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## Ex-Spouses' Relational Satisfaction as a Function of Coparental Communication in Stepfamilies

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### Abstract

This study tested a series of actor-partner interdependence models of coparental communication and relational satisfaction among ex-spouses living in stepfamilies. Participants included 41 ex-spousal dyads ( $N = 82$ ). Results revealed two actor-oriented models whereby ex-spouses' supportive and antagonistic coparental communication predicted their own (but not their ex-spouse's) relational satisfaction. A second set of models revealed that nonresidential parents' supportive and antagonistic coparental communication with the residential stepparent predicted their own satisfaction with their ex-spouses, as well as their ex-spouse's satisfaction with them (i.e., a partner effect). Importantly, the findings demonstrate the interdependence of coparenting relationships in stepfamilies, as supportive coparental communication between nonresidential parents and their ex-spouse's new partner (i.e., the stepparent) predicted meaningful variance in relational satisfaction for both ex-spouses.

**Keywords:** Antagonistic Communication, Coparenting, Ex-Spouses, Stepfamilies, Supportive Communication

Scholars have devoted substantial efforts toward understanding the impact of divorce on families (for reviews, see Amato, 2000; Fine & Harvey, 2006). One of the key conclusions drawn from this body of work is that “marital disruption is a stressful life transition to

which adults and children must adjust" (Amato, 2000, p. 1270). Specifically, divorcing (or separating) partners with children are faced with the challenging task of dissolving their romantic relationship while maintaining their relationship as coparents. According to Van Egeren and Hawkins (2004), a coparenting relationship exists "when at least two individuals are expected by mutual agreement or societal norms to have conjoint responsibility for a particular child's well-being" (p. 166). Coparenting does not refer to the individual attempts of a parent to guide and direct the behaviors and activities of his or her child(ren), but rather, it refers to the interaction patterns that emerge as one parent supports and/or undermines the parenting attempts of his or her partner. Adamsons and Pasley (2006) argued that coparental communication should be conceptualized and studied as distinct from other interparental interactions because of the potential unique effects that coparenting may have on family member outcomes. For example, in first-marriage families, researchers have found that coparenting is more predictive of parents' and children's adjustment than is general marital quality, that coparenting accounts for variance in parent and child outcomes after controlling for individual parent characteristics, and that coparenting is more predictive of marital quality than marital quality is of coparenting (Feinburg, Kan, & Hetherington, 2007; Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004).

Families that have experienced divorce and remarriage, on the other hand, represent a unique context in which the effects of coparental communication are equally likely to influence family members' adjustment and relational well-being. For instance, one of the most challenging aspects of divorce for former partners who are coparenting children is the difficult, and often painful, task of renegotiating power and intimacy boundaries, in essence developing a "separate togetherness" while "uncoupling without unfamilializing" (Graham, 1997, p. 366; Masheter, 1991, 1997a). Managing these challenges becomes even more tenuous in stepfamilies, as remarriage is associated with less reported parenting support from the former spouse and more negative attitudes about the other parent (Christensen & Rettig, 1995). As Ganong, Coleman, and Hans (2006) noted, remarriages occur and are maintained under the watchful eyes of third parties who hold a vested interest in the quality and stability of the stepfamily system, namely children from prior relationships and former spouses (or partners). Given the importance of cooperative coparenting relationships to family members' adjustment, as well as the potential for remarried partners (i.e., stepparents) to undermine (or perhaps to enhance) coparenting interactions between former spouses, research investigating the degree to which ex-spouses' relational satisfaction varies as a function of their coparental communication with each other and with stepparents is warranted. In the present study, we tested this line of reasoning with a sample of 41 ex-spousal dyads using a series of actor-partner interdependence models.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Our investigation was informed by two related, yet distinct social exchange perspectives: interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003) and Rusbult's

(1980) investment model. First, interdependence theory posits that interaction between partners is the essence of all close relationships (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Rather than identify an overarching need that fuels interpersonal behavior, interdependence theory assumes that humans have diverse instrumental and socioemotional needs. Although some needs are pervasive, others are unique to specific situations and partners (e.g., coparents), and many needs are inherently interpersonal needs that can only be gratified in the context of a dyadic relationship (e.g., raising children together) (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Thus, interdependence theory predicts that interactions are experienced as pleasurable (or satisfying) to the degree that they gratify one or more needs and are experienced as unpleasant (or dissatisfying) to the degree that they fail to gratify or to meet important needs (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003).

According to Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998), the explanatory power of interdependence theory emerges as one examines the interdependence structure<sup>1</sup> that characterizes a given relationship, rather than the personal dispositions of each individual partner. In other words, analyzing the structure of interdependence between two individuals (e.g., two ex-spouses) focuses our attention on the ability of each partner (or coparent) to influence the other's outcomes. The extent to which actor and partner outcomes are positively correlated versus negatively correlated represent corresponding versus conflicting interests, respectively. This distinction, in turn, defines four properties of situation structure based on mutual influence (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). First, *level of dependence* describes the degree to which an actor "relies on" an interaction partner, in that his or her outcomes are influenced by the partner's actions. Second, *mutuality of dependence* describes the degree to which two people are equally dependent on one another. *Basis of dependence* describes the various ways in which partners affect one another's outcomes, that is, whether dependence derives from partner control (e.g., the nonresidential parent's outcomes are controlled by the residential parent's unilateral actions) or joint control (e.g., the nonresidential parent's outcomes are controlled by the coparents' joint actions). Finally, *covariation of interests* describes the degree to which partners' outcomes correspond, or in the present study, whether the parenting actions that benefit one ex-spouse (e.g., the residential parent) similarly benefit the other ex-spouse (e.g., the nonresidential parent).

It is this final component of situation structure, the covariation of interests, which is particularly germane to an investigation of coparental communication between ex-spouses. As Rusbult and Van Lange (2003) argued, covariation ranges from corresponding interests to mixed-motive situations, to situations with conflicting interests (i.e., "zero-sum" interactions). In the aftermath of a divorce, there is likely to be tremendous variability in the covariation of coparenting interests among ex-spouses. Although some former partners are able to develop cooperative coparenting arrangements (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Schrodt, Baxter, McBride, Braithwaite, & Fine, 2006) and postdivorce friendships (Masheter, 1997a), others sustain predivorce patterns of conflict, hostility, and animosity toward one another that undermine cooperative coparenting (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Masheter,

1997b). Still, others develop “business-like” partnerships (perhaps out of mixed-motives) for the purposes of coparenting children in postdivorce stepfamilies (Braithwaite, McBride, & Schrodtt, 2003; Schrodtt et al., 2006). Despite this variability, however, the coparenting relationship remains one of the defining interaction patterns that determines the quality of most ex-spousal relationships in postdivorce families (Ahrons, 2007; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Thus, interdependence theory predicts that ex-spouses who communicate as coparents in ways that meet their partner's parenting expectations (e.g., supportive and cooperative) will experience higher levels of satisfaction.

In addition, Rusbult's (1980) investment model asserts that dependence is not only influenced by satisfaction and quality of alternatives (as interdependence theory asserts) but also by investment size. “*Investment size* refers to the magnitude and importance of the resources that are attached to a relationship—resources that would decline in value or be lost if the relationship were to end” (Rusbult et al., 1998, p. 359). Although former partners have dissolved their romantic relationship during the process of a divorce, both partners have typically invested time, energy, and personal resources into the upbringing of their offspring. In doing so, the investment model predicts that coparenting enhances commitment because the act of investing in the well-being of the children increases the costs of ending a coparental relationship, “serving as a powerful psychological inducement to persist” (Rusbult et al., 1998, p. 359). Consequently, the question for many ex-spouses with children is rarely a question of *if* they will continue their coparenting efforts; rather, for many it is a question of *how* they will continue their coparenting efforts and to what end.

Moreover, the association between cooperative coparental communication and relational satisfaction is likely to be evident even as children age from adolescence into young adulthood. As Aquilino (1997) found, there is a high degree of continuity between parent-child relationships in adolescence and young adulthood. Both Apter (2001) and Arnett (2004) have argued that most young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 (i.e., “emerging adults”) are not ready for the responsibilities of adulthood and are often dependent on their parents' emotional and financial support for many years. In addition, the introduction of a new adult partner to the coparenting relationship is likely to alter the coparenting relationship between ex-spouses, as residential parents often rely on their new partners (i.e., stepparents) to help raise their offspring. Consequently, remarriage and/or the introduction of a stepparent carry with it the potential to influence the covariation of coparenting interests among ex-spouses.

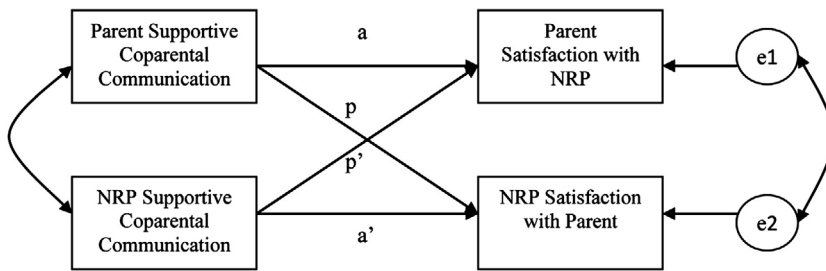
### ***Coparental Communication and Relational Satisfaction in Stepfamilies***

According to Adamsons and Pasley (2006), “research on how remarriage affects coparenting between biological parents is scant” (p. 254). With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 2003; Schrodtt et al., 2006), most of what we know about coparenting among ex-spouses comes from the postdivorce literature, with very little research being

done on these relationships after stepfamily formation. For instance, the bulk of postdivorce coparenting research has focused primarily on communication patterns of *supportiveness* and *antagonism* between ex-spouses as they coparent their children (Adamsons & Pasley, 2006). Ahrons and her colleagues (Ahrons, 1981, 2007; Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987) found that, although the majority of divorced parents in their sample reported tension and anger during coparental interactions, close to half simultaneously reported feeling that their former spouses were supportive coparents. A majority of ex-spouses maintain some form of direct (or indirect) contact well beyond the first year after divorce; though with time the frequency and length of such interactions tend to diminish (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). In stepfamilies, the coparenting relationship is further complicated by the presence of both stepchildren and new relational partners (Ganong et al., 2006; Schrodt et al., 2006), as remarriage is negatively associated with cooperative coparental interaction and parenting satisfaction (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987), as well as visitation with the children (Wolchik & Fenaughty, 1996). In fact, Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) identified a number of factors that undermine cooperative coparenting in postdivorce families, including interparental hostility, incompatible values, and a general distrust of a former partner's parenting abilities, to name a few.

To date, only two studies have examined coparental communication among ex-spouses living in established stepfamily systems. Braithwaite, Schrodt, and their colleagues (Braithwaite et al., 2003; Schrodt et al., 2006) examined communication patterns among coparents in stepfamilies using time diaries and in-depth interviews. In their first report using diary data, Braithwaite et al. (2003) found that the coparents in their sample had a moderate level of interaction, averaging six coparental interactions over the course of the two-week study. Most of the interactions were very "business-like," focused primarily on the children, and were characterized by relatively low levels of conflict and tension. In their second report using follow-up interviews, Schrodt et al. (2006) investigated the various ways in which ex-spouses communicated about the meaning of the divorce decree within their coparenting relationships. They found that issues of trust, fairness, and good faith were fundamentally tied to how coparents used the divorce decree to facilitate or hinder the coparenting actions of their former spouses.

In general, then, researchers have demonstrated that the coparenting relationship is central to family functioning (Feinburg et al., 2007) and is predictive of adults' adjustment in postdivorce families (Ahrons, 2007; Ahrons & Tanner, 2003). Although coparental communication among ex-spouses is likely to vary in terms of supportiveness and antagonism, interdependence theory would predict that expectations of trust, fairness, and good faith (i.e., ex-spouses' comparison levels) would characterize supportive and cooperative coparental communication, which in turn would lead to higher levels of relational satisfaction. Of course, the challenge of maintaining a supportive and cooperative coparenting relationship while reconciling the end of a romantic relationship remains, and many ex-spouses often struggle with allowing residual feelings of hostility and resentment to interfere with their support of their ex-spouse's parenting attempts (Masheter, 1997b). Thus, ex-spouses' perceptions of whether they feel validated and supported by their coparental



*Note.* NRP = Nonresidential Parent; a = Parent actor effect; p = Parent partner effect; a' = Nonresidential Parent actor effect; p' = Nonresidential Parent partner effect. The same model was tested for ex-spouses' reports of antagonistic coparental communication. Two additional models were then tested using ex-spouses' reports of supportive and antagonistic coparental communication with the residential stepparent as predictors of ex-spouses' relational satisfaction.

**Figure 1.** Hypothesized APIM of Supportive Coparental Communication and Relational Satisfaction in Ex-Spousal Dyads ( $N = 41$  dyads).

partners are important factors to consider when evaluating the strength and integrity of the coparental alliance; an alliance that ultimately impacts the adults' satisfaction with their former partners. To the extent that ex-spouses develop supportive and nonantagonistic coparental communication patterns, such patterns should increase their relational satisfaction (i.e., actor effects). To test this line of reasoning, we advanced the following hypotheses (see Figure 1):

- H1:** In stepfamilies, ex-spouses' reports of supportive coparental communication are positively associated with their reports of relational satisfaction.
- H2:** In stepfamilies, ex-spouses' reports of antagonistic coparental communication are inversely associated with their reports of relational satisfaction.

On the other hand, previous research provides less evidence to suggest that coparents' relational satisfaction varies as a function of their ex-spouse's perceptions of coparental communication quality (i.e., partner effects). Given that divorce signifies for many the end of their concerns about what their former partner thinks, and that most ex-spouses move into parallel coparenting patterns over time (i.e., where former spouses develop their own household rules) (Adamsons & Pasley, 2006; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992), ex-spouses' relational satisfaction with each other may or may not vary as a function of their ex-partner's perceptions of coparental communication. That is, researchers have yet to provide enough evidence to suggest that one ex-spouse's reports of supportive and antagonistic coparental communication is likely to predict the relational satisfaction of the other ex-spouse (i.e., partner effects). To investigate this issue, then, we



advanced a research question rather than a hypothesis so as to include partner effects in our hypothesized models:

**RQ:** How, if at all, do ex-spouses' reports of relational satisfaction vary as a function of their former partner's reports of coparental communication quality in stepfamilies (i.e., supportiveness and antagonism)?

Finally, interdependence theory would suggest that a quality alternative to the residential parent's coparenting relationship with the ex-spouse holds the potential to alter the level of dependence present in the coparenting relationship, ultimately impacting relational satisfaction with the ex-spouse. Most remarriages unfold under the watchful eyes of former partners (Ganong et al., 2006), and, given the potential for antagonistic interactions between ex-spouses, residential parents may seek the assistance of their new partners and position them as mediators within the coparenting relationship with their ex-spouses. Indeed, the fundamental challenge for residential parents involves figuring out how to maintain working relationships as coparents with their former partners without letting their former partners intrude on the remarriage (Ganong et al., 2006). To the extent that nonresidential parents develop supportive and nonantagonistic patterns of coparental communication with residential stepparents, such patterns are likely to ease the inherent tensions residential parents may feel between their remarried and coparenting relationships, thereby enhancing their satisfaction with their ex-spouses.

Of course, nonresidential parents have as much, if not more, at stake in the coparenting relationships that evolve with stepparents once their former partners remarry. As Miller (2009) observed, many coparents fear that their ex-spouse's new dating partner might replace them as a parent in the family system. This is due, in part, to the fears and anxieties associated with trusting an ex-spouse's new partner to help raise one's children (Miller, 2009; Schrodt et al., 2006). Consequently, the ability of nonresidential parents to communicate with residential stepparents in supportive and nonantagonistic ways should predict nonresidential parents' abilities to sustain cooperative and satisfying relationships with their former partners. To test this line of reasoning, then, we advanced our final two hypotheses (see note in Figure 1):

**H3:** In stepfamilies, nonresidential parents' reports of supportive coparental communication with residential stepparents are positively associated with ex-spouses' reports of relational satisfaction.

**H4:** In stepfamilies, nonresidential parents' reports of antagonistic coparental communication with residential stepparents are inversely associated with ex-spouses' reports of relational satisfaction.

## Method

### *Participants*

The data reported here were collected as part of a larger program of research investigating interpersonal communication behaviors and family functioning in stepfamilies (Schrodt, Soliz, & Braithwaite, 2008). In this study, a total of 41 residential parents (ages 23–71,



$M = 47.50$ ,  $SD = 8.32$ ) and 41 nonresidential parents (ages 25–69,  $M = 48.85$ ,  $SD = 7.91$ ) participated ( $N = 82$ ). The majority of participants were Caucasian (78.0%,  $n = 32$  dyads) and lived in either the Midwestern ( $n = 56$ , 28 dyads) or Southwestern ( $n = 26$ , 13 dyads) regions of the United States. Residential parents included 31 mothers and 10 fathers, the majority of whom were remarried (83.0%) and had been previously divorced once (70.7%); though 9 (22.0%) had been divorced twice. Nonresidential parents included 31 fathers and 10 mothers, the majority of whom were not remarried (56.1%) and had been previously divorced once (65.9%); though 8 (19.5%) had been divorced twice.

The majority of residential parents had completed some college (46.3%), a bachelor's degree (17.1%), or a masters degree (14.6%), whereas the majority of nonresidential parents had completed a high school diploma (29.3%), some college (24.4%), or a bachelor's degree (22.0%). Time since the divorce ranged from 4 to 29 years ( $M = 13.8$ ,  $SD = 5.77$ ), and residential parents reported a length of stepfamily formation that ranged from 1 year to 21 years ( $M = 9.75$  years,  $SD = 6.25$ ). The average age of the young adult child who helped recruit participants was 21.9 years ( $SD = 3.87$ ).

### **Procedures**

The original data included multiple members of individual stepfamilies (i.e., stepchildren, parents, stepparents, and nonresidential parents) and were collected using purposive and network sampling techniques. First, the researchers entered classes at two large universities in the Midwest and Southwest and solicited direct participation from a variety of young adult stepchildren. As part of these efforts, participants were invited to recruit their parents for participation in the research, and the data for the present study consist only of the divorced partners' responses (i.e., the ex-spouses). All participants completed the questionnaire on a volunteer basis, and, in classes where instructors granted permission, students were awarded minimal class credit (less than 2%) for returning completed questionnaires from other members of their stepfamily.

Second, students not qualifying as members of a stepfamily, as well as faculty members, friends, and fellow community members, identified additional participants meeting the criteria for inclusion and willing to complete a questionnaire. Participants provided a phone number at the bottom of the consent form to verify participation and returned questionnaires to the researchers in sealed envelopes so as to protect confidentiality. To verify participation of those respondents completing questionnaires through the network sampling procedures ( $n = 60$ ), a research assistant randomly called 25% of the respondents to verify that they had indeed participated in the study and completed the questionnaire. All 15 respondents verified participation.

### **Measures**

#### *Coparental communication*

Participants' reports of coparental communication were measured using Ahrons's (1981) Quality of Coparental Communication Scale (QCCS). As Van Egeren and Hawkins (2004)

noted, coparenting can be measured either as a dyadic variable or as an individual variable, as long as the individual variable approach assesses each partner's feelings or behaviors within the context of the coparenting relationship (i.e., items should specifically reference the partner's existence). Given that Ahrons's QCCS is the most established scale of coparental communication used in postdivorce research, we employed it in the present study. The scale is composed of 10 Likert items assessing coparents' perceptions of *antagonism* (e.g., "When my ex-spouse and I discuss parenting issues, the atmosphere is one of hostility and anger," "My former spouse and I have basic differences of opinion about issues related to childrearing") and *supportiveness* in the coparenting relationship (e.g., "When I need help regarding the children, I seek it from my ex-spouse," "My former spouse understands and is supportive of my special needs as a parent"). In this study, the same items were replicated to measure the quality of coparental communication between ex-spouses and residential parents' romantic partners (i.e., stepparents). Responses were solicited using a 5-point scale that ranged from (1) *Strongly disagree* to (5) *Strongly agree*. The validity and reliability of the QCCS are well established (Ahrons, 1981; Ahrons & Tanner, 2003; Bonach, Sales, & Koeske, 2005). In this study, the scale produced acceptable Cronbach's alpha coefficients for residential parents' reports of supportive communication with their ex-spouses ( $\alpha = .82$ ) and their remarried partners ( $\alpha = .76$ ), as well as for antagonistic communication with ex-spouses ( $\alpha = .91$ ) and remarried partners ( $\alpha = .84$ ). Likewise, the scale produced acceptable reliability estimates for nonresidential parents' reports of supportive communication with their ex-spouses ( $\alpha = .79$ ) and residential stepparents ( $\alpha = .79$ ), as well as for antagonistic communication with ex-spouses ( $\alpha = .85$ ) and residential stepparents ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

### *Relational satisfaction*

Ex-spouses' relational satisfaction was operationalized using a modified version of the Marital Opinion Questionnaire (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986). The scale consisted of 10 items measuring satisfaction with 7-point semantic differential scales (e.g., "miserable-enjoyable") and an additional global satisfaction item that ranged from (1) *Completely dissatisfied* to (7) *Completely satisfied*. Each participant reported their satisfaction with their ex-spouse over the last month. Final scores were calculated for each member of the dyad by averaging items. Previous studies have demonstrated the validity and reliability of using the modified version to measure both relational and familial satisfaction (e.g., Schrodt & Afifi, 2007; Schrodt et al., 2008). In this study, the 11-item measure produced strong reliability with alpha coefficients of .95 and .89 for both residential and nonresidential parents' reports of relational satisfaction, respectively.

### *Data Analysis*

We tested our hypotheses and addressed our research question using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006).

According to Kenny et al. (2006), the APIM estimates two types of effects: (a) *actor effects* describe the association between a person's score on an independent variable and their own score on an outcome variable, and (b) *partner effects* describe the association between a person's score on a predictor variable and his or her partner's score on an outcome variable. In the present study, residential and nonresidential parents' actor effects are represented in Figure 1 by paths labeled *a* and *a'* respectively, whereas partner effects are represented by paths labeled *p* and *p'* respectively. We employed path analysis with maximum likelihood estimation in LISREL 8.80 to test our APIMs. Given our modest sample size ( $N = 41$  dyads), we estimated each APIM using manifest (or observed) indicators rather than latent constructs. All estimates of actor and partner effects were generated while controlling for all other effects in the model (Cook & Kenny, 2005), including effects due to mutual influence. All tests of statistical significance were set at  $p < .05$ .

## Results

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and Pearson product-moment correlations for the independent and dependent variables included in this report are presented in Table 1.

### Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses were conducted to determine whether key demographic characteristics of the sample (i.e., family role, biological sex, and time) might influence the results. No significant, within-dyad differences emerged based on either family role (i.e., stepparents vs. nonresidential parents) or biological sex (i.e., males vs. females) nor were there any significant between-dyad effects for stepparent role (i.e., stepfather vs. stepmother couples). Likewise, time since the divorce, length of stepfamily membership, and age of

**Table 1** Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Product-Moment Correlations for All Variables ( $N = 41$  dyads)

| Variables                            | <i>M</i>    | <i>SD</i>   | 1            | 2            | 3           | 4          | 5            |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|------------|--------------|
| 1. Supportive COPAR-EX               | 2.87 (3.02) | 1.01 (.86)  | <b>.63**</b> | -.51**       | .55**       | -.50**     | .62**        |
| 2. Antagonistic COPAR-EX             | 3.00 (2.91) | 1.24 (.98)  | -.42**       | <b>.60**</b> | -.22        | .34*       | -.70**       |
| 3. Supportive COPAR-STEP             | 4.16 (2.82) | .71 (.78)   | .18          | -.27y        | <b>.27†</b> | -.45**     | .52**        |
| 4. Antagonistic COPAR-STEP           | 2.21 (2.56) | 1.04 (.86)  | .02          | .37*         | -.58**      | <b>.06</b> | -.52**       |
| 5. Satisfaction with EX <sup>a</sup> | 3.91 (4.18) | 1.55 (1.17) | .59**        | -.56**       | .17         | -.09       | <b>.56**</b> |

COPAR = coparental communication; EX = ex-spouse; STEP = stepparent. Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) are for (nonresidential) parents. Correlations for nonresidential parents are in the upper diagonal and correlations for residential parents are in the lower diagonal. Correlations in the diagonal represent estimates of nonindependence.

a. Responses solicited using a 7-point Likert scale.

†  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

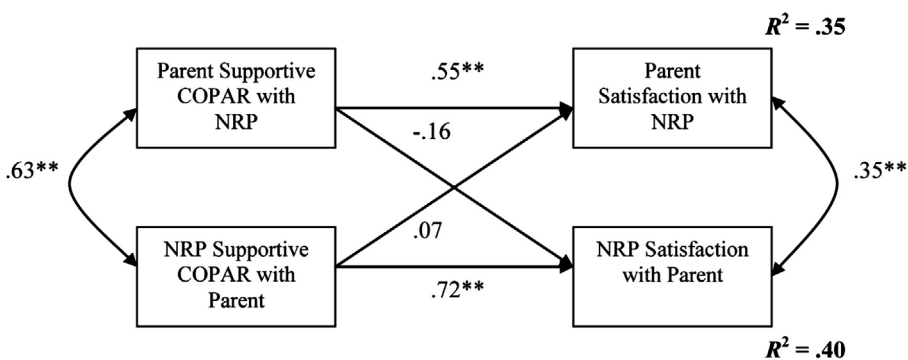
the young adult child were not correlated significantly with any of the constructs of interest. Consistent with the recommendations of Kenny et al. (2006), Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the degree of nonindependence present in the data set. The results revealed moderate degrees of nonindependence for ex-spouses' reports of supportive and antagonistic coparental communication, as well as relational satisfaction (see Table 1). Given the amount of nonindependence present in our data, we analyzed the couple as the unit of analysis.

### *H1: Supportive Coparental Communication and Relational Satisfaction*

Our first hypothesis predicted that ex-spouses' reports of supportive coparental communication would positively predict ex-spouse's relational satisfaction. The APIM is, by definition, a saturated model that produces perfect model fit (Kenny et al., 2006). Thus, after controlling for nonindependence in reports of both supportive coparental communication and relational satisfaction, the model revealed significant actor effects for both residential parents' ( $\beta = .55, z = 2.95, p < .01$ ) and nonresidential parents' ( $\beta = .72, z = 3.71, p < .01$ ) reports of supportive coparental communication (see Figure 2). The model accounted for 35% and 40% of the variance in residential and nonresidential parents' reports of relational satisfaction, respectively. Thus, our first hypothesis was supported.

### *H2: Antagonistic Coparental Communication and Relational Satisfaction*

Our second hypothesis predicted that ex-spouses' reports of antagonistic coparental communication would negatively predict ex-spouse's relational satisfaction. After controlling for mutual influence in reports of both antagonistic coparental communication and relational satisfaction, the model revealed significant actor effects for both residential parents'



*Note.* COPAR = Coparental communication; NRP = Nonresidential Parent.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Figure 2.** APIM of Supportive Coparental Communication and Relational Satisfaction in Ex-Spousal Dyads ( $N = 41$  dyads).

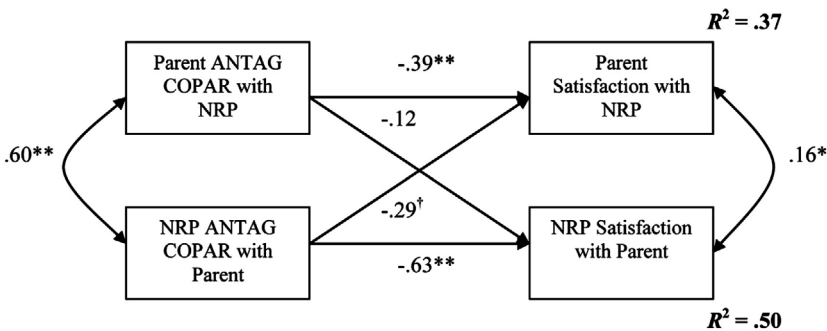
( $\beta = -.39, z = -2.32, p < .05$ ) and nonresidential parents' ( $\beta = -.63, z = -3.67, p < .01$ ) reports of antagonistic coparental communication (see Figure 3). The model accounted for 37% and 50% of the variance in residential and nonresidential parents' reports of relational satisfaction, respectively. Thus, our second hypothesis was supported.

**RQ: Partner's Perceptions of Coparental Communication and Relational Satisfaction**

Our research question explored how, if at all, ex-spouses' reports of relational satisfaction varied as a function of their partner's reports of coparental communication quality in stepfamilies. Across all four partner effects for supportive and antagonistic coparental communication (see Figures 2 and 3), only the path from nonresidential parents' reports of antagonistic communication to residential parents' reports of relational satisfaction approached statistical significance ( $\beta = -.29, z = -1.79, p = .07$ ). Thus, the results provide modest evidence to suggest that residential parents' satisfaction with their ex-spouses varies inversely as a function of their ex-spouse's reports of antagonistic coparental communication.

**H3: Supportive Coparental Communication with Stepparents and Relational Satisfaction**

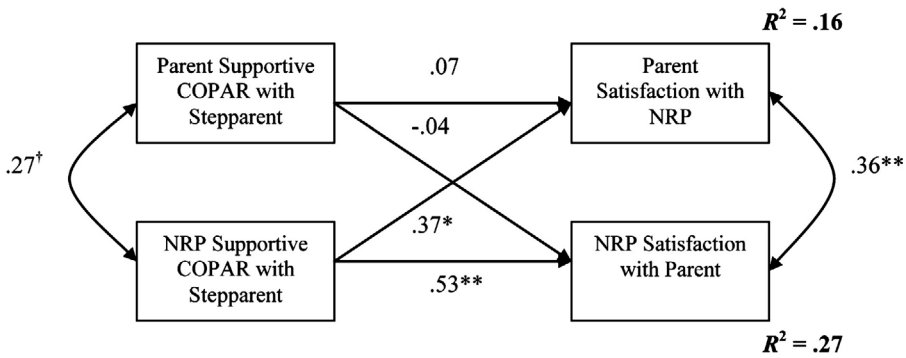
Our third hypothesis predicted that nonresidential parents' reports of supportive coparental communication with residential stepparents would positively predict ex-spouses' reports of relational satisfaction. After controlling for nonindependence in reports of both supportive coparental communication with the stepparent and relational satisfaction, the model revealed a significant actor effect for nonresidential parents ( $\beta = .53, z = 3.24, p < .01$ ), as well as a significant partner effect from nonresidential parents' supportive



Note. ANTAG = Antagonistic; COPAR = Coparental communication; NRP = Nonresidential Parent.

†  $p = .07$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Figure 3. APIM of Antagonistic Coparental Communication and Relational Satisfaction in Ex-Spousal Dyads ( $N = 41$  dyads).



Note. COPAR = Coparental communication; NRP = Nonresidential Parent.

†  $p = .06$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Figure 4.** APIM of Supportive Coparental Communication with Residential Stepparents and Relational Satisfaction in Ex-Spousal Dyads ( $N = 41$  dyads).

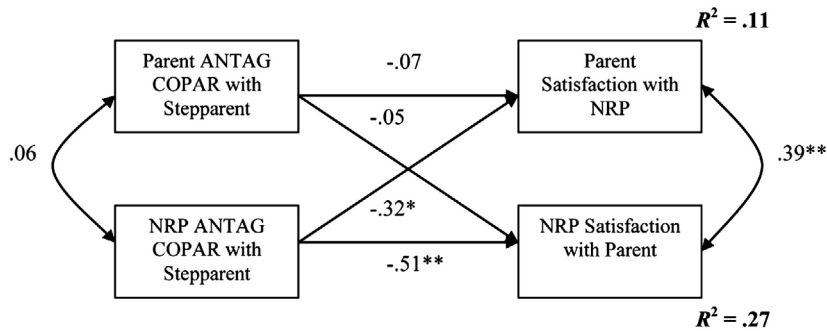
coparental communication with stepparents to residential parents' relational satisfaction ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $z = 2.29$ ,  $p < .05$ ) (see Figure 4). The model accounted for 16% and 27% of the variance in residential and nonresidential parents' reports of relational satisfaction, respectively. Thus, our third hypothesis was supported.

#### ***H<sub>4</sub>: Antagonistic Coparental Communication with Stepparents and Relational Satisfaction***

Our final hypothesis predicted that nonresidential parents' reports of antagonistic coparental communication with residential stepparents would negatively predict both ex-spouses' relational satisfaction. After controlling for mutual influence in reports of relational satisfaction, the model revealed both a significant actor effect ( $\beta = -.51$ ,  $z = -3.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and a significant partner effect ( $\beta = -.32$ ,  $z = -2.03$ ,  $p < .05$ ) for nonresidential parents' reports of antagonistic coparental communication with stepparents (see Figure 5). The model accounted for 11% and 27% of the variance in residential and nonresidential parents' reports of relational satisfaction, respectively. Thus, our fourth hypothesis was supported.

## **Discussion**

Using interdependence theory, this study examined the degree to which ex-spouses' coparental communication with each other and with the residential stepparent predicted ex-spouses' relational satisfaction in the coparenting relationship. As expected, when ex-spouses perceive that they coparent in ways that are supportive and nonantagonistic, such perceptions are positively associated with their relational satisfaction. More importantly, when nonresidential parents coparent with residential stepparents in ways that are supportive and nonantagonistic, both they and their ex-spouses are likely to experience



Note. ANTAG = Antagonistic; COPAR = Coparental communication; NRP = Nonresidential Parent.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Figure 5.** APIM of Antagonistic Coparental Communication with Residential Stepparents and Relational Satisfaction in Ex-Spousal Dyads ( $N = 41$  dyads).

enhanced satisfaction in their coparenting relationship. One of the fundamental challenges facing remarried partners who are coparenting children in stepfamilies is the (re) negotiation of parental roles, power, and intimacy boundaries, particularly when former spouses (or partners) are actively coparenting (Ganong et al., 2006). To the extent that ex-spouses learn to cooperate and peacefully coordinate childrearing activities, such efforts are likely to enhance the ex-spousal relationship. Likewise, incorporating a new partner into the coparenting relationship (e.g., a residential stepparent) in ways that are supportive and nonantagonistic is likely to benefit both ex-spouses and the stepfamily as a whole. Consequently, these results further our understanding of coparenting relationships in stepfamilies by illustrating the interdependence and covariation of coparental interests among ex-spouses.

Our first two hypotheses predicted that ex-spouses' reports of quality coparental communication (i.e., supportive and nonantagonistic) would be positively associated with their satisfaction in the coparenting relationship and, indeed, such was the case. When former spouses communicate in ways that are understanding and supportive of each other's parenting attempts, and when they are able to rely on each other as a resource in raising the children, such efforts are likely to enhance the satisfaction that both parents feel in their coparenting relationship. At stake in this process is rebuilding and maintaining a sense of trust in one's former partner to continue parenting in ways that promote the growth and resilience of the children. Of course, reestablishing this sense of trust can be quite difficult when former partners still feel anger and resentment from the events that led to the dissolution of the marriage (or partnership). As Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) noted, interparental hostility and a general distrust of a former partner's parenting abilities are factors that undermine ex-spouses' abilities to develop cooperative and supportive coparenting relationships. Schrodt et al. (2006) found, however, that coparents who were



able to negotiate and coordinate their childrearing activities in lieu of the specific guidelines set forth in the divorce decree developed a sense of trust in the coparenting efforts of their former spouses. Thus, the keys to developing communication patterns that support the coparenting efforts of a former spouse, and thus enhance both coparents' satisfaction, may be to remain flexible and to demonstrate a willingness to negotiate the implicit and explicit rules that ex-spouses agree to abide by as they continue raising their children across different households.

That being said, the results of our research question provided only modest evidence to suggest that ex-spouses' (i.e., residential parents') reports of satisfaction vary as a function of their coparenting partner's reports of coparental communication quality (i.e., antagonistic communication). In other words, the satisfaction that ex-spouses derive from their coparental communication emanates primarily from their own abilities to seek support and cooperation from their former partners when need be, rather than from their former partner's perceptions that he or she may do the same. Given that the stepfamilies in our sample had been formed for an average of nearly 10 years, one explanation for these results may be that most of the coparents in our sample had established parallel patterns of coparenting (cf. Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Drawing from established stepfamilies, for instance, Braithwaite et al. (2003) noted that the coparents in their sample recorded very "business-like" interactions in their diaries that were focused primarily on the children and characterized by relatively low levels of conflict and tension. Likewise, the divorce process signifies for many the end of their concerns over what their former partners think, and, thus, ex-spouses may only be concerned with the level of support and cooperation they receive from their former partners when they themselves are in need of coparenting help. This, in turn, further supports the idea of a "separate togetherness" that ex-spouses must negotiate as they redefine power and intimacy boundaries (Graham, 1997, 2003); "separate" in the sense that they are no longer intimate partners, but "together" in the sense that they are coparenting partners invested in the health and well-being of their children.

The second, but perhaps more important, goal of our investigation was to test the extent to which ex-spouses' relational satisfaction varied as a function of their coparental communication with the residential parent's new partner (i.e., the stepparent) (H<sub>3</sub> and H<sub>4</sub>). The results confirmed our expectations and are meaningful given that they illustrate empirically the interdependence that exists among ex-spouses and the residential stepparent in a stepfamily system. Specifically, part of a residential parent's satisfaction with his or her former spouse (or partner) may be contingent upon the former spouse's willingness to support (or undermine) the residential parent's new partner in his or her coparenting activities in the stepfamily system. Ganong et al. (2006) argued that remarriages occur and are maintained under the watchful eyes of former spouses who hold a vested interest in the quality and stability of the stepfamily system. Although relationships with former spouses can problematize the establishment of boundaries around the remarried dyad (Coleman, Ganong, & Weaver, 2001), given the results of our study, non-residential parents who are inclined to interfere with their ex-spouse's new relationship

may need to consider carefully the (un)intended consequences of their actions. In other words, the nonresidential parent-child relationship may also unfold under the watchful eyes of residential parents and stepparents, who hold an equally vested interest in the quality and stability of their own household. To the extent that residential parents (which are most often residential mothers) act as gatekeepers in either facilitating or hindering their ex-spouse's involvement as a coparent (e.g., Sobolewski & King, 2005), nonresidential parents' access and involvement with their children may depend on their abilities to develop and sustain cooperative coparenting relationships with their ex-spouse's new partner. Understandably, this is no simple task given that some nonresidential parents may struggle with the fear of being replaced by the stepparent as a parent in the family (Miller, 2009), as well as with residual anger and resentment from the divorce (Graham, 1997; Masheter, 1991).

Theoretically, the results of this study provide at least two implications worth noting. First, the results extend interdependence theory by suggesting that ex-spouses continue to share a covariation of coparental interests long after their divorce, and that such interests are impacted by the presence of a third coparenting partner (e.g., a residential stepparent) in the stepfamily. Few postdivorce interactions have greater potential to be tension filled and conflict ridden than the interactions that occur between ex-spouses or between a nonresidential parent and a residential stepparent. Yet, how ex-spouses and their new partner(s) interact and function together as coparents may hold tremendous promise (or unfortunate consequences) for the future development, growth, and resiliency of the stepfamily. To the extent that ex-spouses can transform their former marital relationship into a supportive coparenting relationship postdivorce, and to the extent that nonresidential parents can build a modicum of trust and respect for the stepparent who may be called upon to help raise his or her children by the residential parent, such efforts are likely to enhance the satisfaction and general well-being of both children and adults in the family. Second, the results further highlight a growing consensus in the stepfamily literature that the stepparent role is not only what primarily distinguishes stepfamilies from other family types (including postdivorce families) (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999; Schrodt, 2006) but that coparenting relationships with stepparents are likely to influence the quality of the ex-spousal relationship, and perhaps to a lesser degree, the nonresidential parent-child relationship. In fact, one of the key contributions of this study is empirical evidence demonstrating the relational interdependence that exists within the parent-stepparent-nonresidential parent triad.

Of course, these findings should be interpreted with caution given the inherent limitations of the research design. For example, the use of purposive sampling and the cross-sectional nature of our research represent limitations. Although every effort was made to collect data from as many ex-spouses as possible, understandably, our sample size was modest given that ex-spousal relationships in established stepfamilies are often tenuous at best. Our sample was also comprised primarily of residential mothers and nonresidential fathers (75%). While this is consistent with larger national trends (e.g., Sobolewski & King, 2005), continued research examining the role that residential fathers and

stepmothers play in facilitating (or hindering) coparenting relationships with nonresidential mothers is needed. Researchers might address these limitations by collecting data from multiple coparenting partners within simple and complex stepfamily systems at different points in time. Researchers might also incorporate the perspective of children in stepfamilies. Indeed, there is a growing body of research documenting the parental behaviors that exacerbate children's feelings of being caught between their parents (e.g., Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), and antagonistic coparental communication may heighten such feelings of triangulation in children. Likewise, qualitative investigations of coparental communication in stepfamilies may yield further insights into the meanings that ex-spouses assign to supportive and antagonistic coparenting behaviors, as well as the practical implications of the patterns reported here. Such investigations hold promise for enhancing our understanding of how coparental interactions support (or undermine) healthy stepfamily functioning.

## Note

- [1] According to Rusbult and Van Lange (2003), the interdependence structure includes two tools from classic game theory, the *outcome matrix* and the *transition list*. An outcome matrix depicts interdependence patterns involving two persons, each of whom can enact either of two behaviors, producing four combinations representing the consequences of the persons' choices in terms of outcomes for Persons A and B. As Kelley and Thibaut (1978) noted, a transition list complements an outcome matrix by specifying the means by which two people proceed from one pattern of interdependence to another. For further information on interdependence structures and processes, see Rusbult and Van Lange (2003).

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