
- How parallel parenting plans work
- For whom parallel parenting plans work for
- When parallel parenting plans work best

CONTACT INFORMATION

Lindsay Robertson

9 Campus Drive,
Arts Building, Room 154
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, SK S7M 0M1
Phone: (306) XXX-XXXX
Fax: (306) XXX-XXXX
lindsay.robertson@usask.ca
gfarthing@stmcollege.ca



Appendix C: Parent Recruitment Letter

This letter has been sent to you by your lawyer at my request. This has been done to protect your privacy. Your lawyer has no ties to this study and getting this letter through your lawyer does not mean that he or she supports this study. Your lawyer will not know or be told if you choose to take part in this study and it will not affect your access to legal advice from that lawyer or law firm.

My name is Lindsay Robertson, and I am a Ph.D. student in clinical psychology at the University of Saskatchewan working under the supervision of Dr. Gerry Farthing. I am doing a study of parallel parenting plans (as defined in the attached brochure) in order to better understand the experience of parents involved with this form of custody. Given the lack of research examining parallel parenting plans, it is hard to know how these arrangements are viewed by families and if they are in the best interests of children. I hope this research will begin to address some of these questions.

This study will involve one-on-one individual interviews with parents who currently have or have had a parallel parenting plan. During the interview, I will ask parents to tell me about their views, perspectives, and experiences of parallel parenting. If you would like to take part in this study, an audio-taped private phone interview will be arranged. This interview will be 1-3 hours in length; however, interview length will vary from one person to the next. After the interview, I will give you a copy of the interview transcript. A second interview will then be set up to provide you with a chance to share your feedback, comments, and any other thoughts that you may have had after the first interview. The second interview is optional.

Because the participants for this study have been chosen from a small group of people (e.g., people who have or have had parallel parenting), people may be identified by others based on what they have said. For this reason, people are being recruited from across Canada, not from specific provinces. By widening the recruitment base for this study, the pool of people will be bigger, making it harder to identify each case. If you choose to take part in this study, every effort will be made to protect your privacy. People who take part in this study will be given a false name and all identifying information (e.g., province and city of residence, job title) will not be reported.

CONFLICT IN PARALLEL PARENTING

Thank you for your interest in this study. If you are interested in learning more about this study, please call me at 306-XXX-XXXX or contact me or my supervisor by email at lindsay.robertson@usask.ca or gfarring@stmcollege.ca and more details will be given to you.

Thank you,

Lindsay Robertson

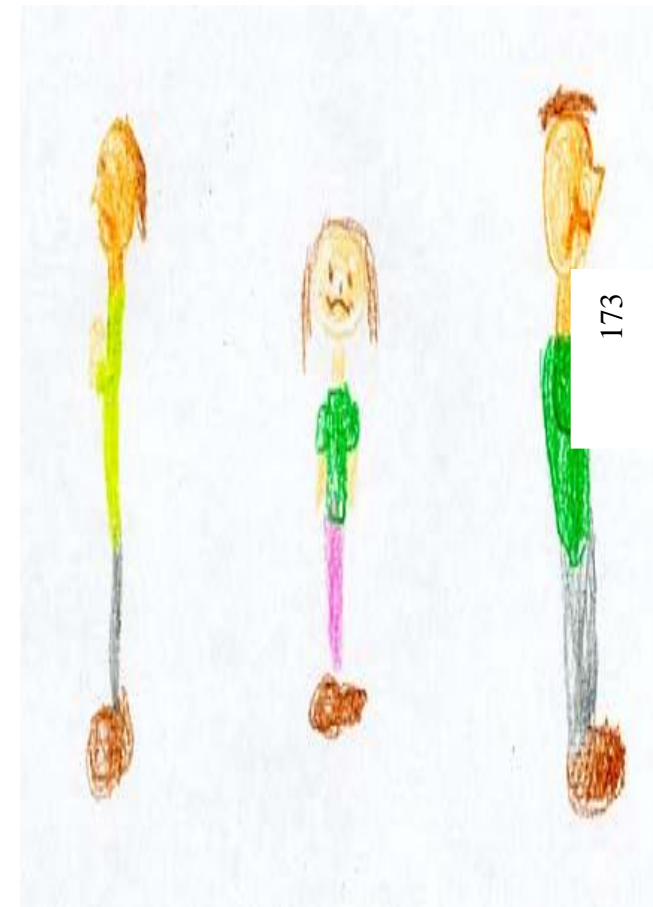
Appendix D: Parent Recruitment Brochure

Evaluating Parallel Parenting Custody Arrangements



ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

- Lindsay Robertson (Schroeder) is a Ph.D. student in clinical psychology at the University of Saskatchewan. Her research is supervised by Dr. Gerry Farthing, R.D. Psych.



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CONFLICT IN PARALLEL PARENTING



WHAT ARE PARALLEL PARENTING PLANS?

Parallel parenting plans are typically imposed by the courts when divorcing parents are unable to agree on a custody arrangement. These custody arrangements are customized to the degree, type, and intensity of parental conflict by requiring more or less structure and specificity in the plan (e.g., requiring parents to communicate with each other through an access book rather than through the child).

WHY AM I BEING CONTACTED?

I am doing a qualitative study of custody arrangements managed by parallel parenting plans in order to gain a better understanding of how parents experience and renegotiate their parenting roles under these circumstances and come to understand their parallel parenting experience. This brochure has been forwarded to you by your lawyer at my request because you either currently have, or have had a custody arrangement managed by a parallel parenting plan. Your lawyer was asked to forward this to you in an attempt to protect your privacy. If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at the address, email address, or phone number listed in this brochure.

THIS RESEARCH

This study will involve one-on-one interviews with parents who currently have, or have had a parallel parenting custody arrangement. During the interview I will ask parents to tell me their stories in whatever way they see fit. I am particularly interested in how family members view parallel parenting custody arrangements, whether (and how) family members were able to make sense of the parenting arrangement and divorce, and whether the parenting plan has changed the family members' relationships with one another or affected their views and beliefs. All interviews will be conducted individually.

If you are interested in participating in this study, arrangements would be made for a confidential audio-taped telephone interview. It is anticipated that this interview will be 1-3 hours in length; however, interview length will vary depending on each participant.

Some time after the interview you will be given a copy of the interview transcript. A second interview will then be arranged to provide you with an opportunity to share your feedback, comments, and any other thoughts that you may have had after the interview with me. This will be done in an attempt to identify discrepancies or missing pieces in the transcript.



GOALS OF THIS RESEARCH

- This research aims to understand:
- How parallel parenting plans work
- Who parallel parenting plans work for
- When parallel parenting plans work best
- How parallel parenting plans change the familial relationships
- How family members feel they have changed (if at all) because of the parallel parenting custody arrangement
-

CONTACT INFORMATION

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Appendix E: Screening Protocol

1. Are you currently engaged in any further litigation with your former partner?
 - a. If yes, encourage individual to contact me once this litigation has been complete.
 - b. If no, proceed with screening questions.

2. Was your relationship with your former partner characterized by physical, sexual, or verbal abuse?
 - a. If no, proceed with informed consent and interview procedure.
 - b. If yes, is this abuse ongoing?
 - i. If yes, do have a safety plan or safety measures in place (e.g., participation in a Domestic Violence Emergency Response Service (DVERS) program)?
 1. If yes, what is your plan?
 - a. Assess the likelihood of the plan's success (e.g., another person involved, clear access to an escape route, involvement with a women's shelter or DVERS). If the plan is comprehensive and the individual feels comfortable accessing the resources (e.g., women's shelter, etc.) if required, the participant is eligible for participation in this research. If the plan is not appropriate, participation is not possible until an appropriate safety plan or safety measures are in place (as below).
 2. If no, inform individual that participation is not possible until a safety plan or safety measures are in place. Encourage individual to contact local police or other community resources (e.g., women's shelter or DVERS) to assist in the development of a safety plan. Inform individual that, once a safety plan is in place, they can notify me if they are still interested in participating in this research.

Appendix F: Consent Form

Consent Form



Parallel Parenting Custody Arrangements:
Exploring the Lived Experience

You are invited to participate in a study entitled “Parallel Parenting Custody Arrangements: Exploring the Experience”. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask any questions you might have.

Researcher

Lindsay Robertson – Tel: (306) XXX XXXX

Email: lindsay.robertson@usask.ca

Department of Psychology, University of Saskatchewan

Research Supervisor

Dr. Gerry Farthing – Tel: (306) XXX XXXX

Email: gfarthing@stmcollege.ca

Department of Psychology, University of Saskatchewan

Purpose and Procedure: The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of parallel parenting custody arrangements from the perspective of parents through a confidential audio-taped interview. However, you may request that the recording device be turned off at any time. The purpose of the audio-recording is to assist with the transcription of the interview. No one, other than the researcher and the researcher’s advisory committee will have access to the audio recordings or your interview transcript. It is anticipated that this interview will be 1-3 hours in length for parents; however, interview length will vary depending on each participant. Some time after the interview I will give you a copy of the interview transcript. A second, follow-up interview will then be arranged to provide you with an opportunity to share your feedback, comments, and any other thoughts that you may have had after the interview with me. This will be done in an attempt to identify discrepancies or missing pieces in the transcript. Follow-up interviews will last one to three hours and will be completed individually, as required.

CONFLICT IN PARALLEL PARENTING

If you do not wish to review your transcript but wish for the interview data to be used for the purposes of this research, a transcript of your interview will not be sent to you. However, if you wish to review your transcript, verbal consent will be required before your transcript is released to the researcher and used for the purposes of this research.

Potential Risks: There are no foreseeable risks involved with the study; however, interview questions may trigger some emotional memories about family conflict and divorce. If you experience negative or distressing emotions as a result of the interview, please feel free to contact any of the crisis, support, or counselling services on the attached list.

Further, because the participants for this study have been recruited from a small group of people (e.g., individuals who have or have had a parallel parenting custody arrangement), it is possible that participants may be identifiable to other people on the basis of what they have said. For this reason, participants are being recruited from across Canada rather than specific provinces. By widening the recruitment base for this research to Canada as a whole, the pool of participants will be larger, making each individual case more difficult to identify. Further, if you chose to participate, every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality. That is, participants will be given a pseudonym and all identifying information (e.g., specific occupation position) will be removed from the report. In some cases, a detailed case narrative will be written to highlight the complexities of individual parallel parenting cases. These case narratives will consist of the information provided in the online judgment database, which is part of the public record, as well as any other relevant information provided by the participant in the telling of his or her story. All identifying information will be altered and every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality of participants. However, persons close to the case who read the thesis *might be able to identify participants* in the study based on what has been reported.

Potential Benefits: The results from this evaluation will begin to tell us how parallel parenting plans work, who they work for, and when they work best. Furthermore, results may guide future interventions with high conflict families by informing policymakers and practitioners about which interventions are best suited to which families, so they do not adopt a ‘one size fits all’ approach to child custody arrangements. However, there may be no personal benefits to participants as a result of participating in this study.

CONFLICT IN PARALLEL PARENTING

Storage of Data: All data and transcriptions will be stored in a locked room at the University of Saskatchewan for a minimum of five years, at which time the data will be destroyed. To protect the identity of the participants, consent forms, data/transcript release forms, and demographic information will be stored separately from the data.

Confidentiality: Every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality. All participants will be given a pseudonym and all identifying information (e.g., specific occupation position) will be altered in the transcripts in order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants. However, because the participants for this study have been recruited from a small group of people, it is possible that you may be identifiable to other people on the basis of what you have said. Participants are being recruited from across Canada to reduce the probability of participants being identified through their responses. In some cases, a detailed case narrative will be written to highlight to complexities of individual parallel parenting cases. These case narratives will consist of the information provided in the online judgment database as well as any other relevant information provided by you in the telling of your story. All identifying information will be altered and every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality of participants. However, as noted above, persons close to the case who read the thesis *might be able to identify participants* in the study based on what has been reported. Direct quotes from the interviews may also appear in the report to substantiate data that have been aggregated. As such, you will have the opportunity to review a copy of the transcript of the interaction and make any desired revisions if you wish to do so. You will also be provided with a data/transcript release form to complete, authorizing the release of the transcript to the researchers. All interview transcripts will be kept confidential. That is, no one will have access to anyone else's interview transcript other than your own in order to protect their privacy and confidentiality. Finally, after the transcript has been reviewed and you have signed the transcript release form, the audio recording will be destroyed. With the approval of the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB), the data from this study may be published and presented at conferences; however, your identity will be kept confidential. Although we may report direct quotations from the interview, you will be given a pseudonym, and all identifying information (e.g., specific occupation position) will be removed from the report.

Right to Withdraw: Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study for any reason, at any time, without penalty of any sort. If you withdraw from the study at

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any time, any data that you have contributed will be destroyed at your request. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until data have been pooled. After this it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data. You may also refuse to answer individual questions.

Questions: If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to ask at any point; you are also free to contact the student researcher or the research supervisor at the numbers provided above if you have questions at a later time. This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on (insert date). Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Ethics Office (966-2084). Out of town participants may call collect. Lastly, the findings of this research may be published, including excerpts from interview transcripts in a scholarly journal and/or submitted for presentation at professional and/or academic conferences.

Consent to Participate: I have read and understood the description provided above; I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. A copy of this consent form has been offered to me for my records. I consent to:

- Yes, I consent to participate in the research as described above.
- Yes, I consent to allow my interview to be audiotaped.
 - No, I do not consent to allow my interview to be audiotaped.
- Yes, I wish to receive a copy of my interview transcript.
 - No, I do not wish to receive a copy of my interview transcript.

I understand that, at any time, I can decide to discontinue my participation in this research and can withdraw consent for my material to be used for research purposes as specified above. My signature below indicates that I have read and understand the above information and the conditions for taking part in this research. My signature indicates that I agree to participate under these conditions.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Signature of Researcher

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Crisis, Support, and Counselling Services

The following numbers may also be of assistance if you experience any distress or wish to pursue counselling or support services in your area. If you are in need of immediate assistance, you can phone or go to the emergency department of your local hospital. The front page of your telephone book may also have the phone number of a community service referral agency or crisis hotline.

Adult Crisis Line, Salvation Army (Edmonton, AB)

780-429-0230

Alberta Mental Health Help Line (AB)

1-877-303-2642

Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention Centre of British Columbia (Vancouver, BC)

1-866-661-3311

Mental Health Works (MB)

204-953-2353

Chimo Help Line (Fredericton, NB)

1-800-667-5005

NWT Help Line (Yellowknife, NWT)

1-800-661-0844

Pictou County Help Line (New Glasgow, NS)

902-752-5952

Keewatin Crisis Line (Rankin Inlet, NU)

1-867-635-3333

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Mental Health and Family Services Division (Iqaluit, NU)

1-867-979-7680

Nunavut Kamatsiaqtut Help Line (Iqaluit, NU)

1-867-979-3333

Distress Centres Ontario (Toronto, ON)

416-486-2242

Island Helpline (PEI)

1-800-218-2885

Appendix G: Transcript Release Form



Data/Transcript Release Form

(Interviews)

- I, _____, do not wish to review the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study and hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Lindsay Robertson to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.
- I, _____, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with Lindsay Robertson. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Lindsay Robertson to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Signature of Participant/Legal Guardian

Date

Signature of Researcher

Appendix H: Demographic Information

Name: _____

Phone number(s): _____

Address: _____

Age:

Date of separation/divorce:

Length of marriage:

Custody arrangement:

Number of court appearances to alter custody order:

Major issue in divorce:

Number of children (ages):

Years of education:

Occupation:

Appendix I: Interview Guidelines

1. How do families come to parallel parenting custody arrangements?
 - a. The marriage, significant aspects of it relevant to the divorce
 - b. Details of the divorce (e.g., date of separation; date of divorce; interactions with lawyers, mediators, court system; type of custody arrangement; level of conflict in marriage and during divorce; quality of parental relationship)
2. Details of the custody arrangement (e.g., frequency of contact between children and non-residential parent; personal contact with ex-spouse; rules/guidelines in parenting plan)
 - a. Reaction to the custody arrangement (e.g., acceptance of parallel parenting plans)
 - b. How closely are the rules/guidelines imposed by the courts followed?
3. Experience of parallel parenting (e.g., conflict management; communication issues; division of parenting duties; adjustment period; children's reactions)
 - a. Has this experience changed them? If so, how?
4. Has the parallel parenting custody arrangements changed the coparenting relationship?
 - a. Relationship with ex-spouse (e.g., current relationship; significant changes; level of conflict)
 - b. Relationship with children (e.g., impact of conflict; reactions to custody arrangement, divorce, etc.)
5. Other thoughts/experiences not discussed about your experience; or things that influenced your experience of parallel parenting?

Close the interview by assessing participants' feelings after having gone through the interview process. Refer to counselor and/or offer support materials if participants are upset following the interview. Inquire about their expectations of the interview (e.g., has anything about the interview or their responses surprised them?). Are there any questions you would like to ask about the research study, interview process, etc.?

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Appendix J: Character Map: Guide To Participants

Participant	Former Partner	Spousal Violence	Infidelity	New Relationship (participant)	New Relationship (former partner)	Length of Relationship	Length of Time Since Separation	Parallel Parenting
Doug	Sharon	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	10-15 years	15-20 years	10 years
Jamie	Sam	No	Alleged	Yes	Yes	5-10 years	5-10 years	<5 years
Debra	Jake	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	<5 years	5-10 years	5-10 years
Sherri	Kurt	Yes	Alleged	No	Yes	5-10 years	10-15 years	5-10 years
Mark	Marjorie	No	No	Yes	No	<5 years	10-15 years	5-10 years
Jeff	Crystal	No	No	Yes	Yes	15-20 years	5-10 years	5-10 years
Maria	Pat	Yes	No	Yes	No	5-10 years	15-20 years	10-15 years
Blair	Jordan	No	Alleged	Yes	Yes	5-10 years	5-10 years	<5 years

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Appendix K: Deflection to Conflict

I: How has parallel parenting been for you?

P: Essentially what the judge has done is said he didn't break you in your marriage. I'm gonna break you now. You know? I'm gonna tie you to this person-

I: Mm hmm.

P: -who's abusive and who uses your child as a pawn and you're not going to be able to get away from him ever. Really. That's what they've done. They might as well give me a court order so that I have to marry him again...because...you know...you can-you can live your life and I can say, okay it's fine. Um...you know, I'll get her into activities when she's with us...and, you know, if he takes her, he does and if he doesn't – but you still, despite the fact...that if he doesn't take her, you still know that that's being done to your child.

I: Mm hmm.

P: And as a mother I don't know what could possibly be, you know, any worse than having your child...you know killed or...used or abused or whatever. I don't think there's anything that's any worse than that. So...I mean...you know his.....his connection to me is her so how can that ever end...unless he dies or I die or she dies? So.....and there's like, you know, there's no.....there's no consensus and there's no trying.....to find-

I: Right.

P: -a way through for him because that's not his focus. Right? So you know you're always met...with problems. I mean simple things. I can't send her in good clothes, because if I do – like one pair of pants I didn't get back for 4 months because I accidentally sent her in them. Or...clothes will come back and you know, the zipper's broken...and a brand new pair of sandals – he ripped them right out of...you know...It's in the sole thing.

I: Yeah, I know what you mean.

P: And he rips it right out. You know she's got pierced ears and he doesn't like that so one earring goes missing. By the time she gets back it's gone and I have to poke through her ear. So...and that hurts and she doesn't like that. She loves nail polish. I don't wear nail polish. I don't like nail polish. She loves it. So it's not like I love it and I make her wear it. She loves nail polish. Most little girls do. Even if she'll have an overnight with him, he'll take it off because you're not wearing that with me. So that becomes about him not about her. Not about what she likes.

Appendix L: Assessment of Spousal Violence

According to Bancroft and Silverman (2002), a comprehensive risk assessment requires a detailed examination of the relationship dynamics between mothers and children, siblings, parents, family members and the outside world. Throughout this examination, multiple sources of information should be examined (e.g., clinical observations of each parent and children; interviews with each parent and children, if appropriate; interviews with friends, relatives, school personnel, and other witnesses; records from police, child protective services, courts, and medical providers; interviews with previous partners of the parents, particularly of the alleged perpetrator of abuse; examination of criminal records of the parents; tape recordings and correspondence, diaries, and other documents; and other potential sources of evidence that may come to the professionals attention during the course of the assessment or investigation) and statements made to professionals by perpetrators of abuse or by their family members should not be accepted at face value. Similarly, Neilson (2004) argued the context of the relationship (e.g., the history of the relationship, patterns of violence and emotional abuse over time, victim vulnerability, social and cultural context, dynamics of power and control as well as its psychological and physical impact) must be considered in its entirety prior to making a decision regarding custody. As previously stated, such an assessment should be undertaken as soon as an allegation of abuse has been made in the context of a child custody dispute.

The use of psychological testing is also recommended in the assessment process to help identify core attitudes and beliefs as well as potential treatment targets. However, psychological testing is not appropriate to predict parenting ability in perpetrators of abuse nor is it appropriate to draw conclusions about one parent in the absence of information about the other parent (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). Similarly, Neilson (2004) argued psychological test data should not be used in isolation (e.g., without consideration of the context of the relationship) or to test whether an individual has been abusive since there is no clearly identifiable psychological or socioeconomic profile of perpetrators of spousal violence.

Appendix M: Recommendations for Future Research

- Examine the experience and circumstances under which parallel parenting custody arrangements are used.
- Examine case records, parenting assessments, and child custody evaluations to better understand when and why parallel parenting custody arrangements are implemented.
- Examine the experiences of family law professionals (e.g., lawyers, mediators, and judges).
- Examine children's perspectives and experiences of parallel parenting.
- Examine the role of gender and satisfaction on the outcome of custody disputes.
- Examine different family structures (e.g., same-sex, biological and non-biological) and their impact on the parallel parenting experience.
- Longitudinal research documenting families' involvement with the legal system as well as parallel parenting custody arrangements to determine if these custody arrangements change over time and how they impact children.
- Examine whether or not the experience of parallel parenting custody arrangements differs from the experience of other forms of custody arrangements (e.g., sole, joint, or shared custody alone).
- Examine the use of parallel parenting custody arrangements in cases of spousal violence and the impact of satisfaction on the willingness of parents to cooperate under such circumstances.
- Examine the effect of resistance to abuse on children as well as the impact of child protective concerns on the persistence of conflict.
- Examine the impact of different family sizes on the parallel parenting experience as well as the use of parallel parenting custody arrangements in custody disputes involving older versus younger children.
- Examine how different parenting styles (e.g., authoritative, permissive, or authoritarian) influence child adjustment in cases of parallel parenting.
- Examine the impact of child protection concerns on parenting beliefs and ability.
- Examine how competing desires (e.g., to fight for their child's safety and well-being versus to protect their child from exposure to ongoing conflict) and the parent-child relationship influence parents' motivation to desist from conflict.
- Examine the role of forgiveness on the development of a cooperative coparenting relationship.
- Examine the impact of remarriage on the parenting relationship.
- Examine the attributional style of parents involved in high conflict divorce.
- Examine the adaptive function of different attributional styles and the impact of differing contexts on attributions.