

2017

# The experiences of parenting coordinators working with couples engaged in intimate partner violence

Ann M. Ordway  
*Walden University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations>

 Part of the [Counseling Psychology Commons](#)

---

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies Collection at ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu](mailto:ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu).

# Walden University

College of Counselor Education & Supervision

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Ann Ordway

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

## Review Committee

Dr. Mark Stauffer, Committee Chairperson, Counselor Education and Supervision  
Faculty

Dr. Stacey Reicherzer, Committee Member, Counselor Education and Supervision  
Faculty

Dr. Laura Haddock, University Reviewer, Counselor Education and Supervision Faculty

Chief Academic Officer  
Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2017

Abstract

Experiences of Parenting Coordinators Working With Couples Engaged in Intimate

Partner Violence

by

Ann M. Ordway

MA/EdS, Seton Hall University, 2007

JD, Seton Hall University School of Law, 1990

BA, Seton Hall University, 1987

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

April 2017

## Abstract

In families where parents present with intimate partner violence dynamics, courts routinely impose restraints restricting communications between those parents. However, the same courts also routinely fashion arrangements whereby those same parents share custody of their children. Children in families with this dynamic are often used as communication facilitators and triangulated by parental conflict. This grounded theory study generated a theory about parenting coordination work with high conflict couples with intimate partner violence dynamics. This theory may have utility for parenting coordinators working more effectively with the described population. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 professional parenting coordinators who have worked with high conflict parents with intimate partner violence. The qualitative data collected were analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding procedures with the additional use of research/mentor triangulation and researcher journaling. Results of this study yielded adaptive parenting coordination for intimate partner violence theory (APCIPV). This theory incorporates findings that specific modifications to the parenting coordination process, along with a concentrated effort to implement structured communication techniques and focused monitoring of exchanges between the parties can lead to coparenting despite the intimate partner violence dynamic. Further, it was revealed that high conflict parents, in general, often present with and report many of the same problematic behaviors even without a formal adjudication of domestic violence. Findings from this study can serve as an evidence basis for promoting the use of parenting coordinators as communication facilitators between high conflict parents with intimate partner violence to remove children from familial triangulation.

Experiences of Parenting Coordinators Working With Couples Engaged in Intimate

Partner Violence

by

Ann M. Ordway

JD, Seton Hall University School of Law, 1990

MA/EdS, Seton Hall University, 2005

BA, Seton Hall University, 1987

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

April 2017

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family—my husband, Stephen, my children, Stephen James, Christopher, Michele, Larry, Nick, Allie, Olivia, Shawn, and Lamar. You are my inspiration. Everything I do—I do for all of you. And for Susan Manley and Larry Scucci—who, for a very long time, helped us prove that blended families can work when all four parents work together for the sake of their children.

It is dedicated to my father, Bryan Tyburski, who told me I could do anything I put my mind to doing, and to my mother, Marie Tyburski, who told me I couldn't, so I would put everything I had to give into proving her wrong.

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to the many families who are tortured by the dynamics of high conflict divorce, and the professionals (especially my colleagues through the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts) who help them navigate rough waters. I am humbled by the resilience of the children who are part of these families—and I wish for a world where family peace is possible and resilience not necessary.

## Acknowledgements

In many ways, this has been one of the most challenging journeys of my life. I will not say that completing a dissertation is the hardest task I have ever undertaken—but it is certainly the task during which I have faced more complications, twists and turns, and tests of strength than with anything else I have ever done in my life. It is probably also the only thing in my life I almost didn't finish. There have been many times over the last few years when I have considered giving up—yet, here I am. This has been an exercise in self-discovery. I am stronger than I thought I was.

Thank you to the many voices of friendship and support who never let me quit. I would like to begin my acknowledgments with an expression of gratitude to Dr. Mark Stauffer, my chair, and Dr. Stacey Reicherzer, my methodologist, for encouragement, constructive feedback, an abundance of patience, and undying support. I so appreciate that you both said just the right things to keep me going. Thank you to my dearest friend, Dr. Ruth Moore. It is hard to believe I met you during this process when it feels like I have known you my whole life. You laughed with me, cried with me, and validated me when I needed it most. You have become so much more than my research and writing partner. You are like my sister—and I am ever so grateful that you are in my life. I appreciate all of the many Walden professors who have guided me along the way—but I need to extend a special thank you to Dr. Brande' Flamez who has also become a very dear and amazing friend. I want to acknowledge Dr. Laura Haddock for the inspiration she has offered me, and Dr. J. Kelly Coker, Dr. David Capuzzi, Dr. Michelle Perepiczka, and Dr. Lori Ann Stretch who encouraged me and reminded me that I could do this. I am also grateful to my Walden colleagues and friends, including but not limited to Dr.

Meredith Drew and Dr. Sharon Webb, whose friendship propelled me forward. Thank you also to my Fairleigh Dickinson colleagues (especially Dr. Anthony Tasso) and my Lamar colleagues (especially Drs. Carl and Donna Sheperis) who always saw me for who I am and what I can do rather than for what I had not yet accomplished.

I am especially grateful for my wonderful family. My husband, Stephen, took my hand and encouraged me to pursue a dream when I am not sure anyone else ever had. You believed in me, challenged me, and loved me through everything. You are my heart and I cannot imagine life without you. We travel a winding road—but there is no one I would rather travel beside—and I would not want another life. My children—all 9 of them—Stephen James, Christopher, Michele, Larry, Nick, Allie, Olivia, Shawn, and Lamar—have given meaning to my life. Through you, I understand unconditional love. You cause me to rise to new heights, and it is because of you that I endeavor to be all I can be. I am proud of each and every one of you for all of your unique personalities and the many blessings you bring. I would not trade our adventure together for anything in the world. I love being a counselor educator— but nothing I do will ever be as rewarding as being your Mom. I love you all to the moon and back.



## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	v
List of Figures .....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background .....	3
Gap in the literature .....	5
Social Change Implications .....	6
Problem Statement .....	7
Purpose of the Study .....	9
Research Questions .....	9
Theoretical and Conceptual Framework for the Study .....	9
Theoretical Foundation .....	9
Conceptual Framework .....	10
Nature of the Study .....	12
Definitions .....	15
Assumptions .....	16
Scope and Delimitations .....	18
Limitations .....	19
Significance .....	21
Summary .....	22
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	25
Literature Search Strategy .....	27
Theoretical Framework .....	29

Family Systems.....	29
Conceptual Framework.....	35
Literature Review.....	38
High Conflict Divorce.....	38
Influence on Children.....	41
Domestic Violence Dynamics.....	45
Parenting Coordination.....	56
What it is.....	56
How it works.....	58
Training.....	62
Efficacy (empirical studies and qualitative studies).....	64
Summary and Conclusions.....	67
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	71
Research Design and Rationale.....	73
Role of the Researcher.....	75
Methodology.....	77
Participant Selection Logic.....	78
Instrumentation.....	80
Procedure for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection.....	82
Data Analysis Plan.....	84
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	87
Ethical Procedures.....	87
Summary.....	88

Chapter 4: Results .....	96
Introduction .....	96
Settings .....	98
Demographics .....	99
Data Collection .....	102
Evidence of Trustworthiness .....	105
Data Analysis .....	107
Description of Four Main Categories .....	110
Impact of Journaling .....	115
Data Analysis Results .....	116
Susan .....	119
Marie .....	124
Penny .....	128
Grace .....	131
Wendy .....	135
Tina .....	139
Scott .....	142
Henry .....	145
Rodney .....	149
Grayson .....	152
Theoretical Concept .....	155
Summary .....	167
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations .....	169

Introduction.....	169
Interpretation of the Findings.....	176
Applicability of Structural and Family Systems Theories on the Data.....	181
Maximizing the Benefits While Minimizing the Risks.....	187
Limitations of the Study.....	188
Recommendations.....	194
Implications.....	196
Conclusions.....	199
References.....	186
Appendix I: Interview Protocol .....	202

List of Tables

Table 1. Underlying Professional Disciplines of Participants .....102

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Decision making model for Ipv-PC referrals .....	117
Figure 2. Adaptive intimate partner violence for parenting coordination .....	119

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The impact of divorce on children can be far-reaching, with effects including emotional, social, and psychological maladjustments (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). Pervasive conflict between parents, and the extended experience with the adversarial process in family court, magnifies the impact and prolongs the after-effects well into adulthood (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). Parents usually tend to share their children in some form of a coparenting arrangement postdivorce, and effective communication is essential for a coparenting dynamic to be successful (Sullivan, 2008). Accordingly, family court professionals have long explored alternative methods of dispute resolution designed to remove children from the center of parental conflict, with the intent of mitigating some of the negative effects created from high conflict divorce experiences (Firestone & Weinstein, 2004). Many alternative dispute resolution processes are focused on productive overall outcomes between parents based upon the theory that if parental disputes are resolved, the conflict will be lessened or even extinguished. Some cases present with added complications, such as domestic violence. When intimate partners experience violence in their relationship, communication is often restricted through the imposition of restraining orders. This can be an effective means of limiting the exposure a victim would have to the putative abuser. However, when partners have children in common and communication is necessary for coparenting, restraining orders obfuscate parenting (Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, & Bala, 2007). Children whose parents are embroiled in high conflict divorce dynamics and have also had intimate partner violence experiences can become triangulated and essentially made to be the facilitators of

communication. Accordingly, children are likely to absorb the conflict between their parents (Lee, 2001).

Parenting coordination is a dispute resolution process where the focus is on facilitating communication between the feuding parents for the purpose of exchanging information and making joint decisions for the benefit of their children (Sullivan, 2008). Parents are taught to share their views regarding their children in an effort to reach an agreement, and when they are unable to come to terms, the parenting coordinator would make a recommendation for an end result (Henry, Fieldstone, Thompson, & Treborne, 2011). Currently, some states do not allow joint interventions with couples restrained from communication due to domestic violence. However, it seems reasonable, although the intervention of a neutral third party in a facilitator role between high conflict families rather than the children would be advantageous on many levels. In a review of the literature, no studies were found that examined the role or experiences of parenting coordinators working with this population. Accordingly, in this grounded theory qualitative study, I examined the experiences of parenting coordinators working with high conflict couples with histories of domestic violence. In doing so, successful practices were identified from the responses of the sample participants for the potential development of protocols and industry standards for parenting coordinators when working with this family dynamic and in an effort to remove children from the conflict triangle.



## **Background**

Parenting coordination (PC) is an out-of-court intervention through which a trained professional works with high conflict parents during and after divorce to manage conflict and keep children out of the middle of the parental disagreement (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). Parenting coordinators are most commonly legal professionals, mental health professionals, or a hybrid of the two professional groups (Kelly, 2008). Most often, a family court judge appoints a parenting coordinator for high conflict couples, but sometimes a high conflict couple will voluntarily seek to initiate the intervention on their own. Such parents frequently return to court for resolution of their issues when they cannot resolve those issues on their own or with the assistance of trained mediators and are generally well-known to personnel and judges within their local court system. Parenting coordinators serve to manage conflict, make recommendations for the resolution of issues, educate parents regarding child development and related needs, and facilitate improved communication (Coates, Deutsch, Starnes, Sullivan, & Sydlik, 2004).

In some cases, high conflict couples also experience intimate partner violence (IPV) or domestic violence (DV). In these instances, one or both parties engage in aggressive behavior defined differently from state to state—but usually ranging from harassment to physical behavior (Ballard, Holtzworth-Munroe, Applegate, & Beck, 2011). IPV adds an additional dimension to divorce and postdivorce conflict, rendering families with these experiences even more in need of a parenting coordinator to regulate communication and to redirect attentions to the best interests of the involved children.

IPV can lead to the entry of restraining orders, which limit and sometimes eliminate contact between parties. Restraining orders, albeit necessary to address violent dynamics between some couples, can serve to complicate coparenting dynamics (Stark, 2009).

Custody arrangements are often unaffected by the existence of a restraining order (meaning that one parent is not denied custodial or parenting time rights on the basis of a restraining order; Stark, 2009). Accordingly, high conflict parents who also experience IPV are frequently expected to coparent their children, with limitations on direct contact due to the additional variable of DV (Carter, 2011). This dynamic often creates additional legal expenses and court costs, which, in turn, adds pressure of an additional financial burden for each parent and impacts the lifestyle of the family in general.

Children with high conflict parents who also have DV issues can be put in the middle of conflict more so due to the restrictions on direct communications between parents (Stark, 2009).

Children of high conflict parents are not only directly affected by parental conflict but also are triangulated as messengers, sometimes carrying vile and accusatory messages between their parents and transporting money, including child support, alimony, and reimbursements (Boyan & Termini, 2005). When restraining orders prevent the parents from communicating directly, absent a third party facilitator, the children are even more likely to emerge in this role (Warshak, 2010a). For some professionals, the very nature of what happens to children in the midst of parents embroiled in IPV dynamics should trigger a reevaluation of custody and parenting time. This is due to the significant risk that these children are destined to repeat the dynamic of their parents in the children's

own adulthood later in life (Haselschwerdt, Hardesty, & Hans, 2011). Children suffer enduring emotional impact from having become embroiled in the midst of parental crossfire. An additional consideration is that on-going, intense parental conflict negatively affects children—with the outcome sometimes manifesting as an estrangement of the children from one parent or the other (Fidler & Bala, 2010). The adult preoccupation with underlying conflict can challenge the role of secure attachment in the development of children, which in turn challenges the emotional autonomy of those children during their own adult lives (Biringen, 1994). Since PC has proven effective as a means for facilitating communication between traditional high conflict parents in an effort to successfully remove children from the middle of conflict, it stands to reason that an intervention by a third party to facilitate communication between high conflict parents with intimate violence experiences could fulfill the same purpose and would remove children from that role (Kirkland & Sullivan, 2008).

### **Gap in the Literature**

While there is significant research and scholarly literature regarding the impact of divorce on children, on DV (also referred to as IPV) dynamics, and related to the effects of domestic violence on children (Amato, 2000; Bedi & Goddard, 2007; Dill, 2005; Ordway, 2011; Stark, 2009; Warshak, 2010a), no literature was found that specifically addresses the use of PC as an intervention with families who have domestic violence dynamics. Current researchers who have not appeared to examine the experiences of professional parenting coordinators working with high conflict couples (HCC) who also have experiences of IPV. In a review of the literature, studies were not identified that

examined whether professional parenting coordinators working with this population modify the traditional intervention to meet the specialized needs of these clients and what those modifications might be. Since PC is still a relatively new intervention, the implementation of which varies from state to state, the literature on PC in general is still fairly limited and appears to be more focused on both efficacy and implementation strategies for the more traditional high conflict population.

### **Social Change Implications**

The present study is important for the further evolution of PC as an intervention with subpopulations of high conflict families and the further development of the PC intervention. Exploration of the experiences of parenting coordinators working with HCC that have also engaged in IPV elucidated the nuances of practice and further identified if and how the traditional intervention might be modified to better serve this population. Moreover, this examination could lead to the development of more comprehensive PC training to better prepare parenting coordinators to work with this specific subpopulation of high conflict families. Finally, PC is designed to reduce the impact of parental conflict on children. This study will likely serve to benefit the children of parents whose conflict rises to the level of violence—especially where the needs of those children are not currently being addressed due to a lack of research and understanding of whether IPV alters the dynamics of the traditional PC intervention.

This study is likely to be important to professional parenting coordinators who can be mental health professionals, lawyers, or hybrid professionals, judges who are seeking creative alternatives for the benefit of children in high conflict families, those

professionals who are committed within their field to the development of interventions designed to reduce and/or manage conflict and to keep families out of court, and the families who are likely to benefit from the further development of such interventions.

### **Problem Statement**

Children are significantly impacted by the acrimonious behavior of their parents in high conflict divorce cases (Carter, 2011). Specifically, children are put in the middle, experiencing divided loyalties and a sense that they must choose one parent over the other (Warshak, 2010a). The overall impact of high conflict divorce is likely to increase in cases where the parents have also experienced IPV as a further manifestation of the conflict (Carter, 2011). DV cases frequently involve the application by one party or the other, and sometimes both, for a restraining order. If granted, a restraining order, known as an order of protection in some jurisdictions, results in restrictions or limitations on the contact between the parties. In many jurisdictions, IPV between parents and the existence of a restraining order has little or no impact on the outcome of custody determinations in those families. In other words, parents who are instructed to have little or no contact with one another are also instructed to coparent their children. The legal system reinforces a double-bind; they cannot be together, but they must. Coparenting requires the exchange of necessary information regarding common children and joint decision-making regarding the health, education, and general welfare of those children. When parents cannot communicate, children are often put in the middle of the conflict as messengers, confidants, and conduits for the communication the parents cannot engage in directly (Kelly, 2008).

The presenting social problem is that children of divorced or divorcing high conflict parents, who have experienced IPV, do not have the same resources as children whose high conflict parents have not experienced IPV, such as mediation or family counseling—thereby causing the children from violent households to absorb the conflict due to restraints against direct communication between their parents. The presenting research problem is the gap in the literature regarding the experiences of parenting coordinators working with high conflict parents engaged in IPV, with further examination of whether the traditional intervention is modified to address the nuances of this population, and how. Due to the sensitive nature of the relationship between coparents who have experienced IPV and the empirical evidence of the negative impact of that relationship on the children of those parents, there is a need for an increased understanding of how the PC intervention is or can be used to reduce or alleviate the detrimental effects on children caught in these parental dynamics. While this does not represent the gap in the literature, the statement summarizes the meaning of the gap and the importance of exploring this issue.

Joint interventions with couples who have experienced IPV are controversial (Greenberg, 2011). Accordingly, in some jurisdictions, New Jersey being one, interventions such as PC cannot be court-ordered where there are preexisting domestic violence issues. Other factions of researchers and professionals have considered the need for further and more careful scrutiny of IPV allegations, recognizing the limitations restraining orders can place on joint interventions and other professional assistance that might otherwise benefit the family (Gould, Martindale, & Eidman, 2008). The research

evidences a significant negative impact upon children caught in a high conflict dynamic between their parents, and more so when the dynamic also includes domestic violence (Greenberg, 2011). While researchers have suggested a further review of the role of DV in the PC process, the topic has not yet been explored. There is currently no research on point regarding the experiences of parenting coordinators working with HCC who also have IPV histories and similarly no research on how such cases should be approached most effectively in the context of PC.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In this qualitative grounded theory study, I examined the experiences of parenting coordinators working with families who have also had IPV experiences. The purpose of this study is the development of a theory regarding the use of PC as an appropriate intervention with high conflict parents with IPV experiences. This research can be used as an evidence basis to address several underlying issues related to high conflict families with IPV histories.

### **Research Questions**

How do parenting coordinators work with HCC who experience intimate partner violence (IPV)?

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework for the Study**

#### **Theoretical Foundation**

PC is essentially rooted in structural family theory, which focuses on the role of each individual within the group as influencing the functioning of the unit as a whole (Carter, 2011). From the structural and systemic perspective, the therapist, and in this

case parenting coordinator, takes a fairly active role in facilitating change within the family either by integrating within the family system, or by participating in a form of triangulation, which allows the PC to balance the couple dynamic more effectively (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). A secondary theoretical concept is known as parallel parenting (Carter, 2011; Sullivan, 2008). The purpose of parallel parenting is to facilitate communications through new methods in an effort to allow the parents to disengage and participate only in necessary communication regarding the exchange of information and decision-making for the benefit of their children (Carter, 2011).

This study draws from the Aspirational Guidelines developed in 2003 by a task force of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC). The AFCC guidelines were the result of a comprehensive analysis of practices primarily in the United States and Canada for conflict management with high conflict families. Essentially, the AFCC Task Force created aspirational guidelines for PC for the establishment of credibility and validity for PC as a professional practice (AFCC, 2003). These relate to the current study in that these guidelines form the basis for core practice requirements and ethical practice in the field and will often serve as a guide for how PC is implemented regardless of the population with which the parenting coordinator is working.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Grounded theory comes out of the constructivist approach (Creswell, 2007). Specifically, a constructivist subscribes to an emphasis on diverse perspectives and the complexities associated with different views and approaches (Charmaz, 2006). A



constructivist approach is more flexible in that my view and experience as the researcher plays a role in the evolution of the theory developed (Charmaz, 2006). Ultimately, grounded theory through a constructivist lens departs from the traditional grounded theory approach of Strauss and Corbin (1990) and allows for a more active and participatory role by the researcher. Through a constructivist lens, the researcher determines the themes and patterns being sought through the research and embraces rich opportunities for observation, interpretation, and discovery during the process (Charmaz, 2006). Whiting, Smith, Oka, and Karakurt (2012), for example, underscored that a constructivist approach allowed them to examine the sense of safety in intimate relationships through their study by revealing one angle, not the only angle, of perspective from participants, thus recognizing that there may be more than one way to interpret data.

The flexibility of the Charmaz (2006) approach to grounded theory leaves open the possibilities for additional research in the field to address the inconclusiveness of the conclusions developed by the researcher through the lens of the researcher's own experiences. As a parenting coordinator practicing in the field and working with the described population, my own experiences, if not addressed by sample participants, could bring about additional curiosity and identify further avenues for additional exploration.

Grounded theory develops sampling toward the formation of a theory rather than from the perspective of creating a representative population (Charmaz, 2006), and accordingly, the specific sample developed for this research study was intended to provide the basis for the evolution of a theory on specifically how PCs are actually

working with this population and how others might implement the PC process for work with high conflict families with IPV experiences in the future.

### **Nature of the Study**

This study was qualitative, with a grounded theory design. PC is still a new phenomenon, and there is still very limited research regarding the intervention or its effectiveness. It would be possible to explore the experiences of parenting coordinators with HCC with IPV histories from a phenomenological perspective. However, with the intention of seeking to create social change for the children affected by familial dynamics with parents falling into the described category, the grounded theory approach was better suited for the defined purpose. The research regarding effectiveness of PC from the perspective of the participants (i.e., the couples ordered to participant) is virtually nonexistent. Researchers are just beginning to seek feedback from couples involved in the process, and most research to date has been focused on the feedback from the professionals involved, including lawyers, judges, and parenting coordinators rather than the parties receiving services.

In some states, courts are restricted from ordering joint interventions in cases where there is DV (Levin & Miller, 2003). Participation in joint interventions, therefore, is strictly voluntary. Accordingly, considerations of complications that might arise if couples were mandated by courts to participate in PC were not included and I limited the research to work with couples who have agreed to participate with PC notwithstanding the existence of a restraining order.

From a grounded theory perspective, the intent was to generate a theory regarding the mechanisms of PC as an intervention with the described population (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Due to the existing research regarding the appropriateness of joint interventions with couples experiencing IPV, I am aware that this is a controversial topic. Though I had a baseline theory regarding the appropriateness of PC in this context, I was not sure that the outcome of the research would ultimately support my belief. I viewed a grounded theory approach as beneficial to the generation of a theory about how PC functions in the context of work with IPV couples, but more importantly about how the intervention is modified from use with traditional high conflict families to best fit the described population. Ultimately, grounded theory allowed for an active and participatory role for the development of a theory that is likely to benefit the populations served by the PC intervention and also the professionals who provide the intervention as guidelines for how to do the work (Charmaz, 2006). My role as a professional coordinator added a dimension to the identification of themes and patterns due to a unique understanding of the field that can only come from having been a practitioner in the field though not a participant in the study.

This qualitative study was designed to develop a theory regarding the use of PC as an intervention with high conflict parents engaged in IPV. A phenomenological study might have been beneficial for considering the experiences of parenting coordinators with the identified subpopulation of high conflict parents, but a phenomenological study would not have lent itself to the development of a theory of how best to approach PC work with this population. Moreover, because the nuances associated with the described

population suggest the need for an intervention to address necessary, but often disallowed communications between high conflict parents due to DV and restraining orders, the development of a methodology and process for work with this population proved prudent.

Through a grounded theory study, I explored the experiences of my participants—in this case, professional parenting coordinators regarding PC as an intervention with HCC who have also experienced IPV—to discover a theory about the phenomenon involved (Charmaz, 2006). The sample was a defined set of professional parenting coordinators who have worked with this population and have experiences to share about how they have or might have modified the PC intervention to make the PC process more effective. Sample participants were all professional parenting coordinators with experience working with HCC with IPV histories. They all have graduate-level degrees in their primary professional disciplines. It is presumed that each professional has received standard training, and likely through AFCC since all participants are members of AFCC. Due to restrictions imposed by the Administrative Offices of the Courts in New Jersey, it was also presumed that the IPV clients agreed to participate in the PC process as noted above and were not mandated to the process.

Theoretical sampling as an approach allowed me to define the characteristics of my sample for the purpose of collecting the data I needed for the evolution of a theory, rather than a random sampling approach, which would have likely yielded unfocused data (Charmaz, 2006). The data collection was controlled by the emerging theory and was refined as the theory emerged (Charmaz, 2006). For example, since parenting coordinators come from different primary professional disciplines, each discipline

represents a subgroup through which the approach to PC practices with the identified population were explored. The diversity among my subcategories offered a broader range of response to test the saturation level of categories within my analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

### **Definitions**

The following definitions shall guide the reader of this study:

*Family systems approach:* Consideration of family dynamics through a view of the family members as part of both subsystems and also as part of a greater system (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

*High conflict divorce:* A process for the dissolution of marriage manifesting with pervasive conflict between the participating spouses, involving multiple court interventions regarding a variety of issues, not the least of which are custody and parenting (Henry, Fieldstone, Thompson, & Treborne, 2011).

*High conflict parents:* The participants in high conflict divorce who also share a child or children in common, where some of the issues presented to the courts focus exclusively or primarily on their offspring (Henry et al., 2011).

*Intimate partner violence (IPV):* Behavior where one or both parties in a romantic relationship engage in aggressive behavior (defined differently in different States—but usually ranging from harassment to physical behavior; Ballard et al., 2011). Also synonymous with *domestic violence*, this term refers to physical, verbal and nonverbal, sexual, and/or harassing abusive conduct by one intimate partner against another, and specifically in the context of this study, partners who have a child or children in common.

*Parallel parenting:* A process by which each parent serves in the primary parenting role in their respective home, but where both parents engage in communication only for the necessary exchange of information and joint decision-making for the benefit of their child or children (Sullivan, 2008).

*Parenting coordination (PC):* “Parenting coordination is a quasi-legal, mental health, alternative dispute resolution (ADR) process that combines assessment, education, case management, conflict management and sometimes decision-making functions” (AFCC, 2003, p. 2).

*Parenting coordinator:* A legal, mental health or hybrid professional who works with high conflict families through an out-of-court intervention designed to facilitate parental communication for information sharing and decision-making for the benefit of the participants’ children, while also protecting the children involved from absorbing the conflict (Kelly, 2008).

*Structural family theory:* An integrative therapeutic approach whereby the professional integrates with the family system and seeks to facilitate change from within through the use of a therapeutic alliance with individual members of the structure and the structure as a whole (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

### **Assumptions**

The assumptions associated with this study were limited. Sample participants were all professional parenting coordinators with experience working with HCC who have IPV histories. They all have graduate-level degrees in their primary professional disciplines. It was presumed that each professional received standard training, and likely

through AFCC since all participants are members of AFCC. Due to restrictions imposed by the Administrative Offices of the Courts in New Jersey, it was also presumed that the IPV clients agreed to participate in the PC process since identified victims cannot be ordered to engage with identified perpetrators in joint interventions in the state of New Jersey.

The outcome of this study was not drastically affected by the presenting limitations and delimitations, especially due to commonalities in the general experiences of parenting coordinators identified through the research that has been done in the field. It is likely that any stated concerns regarding the safety of the professional parenting coordinator working with this population, as well as concerns regarding the safety of the participants, would be echoed by parenting coordinators throughout the United States and potentially in other international locations where PC is recognized and practiced. The circumstances under which the litigant-participants present for the PC intervention (i.e., mandated versus by consent) might play a role in observations regarding behavior and experiential reporting by sample members in an expanded study that would, in the future, include other jurisdictions where practices are different. Members of the sample, however, represented reasonable diversity within the professional PC practice, all having appropriate training and experience that added credibility to their responses. Therefore, there was a sufficient breadth of response to adequately reflect gender and professional discipline differences. Finally, my own experiences have been appropriately integrated from a qualitative, grounded theory perspective with any potential for bias in

interpretation or presentation of data being filtered through the checks and balances provided through computerized software for data interpretation.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Delimitations are factors that affect the study over which the research does have some degree of control (Creswell, 2007). While there was potential for this study to be applied to the interdisciplinary membership of the AFCC, as well as the membership of various organizations through which the PC role is fulfilled, the task would be enormous. Accordingly, for this initial grounded theory study, I elected to study only a sample from the membership of the New Jersey Chapter of the AFCC. The fine focus of the sample created some delimitation in that results may not be reflective of outcome for a broader, nationwide, or international group of professionals serving as parenting coordinators with high conflict families also experiencing IPV issues. Further nuances were identified related to additional subcategories of couples such as membership in the LGBT population, age, status as married or unmarried, or other cultural considerations. In other words, I did not assume that all presenting couples were addressed in the same manner, as nuances associated with each individual couple may play a role in the manner in which the PC process is approached and implemented by the PC. Accordingly, I did not make that assumption in the context of this study and look to further, expand future research to further explore those variables. Couples development theory was also not specifically considered in connection with this study but could also add a dimension for further research in the future.



Moreover, since the Administrative Office of the Courts, which governs and regulates the practices of the New Jersey judiciary, has limited the appointments of parenting coordinators by judges to only cases where there is no active record of DV, the sample participants represented only those parenting coordinators who had been jointly selected by the attorneys and litigants involved in the cases in which they are involved through a consent order. The existence of a consent order, in and of itself, evidences a willingness of the litigant-participants to be involved with PC, which might impact the nature of their behavior in the context of work with the parenting coordinators. For example, litigants who are mandated to participate in PC might present with greater resistance and therefore with greater evidence of anger and less self-regulation with regard to the spouse or former spouse. Consent to participate in the PC process, in contrast, is likely to result in better behavior and greater investment by the litigants with and in front of the parenting coordinator—which was a consideration when interpreting the responses of parenting coordinators regarding their experiences with the described population in the context of this study.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are generally constraints beyond the researcher's control, which have the potential to affect outcome. Traditionally, in the context of grounded theory, researchers were challenged to set aside their own experiences and understandings so a theory could emerge from the collected data in its purest form (Creswell, 2007). However, more recently, grounded theory researchers have been encouraged to embrace their own experiences as adding to the richness of the data and the intensity of

interpretation (Charmaz, 2006). Additionally, grounded theory researchers must determine when data are sufficiently saturated so as to give life to a theory that is rich with supporting detail (Creswell, 2007). The theory can be tested through discriminant sampling, through which a researcher makes inquiry of other individuals not in the original sample to see if the theory applies outside the original sample population (Creswell, 2007). The constructivist approach adapted by Charmaz (2006) provides greater flexibility for the researcher and therefore fewer limitations for the overall application of grounded theory as a research approach (Creswell, 2007).

There was a potential for bias resulting from my own role as a parenting coordinator and professional experiences with high conflict parents who have also experienced DV. My own experiences as a hybrid professional (attorney and counselor) have allowed me to become more comfortable over the years in terms of working with DV clients, both perpetrators and victims, such that I am perhaps desensitized to some of the safety implications for professionals working with DV couples. Even with consent from the litigants, some professional parenting coordinators opt not to work with this population at all due to rational concern for their own safety and for the safety of the identified victim.

I addressed potential limitations associated with my own experiences by using NVIVO-10 software as a check on my analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I also reduced my own bias by referencing careful notes and audio recordings of the participant-responses, member checking with participants to ensure the accuracy of my interpretive assertions, as well as triangulating my results with my methodologist through

an interanalytic process. The nuances of state laws regarding whether joint interventions are even permitted with this population could present a limitation in that parenting coordinators who practice in states that do not allow joint interventions with IPV couples would be excluded from this study. The requirements of my doctoral program also required a connection in the research study to the counseling field—which could have limited diversity and potentially have outcome connected only to the views of counselors serving in the PC role. This was not the case since, by comparison, the counseling profession is not currently well represented in the PC field. NVivo10 also assisted with quality by offering neutral and mechanistic cross-referencing and the identification of patterns and themes as a verification of my own hand-coding process.

### **Significance**

This study is an original contribution to the counseling field, and specifically to the field of PC in that the use of the PC as an intervention with high conflict parents with histories of IPV has not been specifically studied. Furthermore, the contribution has the potential of being significant in terms of the evolution of protocols for professional involvement with families in the identified category.

From a practical perspective, this study can lead to the development of advanced training for parenting coordinators addressing the needs of this subpopulation of high conflict parents, as well as a practice model. From a social change perspective, I explored whether parenting coordinators believe PC is an effective intervention for HCC engaged in IPV. Specifically, children whose parents are restrained from communicating directly with one another as a result of DV frequently rely on their children to pass

messages, convey information, make demands for payment or transmit payment.

Children caught in these family dynamics often absorb potential outbursts from each parent about the other—especially when those parents cannot rage at one another. A parenting coordinator serves to facilitate communications between high conflict parents. Where parents cannot communicate directly with one another due to restraints, the parenting coordinator could potentially serve to convey information and filter negative exchanges through a triadic communication model. Through this study, with the specific sample, it was determined that PC is generally an effective intervention with this population. A triadic approach, whereby a parenting coordinator replaces the children as the messengers and facilitates communication between the parents as a neutral, the high conflict dynamic could be altered and the circumstances of the children could be improved. This study further served to identify ways in which the PC intervention could be refined to address the need of this subpopulation of high conflict parents.

### **Summary**

The impact of parental conflict before, during, and after divorce on children is long-term and significant (Amato, 2000). IPV further complicates the exposure of children to conflict and often results in the children absorbing the conflict more intensely than in cases where IPV is not present between feuding parents (Lee, 2001). This study resulted in evidence of hope for families in the high conflict categories, who are also engaged in IPV, that a tailored intervention would be available so that children do not have to absorb the conflict in the manner the research currently describes. While this is not intended to be a panacea, the reduction of conflict is likely to represent an

improvement in conditions for children in high conflict divorce, where IPV is also a factor. There is little question that additional research is needed to develop effective methods for working with this specific subpopulation of high conflict parents (Hardesty & Chung, 2006). The use of PC in cases with IPV essentially creates a scenario whereby a trained professional takes the place of the child in the communication triad. This new dynamic removes the child as the communication facilitator between two parents restrained from direct communication, and instead allows for a professional intervention for information sharing and joint decision making where appropriate. The parenting coordinator manages the conflict by issuing recommendations when the parents cannot otherwise agree, thus endeavoring to remove the children from the unsettled state which is created by uncertainty and indecision (Hayes, 2010). With proper tailoring to the PC intervention in response to feedback and experiential reports from practicing professionals in the field, the needs of high conflict families with DV experiences can be met more effectively and for the benefit of the children involved.

A significant implication for social change is simply that families in the described population would not have to rely solely on litigation or the court systems for resolution of their disputes, thereby affording these families with an avenue for financial relief from burdensome litigation costs, as well as opportunities for effective communication as coparents. Accordingly, children whose parents have been involved with DV would have a greater opportunity to maintain healthy relationships with both parents because one parent will not have to be marginalized or eliminated from the parenting process. In addition, it was revealed that the parenting coordinators in this context also served as a

buffer for the identified victim, so the necessary communication regarding common children was not always an opportunity for the perpetuation of the abusive dynamic. Parenting coordinators also served as educators and filters for identified perpetrators so as to facilitate those perpetrators having input regarding their children in a more appropriate manner than when such input remains uncorrected and unfiltered. Again, the process is not perfect and this study was a snapshot, which revealed a framework of methodology to improve family dynamics, not necessarily transform them.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2007), in excess of 1.2 million divorces occur annually, with a notable percentage including divorces among couples with children. Approximately an average of about 1 in 5 adults is or has been divorced (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Divorce has essentially become a normative event that no longer stands out as extraordinary, but nevertheless carries with it extraordinary effects (Henry et al., 2011). It is widely accepted that divorce, in general, creates a significant impact for children and their parents; however, children can often recover or emerge from the divorce experience relatively unscathed, depending largely upon the specific behavior of their parents during the process of separation, and before, during, and following divorce (Amato, 2003; Henry et al., 2011).

High conflict divorce, by its very nature, takes the experience to another level due to on-going negative behavior by parents and what seems to be an inability to disengage. Kelly (2002) described high conflict divorce as verbal battling and often-antagonistic exchanges between parents that place children firmly in the midst of personal agendas and angry feelings. While only a relatively small percentage of the overall national divorce statistics have been classified as high conflict, it is this small percentage of families that takes up the majority of available resources available through the court and through professionals who work with the courts in various capacities for the benefit of these families (Neff & Cooper, 2004). When children are embroiled in long-lasting, pervasive, and intense parental conflict, the long-term effects can be devastating, to include an impact on grades, focus, socialization, behavior, and the ability to sustain

healthy romantic partnerships as adults (Boyan & Termini, 2005; Firestone & Weinstein, 2004; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Kelly, 2002). When the classification of high conflict is further intensified through IPV experiences between parents, particularly those to which the children are exposed, the experience the negative impact for those children is further complicated (Ordway, 2011).

PC has been introduced by court systems throughout the United States as an alternative dispute resolution technique designed to reduce and/or manage parental conflict, to teach modified communication methods for coparenting, and to essentially remove children from the middle of conflict. When IPV exists, it is not uncommon for the court to become involved through domestic violence proceedings and to issue a restraining order. Restraining orders restrict or prevent direct contact and communication between the set of parents who continue to retain joint custody of their children (Jaffe & Crooks, 2007). The inability to communicate in the context of a joint parenting arrangement carries positive and negative effects. Of course, there is the obvious benefit of protection for the individual recognized by the court as an identified victim (Jaffe & Crooks, 2007). However, coparenting is very limited and sometimes stifled when there is no communication, no ability to share information, and no ability to jointly make decisions.

Children caught in family dynamics of this kind are often put in the untenable position of having to convey messages between parents and to facilitate necessary discourse to accomplish parenting tasks, which would otherwise potentially not be accomplished at all (Boyan & Termini, 2005; Kirkland, 2004). Along with necessary



communication, children become go-betweens and occasionally pawns in efforts by the identified aggressor to perpetuate the abuse dynamic. Some states, including New Jersey, do not allow courts to order any type of joint professional intervention when there is a finding of DV in the presenting case. Thus, there is virtually no recourse for facilitated coparenting and the role of the children as messengers and pawns is perpetuated. The American Psychological Association Guidelines (2012) for PC include an acknowledgement that, due to power imbalances and safety risks, families with DV issues might not be appropriate candidates for PC and then cautions practitioners to evaluate risk factors before proceeding. My research is devoted to exploring and identifying a theory based upon the experiences of professional parenting coordinators working with this population to determine how PC might be beneficial to families, and especially the children, caught in the fibers of IPV, divorce, and coparenting dynamics.

This chapter includes a review of the literature related to the family systems approach to family therapy, concepts of familial triangulation, enmeshment, and divided loyalty, as well as the impact of common and high conflict divorce dynamics on the children involved. In the literature review, I explored IPV experiences, the evolution of PC as a strategic alternative dispute resolution technique with high conflict parents, and the use of PC with high conflict families also engaged in IPV dynamics.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

A thorough search was conducted in an effort to identify relevant literature. Regarding the dynamics of the divorce experience and the overall impact on families more broadly, I turned first to specific, general texts used to educate mental health

professionals regarding family systems therapeutic work and family dynamics and to review the theories presented by key theorists in the field, such as Minuchin and Bowen. Thereafter, the membership resource database for the AFCC served as an expeditious resource for identifying literature focused on PC and the evolution of the intervention for use with high conflict families. Much of the existing research and literature has been published through and by members of AFCC, with many of the most critical articles having been published in the AFCC signature peer review journal, *The Family Court Review*. Moreover, AFCC has proven an invaluable resource in that several annual and regional conferences have incorporated live presentations by several of the authors of key articles, including but not limited to Sullivan, Kelly, Carter, and Coates, JD. These conferences have provided a unique opportunity to hear directly from vital researchers and practicing professionals in the field for a deeper exploration of their published work. Participation in the New Jersey Parenting Coordination Roundtable added enlightenment through the identification and discussion of the newest published research and materials, as well as legislative efforts and unpublished research in progress in New Jersey, to include current work by the New Jersey State Bar Association, Family Law Executive Committee regarding the role of PC in this state. It was also beneficial to have completed extensive training through AFCC and other organizations and to have read widely regarding PC in furtherance of my own practice in this field.

Further exploration of databases including PsychINFO, SocINDEX, and Google Scholar yielded additional scholarly material particularly regarding on the impact of DV on families, but often led back to material already uncovered through the preliminary

searches through identified journals and organizations known to have contributed significantly to the field. Additionally, I searched journals known to be focused on family counseling and family-related research, to include *The Family Journal*, *The Journal of Child Custody*, *The Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Family Relations*, and *The Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, as well as specific texts also located through an internet search related to specific topics. Key words and phrases used in the search process included *divorce dynamics*, *coparenting*, *impact of divorce on children*, *domestic violence*, *intimate partner violence*, *impact of domestic violence on children*, *parenting coordination*, *parenting coordinator*, *parenting coordination working with domestic violence*, and *intimate partner violence*. While there is a lot of research regarding more general concepts such as the interface between divorce, DV and the effects on children, there is still limited research regarding PC. Though there is a fairly common call for additional research regarding PC and IPV (Hass, 2014), most commentary has been superficial, and I have not uncovered any substantive work regarding the specific topic of my dissertation.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Family Systems**

The context of mental-health based professional work with families has drastically changed over time to include, among other things, a revision of the very definition of family. A family is an integrative system of individuals coexisting and developing together over time, with the behavior of each member of the system impacting the behavior and experiences of the other members. Each person's family

experience influences that individual's development of self-concept, cultural identities, and interrelational style, to include consideration of attachment, self-esteem, interpersonal dynamics, and the direction of future relationships (Kane, 2010). While all families are impacted in one way or another by the events they share, the experience of high conflict divorce is both an event and a transition, which carries with it a pervasive after-effect (Amato, 2003; Carter, 2011). The family systems approach forms the foundation for work as a parenting coordinator, whose job it is to facilitate and manage communications between the parents, or purported leaders of the system, in the context of a high conflict divorce experience, for the defined purpose of also reducing the negative impact of the experience for the children in that family system (Carter, 2011). There are a variety of theories supporting how to approach work with families (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004); however, for purposes of considering PC it is essential to examine only key concepts and approaches likely to prove more effective with the described population—namely, parents embroiled in high conflict divorce who have also had intimate partner violence experiences. Since this dissertation is focused on the experiences of professional parenting coordinators working with the described population rather than members of the population itself, the examination of a conceptual framework is merely foundational in nature and presented to clarify the lens through which most parenting coordinators do this work.

### **Minuchin.**

*Structural.* Minuchin (1974), a medical doctor, developed a theoretical framework for approaching work with family systems from an individualized

perspective, with the recognition that each family has its own organization, hierarchy, communication pattern, and process. While identifying flaws in the interpersonal communication patterns and functioning among members of the system is complex in that there are subsystems or subrelationships within the group (Minuchin, 1974). On one hand, as with other forms of family counseling and therapy, structural therapy intervenes by challenging the family system to make internal changes for more productive and effective subsystem relationships and better systemic functioning (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). While critics of structural therapy have suggested that the approach is too aggressive and confrontational, it has been recently suggested that these components are a part of the model's overall effectiveness (Hammond & Nichols, 2010). However, the Minuchin approach to family structural therapy is not devoid of empathy or the foundational therapeutic alliance (Hammond & Nichols, 2010). In fact, a therapeutic alliance that includes rapport, trust, and a genuine connection between client and therapist is critical for the client being willing and able to tolerate confrontation and correction (Carich & Spilman, 2010). In this respect, the role of a structural therapist is very similar to role assumed by a coordinator in a high conflict parenting situation. In terms of work with families with IPV experiences, the focus on subsystem functioning is critical. Minuchin's use of humor and ability to align with individual members of the family system without alienating others skillfully demonstrated the use of a structural approach in a manner that invites cooperation from the seemingly most resistant family members—thereby making it an ideal approach for work in PC.

*Subsystems.* Subgroups and subrelationships exist in the context of each overall family system. Generally, there is an expectation that the adult members of the family, typically the parents, will function as an executive subsystem—or the thinking and guiding force behind the functioning of the group as a whole (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). The executive subsystem usually creates and implements the rules; however, members of other subsystems may take on executive rules at times and in different contexts, such as when an older sibling implements rules while watching a younger sibling (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). The members of the executive subsystem should be able to communicate, collaborate, and develop joint decisions for the welfare of the general system. In the context of a high conflict divorce, the members of the executive subsystem, severely fractured, are unable to carry out the most basic intended functions of that subsystem. In context, while parent-child subsystems serve a purpose for defining and modeling roles, children in high conflict divorce develop boundary issues and sometimes emerge in parental roles or as caretakers for one or both parents and for other siblings. Boundaries are challenged with enmeshment or disengaged (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013) in a familial effort to block change. This can manifest in terms of divorced parents being too involved in each other's lives or perhaps not involved enough in carrying out responsibilities for children. Sibling subsystems are also impacted by high conflict divorce when roles change and siblings either align for self-preservation or fracture due to divided loyalties and parental alienation. According to Minuchin (1974), pathological family structures are those who experience increased resistance to alternatives during their most stressful times, while normal families adapt.

*Integration of therapeutic intervention.* The goals of a structural therapist include changing family rules and adjustment to a rearrangement in the structure within the family (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). Minuchin (1974) described the technique of joining the family and essentially becoming part of the system through respectful interaction, accommodating the family's style, assessing interactions, monitoring dysfunctional patterns, and then restructuring those patterns for new and more effective transactional styles. One aspect of family structural therapy that lends itself to effectiveness with high conflict divorce is the technique of absolving a party for their own behavior by attributing the behavior as a response to the action of someone else in the family structure. This technique reduces defensiveness by allowing the person to identify the problematic behavior without having to assume the blame or responsibility (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). In context, since high conflict divorce is rooted in blame and fault, through disengagement from the finger-pointing process, the parenting coordinator invites each client to look at problems in the parenting dynamic from a different perspective that is not about what that parent has done wrong but more about an opportunity to exercise some control over the impact the other person has on them and their own behavior. Simply, each parent has the ability to change the way they respond to the behavior of the other.

**Bowen.**

Bowen viewed the family as an interconnected emotional unit that was best assessed from a historical context, with a focus more on process more than content (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). Bowen examined the role of anxiety in people's lives

and noted that anxiety is heightened in response to a threat (real or imagined), which in the context of a family system is about the conflict between togetherness and individualism (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). Divorce is a transitional life event that challenges the traditional view of family and which forces a separation of the system – and is clearly anxiety provoking. It is during heightened anxiety that one or both members of the couple draw a third party into the communication through what is known as a triangle.

***Triangulation.*** When a the two-person system becomes unstable, drawing in a third party changes the dynamic – and can cause one member to feel supported in a two-against-one dynamic. Sometimes interlocking triangles emerge as one triangular relationship leads to other alliances or feuds and creates new dimensions to already existing conflict (Bowen, 1978). While the goal of the person drawing another into a triangle is increased stability, triangulation does not always increase stability – and actually sometimes creates instability for the third party (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013).

***Impact on triangulated child.*** Bowen (1978) argued that the least differentiated person, or that person least able to stand independently, is most vulnerable to being triangulated, or drawn into conflict by the feuding dyad. In the high conflict family, feuding parents are able to draw in their children, though some children are more vulnerable than others, because the children are most dependent on their parents for survival and stability.



*Role of triangulation as therapeutic intervention.* Bowen (1978) also suggested that the role of the therapist in the context of the relationship triangle could be an effective tool for promoting stability or as a means of essentially joining the dysfunctional dyad as an intervention to improve interactions for the members of the system from a vantage point of professional control. The therapist becomes an agent of change by engaging with the family members rather than reacting to the conflict and by demonstrating effective conflict resolution (Friedman, 1991). Since children are often triangulated in high conflict divorce and are given the role of middlemen and messengers, a therapist deliberately assuming this role from a professional vantage point could, in effect, replace the children in the triangle and remove the children from the crossfire of their parents' divorce dynamic. This is worthy of exploration in the context of PC with high conflict families, and particularly those also involved with intimate partner violence.

### **Conceptual Framework**

As noted in chapter 1, grounded theory stems from a constructivist approach to research (Creswell, 2007). A constructivist researcher endorses the process of fully exploring and then ascribing weight to the diverse perspectives and the intricacies associated with different perspectives and methods (Charmaz, 2006). A constructivist approach is more malleable in that my view and experience as the investigator is a piece of the process as the emerging theory evolves (Charmaz, 2006). The constructivist approach departs from the more traditional grounded theory prescription of Strauss and Corbin (1990) and sanctions a dynamic and hands-on function for the researcher, who then defines the themes and patterns being sought. The researcher also embraces

valuable openings for observation, analysis and discovery along the way (Charmaz, 2006).

Whiting, Smith, Oka, and Karakurt (2012) utilized a constructivist approach to examine the sense of safety in intimate relationships and noted that their study “produces one representation of the participants’ experience (not *the* representation) that was in part shaped by the values, questions, interpretations, and analytical decisions of all involved” (p.314). The authors focused on the interrelationships between perceptions based upon whether the relationship described was of a violent or non-violent nature (Whiting et al., 2012). As influences stemming from the constructivist lens, the researchers identified their own criteria for sample inclusion, questions posed in the semi-structured interviews, and interpretation of the relationships between themes and data (Whiting et al., 2012). In another study, Mahony, Haracz, and Williams (2012) examined how mental health occupational therapists address issues of diet with their clients. The first author in the study was an occupational therapist, who conducted the semi-structured interviews. Meaning attributed to data was “co-constructed between participants and researchers,” with the researcher’s own experiences having added to interpretation (Mahoney, Haracz, & Williams, 2012). Whiting, Oka, and Fife (2012), also utilized a constructivist approach to examine appraisal distortions and intimate partner violence, and specifically the interrelationship between perception/appraisal and treatment efficacy. The researchers recorded their own “emerging theoretical ideas and self-reflection” to enhance the trustworthiness of their emerging findings (Whiting, Oka, & Fife, 2012, p. 138). With a constructivist lens, “reality is not absolute, but is socially constructed and

that multiple realities exist that are time and context dependent,” (Mertens, 2010, p. 226). Moreover, Guba and Lincoln (2005) identified the transformative influence in constructive, whereby other research paradigms now influence the manner in which data is received and interpreted (Mertens, 2010). This thinking includes the concept that a feminist influence favors a qualitative approach to research for the added dimension multiple perspectives bring to the examination of “the complexities of women’s lives,” (Mertens, 2010, p. 227), with the recognition that pure neutrality is not always best. In the context of my research, the examination of gender perspectives associated with domestic violence issues and how professionals process such cases lends itself well to the integration of a feminist consideration with the constructivist lens. Further, the flexibility of the Charmaz (2006) approach to grounded theory leaves open the possibilities for additional research in the field to address the inconclusiveness of the initial deductions advanced by the researcher through the lens of the researcher’s own experiences.

Grounded theory can include a more purposeful approach to sampling to support the emergence of a theory rather than from the standpoint of creating a representative population (Charmaz, 2006). In other words, this approach is less rooted in the concern that identified viewpoints are representative of all professionals engaged in the PC process, but rather for the purpose of getting a sense of the viewpoints and approaches of those working as parenting coordinators as the basis for the evolution of a theory on specifically how to implement the PC process for work with high conflict families with IPV experiences.

## Literature Review

### High Conflict Divorce

As noted above separation and divorce have become “normative events despite the often harmful effects on couples, their children, and society in general” (Henry, Fieldstone, Thompson, & Treborne, 2011, p. 456). Though it was once an anomaly to discover one child in a grammar school setting whose parents were divorced, it is now almost an anomaly to identify more than a handful of children whose lives have not somehow been touched by familial conflict and the dissolution of their parents’ marriage. Simply, divorce has become common (Neff & Cooper, 2004). For many of the children whose lives are impacted by parental divorce, it is not the divorce itself, but the behavior of their parents and the level of conflict that leads to maladjustment and long-lasting negative effects (Amato, 2003). Specifically, as early as 1991, Amato and colleagues began studying the impact of divorce on children through the examination of cases involving in excess of 15,000 children at different stages of development. Through comparative analysis, Amato reviewed children in intact families against those from divorced families, and teased out differentials, which appeared to be connected to the nature of the divorce process and relationship between parents (Amato, 2003). Amato represents one of many researchers who has devoted years of researching efforts to both qualitative and quantitative studies focused on the effects of divorce and the divorce process on families (Blaisure & Geasler, 2006; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Neff & Cooper, 2004).

Exchanges between adults engaged in divorce-related conflict are characterized by exaggeration, false allegations, and defamation, along with reconstructed, often inaccurate, narratives of past events (Vangelisti, 2006). Children who are caught in the cross-fire of parental conflict frequently feel powerless to stop the conflict and are pulled into a divided loyalty or triangulation, essentially aligning with one parent or the other rather than bear the brunt of that cross-fire (Boyan & Termini, 2005; Kirkland, 2004).

Resources are available through the court systems throughout the United States which are expressly designed to assist children and their parents with transitions associated with divorce, to make decisions regarding custodial and time-sharing arrangements, and to resolve financial matters through the division of assets. Families who utilize such services productively are often able to resolve their presenting issues simply and amicably, thus reducing, but perhaps not eliminating, the far-reaching negative impact for their children (Carter, 2011). In contrast, litigation and lawyers sometimes cause more harm and actually perpetuate conflict through antagonistic exchanges and a focus on winning, albeit with an unclear notion of exactly what is won in the litigation arena (Firestone & Weinstein, 2004). Firestone and Weinstein examined flaws in the existing family court system, which seemingly perpetuate conflict, and proposed a revised system designed to promote conflict resolution from the inception (Firestone & Weinstein, 2004). Family court service professionals who devote their time and effort to resolving or successfully navigating through divorce-related conflict can experience intrinsic and extrinsic rewards when their efforts are fruitful and individual families are able to make post-divorce transitions. However, some families, identified as

*high conflict*, participate fully in the adversarial system that, as noted above, seems to exacerbate and perpetuate anger and hostility (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Neff and Cooper (2004) suggested that high conflict families make up only about 10% of the overall population with which family court professionals work. Though it is a relatively small percentage of divorcing couples that fit into this category, this small percentage seems to utilize 90% of the time of those providing resources and assistance (Henry et al., 2011; Neff & Cooper, 2004). Gross, 2008, discussed the significant financial costs for high conflict divorcing couples, who engage in extensive motion practice, frequent court appearances, and even trial. There is, of course, an additional cost to the court system, to include the salaries of court reporters, judges, and administrators, and the cost of time that could be devoted to other cases and sometimes more pressing cases. Further costs include the emotional toll associated with burnout and compassion fatigue for court personnel and the significant emotional investment of those who are direct participants as litigants going through the process.

The ethical protocols followed by professionals engaged in practice with this population are critical both because there is enormous potential for unethical professionals to take advantage of the highly vulnerable families in this category due to their susceptibility to promises of *winning* at the expense of the other party, and due to the high risk for licensing complaints and malpractice liability claims to which professionals expose themselves through this work (Barnett, 2009; Carter, 2011). High conflict parents seem to utilize the court system as a tool with which to punish one another and to prolong the inevitable end of a dysfunctional marital relationship (Coates,

Deutsch, Starnes, Sullivan, & Sydlik, 2004). Ironically, in the most intense high conflict divorces, a final judgment of dissolution does not serve to end the conflict, which continues in full force into the post-judgment phase of litigation and continues to clog the system with a stream of motions for relief regarding custody, parenting time, and support issues. Without some professional intervention outside of the court system, the highest conflict families seem to find themselves in a never-ending process that essentially fuels itself. There is a clear need for systemic reform in an effort to better protect children from the implications and direct impact of high conflict divorce, but the call for such reform is nothing new (Elrod, 2001).

#### **Influence on children.**

There are more than a million children annually involved in the dissolution of their parents' marriage, with the long term impact of those experiences being particularly traumatic in heightened conflict (Blaisure & Geasler, 2006). Kelly (2008) citing both qualitative and quantitative research she and colleagues have done over the years noted that the level of conflict between a divorcing couple is a predictor regarding the child's overall adjustment to the divorce and of negative aftermath in the child's development. Children become victims of the antagonistic exchanges between their parents, often manifested through divided loyalty and a skewed view of parents as those in need of support rather than those to whom children can turn to for support (Boyan & Termini, 2005; Firestone & Weinstein, 2004; Kirkland, 2004; Warshak, 2010a). The biggest issues in high conflict divorce are rooted in support, parenting time, and custody – all issues which directly impact and easily involve the children (Lebow & Rehart, 2006).

Children are engaged through comments about what the family can no longer afford because of the burdens of too much or too little alimony and child support; and with comments about each parent having too much or too little time with the child, causing the child to feel responsible and even guilty when they leave for parenting time or choose to remain at home. Children hear negative comments about the other parent, including comments about adult issues, ranging from adultery to suspect business practices, in an effort to cloud the children's judgment about a parent they may have previously held in high regard. Negative information about one parent is often seen as fuel for a litigation strategy for winning more money, more time, or for punishing the other parent (Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, & Bala, 2008). Further, children in these situations suffer a blow to their attachment styles and their ability to engage in healthy, long-term, adult romantic relationships and their ability to trust can be compromised (Biringen, 1994). The win-lose approach, coupled with overworked, understaffed family courts with limited resources perpetuates the conflict and leaves children to fend for themselves in the context of conflict, albeit unintentionally (Sullivan, 2008b). Custody evaluations seem to propagate the parental feud over interpretations of the best interests of the children as evidenced by the existence of dueling experts and an increase in complaints against experts in recent years (Martindale, 2007). Children become more vulnerable to added complications associated with their status as part of a high conflict family. In contrast, when parents are able to co-parent following separation and divorce, they demonstrate to their children a level of problem solving and cooperation and promote resiliency among those children (Kelly, 2007).



Complications (i.e., parental alienation, domestic violence). Even beyond superficial divided loyalty ramifications the concept of parental alienation is borne from this divided loyalty and a child's sense that a choice must be made for one parent over the other (Baker & Darnell, 2007; Baker, 2005). More specifically, children are directly influenced by the anger they experience between their parents, by the blame and finger-pointing that often comes with the high conflict divorce experience, and by each parent's need to sum up a reason for the divorce by attributing fault to the other parent (Baker & Darnell, 2007; Baker, 2005). When children are witness to these behaviors and when they overhear angry exchanges between their parents, children are swayed or guided in what to believe about what is happening in their family and are sometimes torn over which parent's version of events is the correct one (Kirkland, 2004). Therefore, rather than remain in the middle, the child may have to select a side, resist contact with the declared bad parent, or risk losing the relationship with the parent to whom the child is compelled to remain loyal (Baker, 2005; Fidler, Bala, & Saini, 2013; Moore, Ordway, & Francis, 2013). Baker, a behaviorist, in particular, has conducted substantial qualitative research through interviews with adult subjects who experienced parental alienation as children. Through the interviewing process, Baker identified commonalities associated with the behaviors of the alienating parent, the alienated parent, and the child caught in the middle, as well as long-term effects associated with the alienation experience (Baker, 2005).

Each parent's direct interaction with the child, individually, also impacts the child's relationship with that parent long-term (Dillman Taylor, Purswell, Jayne, &

Fernando, 2011; Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Dillman Taylor et al (2011) investigated parents' perceptions of the impact of Child-Parent-Relationship Therapy (CPRT) on the parent, the child, and the parent–child relationship through a mixed method approach and identified the impact parental perception of the other parent has on the perception of the child. The authors determined that the impressions and perceptions children have of one parent is directly influenced by the perceptions of the other parent, thus underscoring the impact negative rhetoric offered by an angry parent in a high conflict divorce dynamic can have on the relationship a child has with the other parent.

New programs designed to support reunification and/or relationship building between an alienated parent and the estranged children have been developed with additional consideration of the role the alienating parent plays in reconciliation efforts (Sullivan, Ward, & Deutsch, 2010; Warshak, 2010b). However, these programs are still in their infancy and research is extremely preliminary. Interestingly, developers of such programs through mostly qualitative analysis, including interview and observation, have identified the important role the alienating parent has in allowing a relational bridge to be built between the child and the estranged parent (Sullivan, Ward, Deutsch, 2010b).

High conflict parenting dynamics extend to children through the manner in which children communicate and interact with their parents (Ellis & Boyan, 2010). Children sometimes become estranged from one parent due specifically to the actions of that parent, which actions range from addiction to an extramarital affair to violence toward the child's other parent (Ellis & Boyan, 2010). Children witnessing acts of violence by one parent against the other are likely to be influenced in terms of how they view and

relate to the parent perpetuating the act of violence (Bancroft, Silverman, & Ritchie, 2012). In other words, a child's own opinion of each parent is shaped by the child's personal interactions and observations related to that parent. This differs from parental alienation where one parent contributes to or actually causes the distance between the child and the other parent, sometimes through overt behavior designed to create a rift in the parent-child relationship (Fidler & Bala, 2010).

High conflict dynamics also perpetuate enmeshment between an alienating parent and the child, whereby the child's sense of safety and security are directly connected to their relationship with that parent (Fidler, Bala, & Saini, 2013). Children experience divided loyalties and can be torn by feeling they need to align with one parent or the other in a dispute that will end with a winner and a loser (Warshak, 2010a). A parenting coordinator in a case with parental alienation can work to reframe the enmeshment by highlighting the unhealthy limitations imposed on the child by the relationship and by reinforcing the child's need for individuation in the ordinary course (Ellis & Boyan, 2010). With IPV dynamics, children sometimes align with one parent or the other, forming a unique kind of enmeshment premised on safety or protection (Bancroft, Silverman, & Ritchie, 2012).

### **Domestic Violence Dynamics**

**Added dimension to “high conflict.”** In order to fully explore consideration of the use of PC with high conflict families that also have intimate partner violence experiences, the nature and nuances of IPV must also be explored. In fact, there is evidence that IPV often involves coercive control and is not limited strictly to physical

assault or battery (Gould, Martindale, & Eidman, 2008). Stark (2009), summarized the findings of previous researchers regarding the nature of family violence and the consideration of the nuances of presenting situations by the courts. Family courts have sought to preserve the relationship between children and both parents, aligning with the suggestion that children want and need relationships with both parents (Stark, 2009). However, evidence supports the notion that domestic violence does not cease once a divorce is granted and that, in fact, a high percentage of women who have left their partners due to domestic violence are abused by that same former partner post-divorce due to contact that arises in connection with custody and parenting time arrangements (Stark, 2009). Moreover, every victim does not react the same way to his or her experiences with IPV (Meyer, 2011). Family courts and related evaluative experts and treating professionals are forced to cull out and sort through false allegations, bogus denials of guilt, mixed stories, and actual fact that validate true risk (Stark, 2009). Concerns regarding the risk of harm to children who are left unsupervised with a parent who has been abusive to a spouse or partner are valid (Stark, 2007). Experts and judges must be educated and attuned to the nuances of IPV dynamics and the specialized risks associated for each family member (Geffner, Conradi, Geis, & Aranda, 2009).

***Controversy regarding joint interventions.***

Stark (2009) opined,

No current issue divides the professionals who work in and around family courts more sharply than the appropriate response in divorce cases that involve domestic violence. Indeed, there are myriads of stories representing the plights of mother-

victims who have been penalized by the courts for their resistance to joint custody and parenting time arrangements connected to a stated desire to protect their children, and of the adjudicated batterers who have lost legal and physical access to their children due to unjust allegations. (p.287).

Citing significant empirical evidence and a wealth of studies, Stark also reported the substantial and pervasive impact to children of exposure to domestic violence between their parents in intact families, and post-separation and divorce, usually during visitation exchanges (Stark, 2009). Ballard, Holtzworth-Munroe, Applegate, & Beck, (2011) reported that the use of joint interventions with couples engaged in intimate partner violence remains controversial, particularly due to concerns that engagement in a joint process can serve to perpetuate victimization when the identified relational aggressor usurps the power in the process, noting that a trained professional facilitator is essential to avoid this problem. Through a study involving a random sample of 30, Ballard et al gathered and then evaluated responses from a concise, IPV behavior-focused screening questionnaire to the independent assessments of the mediators with whom the participants were working (Ballard et al., 2011). Significantly, mediators did not always agree on whether or not the mediating couple had IPV experiences and seemed to vary in definition of what behaviors constituted IPV (Ballard et al., 2011).

Core training is essential for effective evaluative practices by professionals addressing IPV allegations in the context of child custody cases (Geffner, Conradi, Geis & Aranda, 2009). However, each state has a unique set of laws regarding the handling of domestic violence in that jurisdiction, ranging from definition to mandatory arrest

requirements, to influence of determinations of guilt on related custody proceedings and whether joint interventions can be mandated by the courts (Levin & Miller, 2003). These differences are likely to influence the nature and extent of training offered to professionals and court personnel working with IPV cases in each state. There may not be uniformity.

Further concerns regarding joint interventions surround the impression that the identified relational aggressor or *batterer* might be able to conjure a better presentation, thus creating a façade which confuses the professional regarding which parent is more stable, more rational, and more reliable. In this regard, mothers who have been victims of domestic violence have lost custody of their children due to an impression by the court that the almost-histrionic affect that sometimes accompanies the victim role in domestic violence cases means that the mother is unstable, whereas the father's more put-together, calm affect suggests greater stability (Bemiller, 2008). Additionally, questions have arisen regarding a victim's ability to protect her children from direct abuse or exposure to abuse (Bemiller, 2008). Bemiller (2008) conducted qualitative research involving 16 noncustodial mothers in Ohio to examine their experiences with domestic violence prior to losing custody and the manner in which those experiences played a role in their custodial proceedings.

Bedi and Goddard (2007) published a review of a substantial body of research and literature in support of the conclusion that children who are exposed to IPV in their homes, between their parents, experience significant effects, ranging from post-traumatic stress symptomology to overt *acting out* behaviors. Sometimes direct exposure triggers

the involvement of a state child protective services agency to ensure that the child is protected from exposure to violence (Meyer, 2011). In fact, in some states, law enforcement officials are mandated to report to child protective services any incident of domestic violence where children are present.

Most incidents of IPV following separation reportedly occur in the context of contact with children, such as parenting time exchanges (Stark, 2009). Many of these incidents are psychological in nature and the exposure by children can leave long-lasting impressions (Stark, 2009). Partner abuse continues in the post-separation relationship in the form of *coercive control*, where a pattern of terroristic interaction that includes intimidation, degradation, harassment, and sometimes open threats of harm (Stark, 2007; 2009). Children are also subjected to implanted notions that any violence they have witnessed or overheard is somehow justified due to the conduct of the victim-parent and that the aggressive parent is the speaker of truth (Stark, 2009). Likewise, children are often subjected to coercive suggestions by the abusive parent that a loss of parenting rights would lead to self-harm, including suicide – thus leading to the manipulation of the child as a conduit for reaching the intended victim/former spouse (Stark, 2009). The cessation of the relationship does not necessarily alleviate the fear or the likelihood of reoccurrence of violence in some form, especially where there are children between the couple (Hardesty & Chung, 2006). Intimidation and what can otherwise be viewed as a form of psychological warfare by the relational aggressor against the victim gives rise to the concerns that abusive communication would only be perpetuated through mandated joint interventions such as therapy or even PC.

Zorza (2009) evaluated a guide funded and developed for judges through the Family Violence Department of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ). The purpose of the guide was to assist judges in determining custodial issues and implementing appropriate services, such as evaluation, when addressing the needs of a family embroiled in IPV. Zorza critiqued one of the early efforts at the guide by suggesting that references to *family dynamic theory* served to minimize the impact of the relational violence by suggesting it was mutually created or caused, as opposed to having been perpetrated by one family member against the others (Zorza, 2009). Zorza further pointed to the alienating behaviors perpetuated by the relational aggressors as a contrast to the suggestion that women lodge false domestic violence complaints in an effort to alienate fathers from their children or what has been referred to as parental alienation (Zorza, 2009). The author also questioned the efficacy of traditional batterers' treatment programs; particularly those that focus on anger management as opposed to domestic violence (Zorza, 2009).

In the revised 2006 edition of the guide, Zorza noted language regarding a presumption of custody to the non-violent parent and a focus on relocations by victims, which are designed to protect themselves or their children; along with a reinforcement that appropriate evaluations need to be conducted when the existence of IPV is unclear (Zorza, 2009). In extreme cases, victims of domestic violence and their children have been permitted by courts to change their identities and to relocate for safety reasons (Haberman, 2005); thus highlighting the potential for other, more sensitive considerations for courts in extraordinary circumstances. Finally, and of significance, Zorza highlighted



the differentiation between the designation as a *primary perpetrator* versus someone whose use of violence is in self-defense (Zorza, 2009).

In sharp contrast, various fathers' rights groups have argued that there is a greater proportionality of female-generated partner violence than the media suggests and that the domestic violence movement to limit access of purported batterers, presumably male, to their children is nothing more than a feminist movement designed to perpetuate parental alienation (Stark, 2009). Gender paradigms as they present in domestic violence cases have been challenged, with resulting recommendations that case sensitive analyses are critical to outcome even where statistics suggest that one gender is more often the perpetrator, while the other is more often the victim (Dutton, Hamel, & Aaronson, 2010). Hamel and Aaronson criticized standards put forth by Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, and Bala (2008) and Kelly and Johnson (2008) for assessment of domestic violence issues in custody evaluations as being gender-biased and presented a comparative analysis of cases to demonstrate the importance of consideration of false allegations or the presence of female perpetrators and male victims. Each case should be reviewed by the involved professionals for a more accurate assessment; perhaps especially in a climate where more fathers have assumed the role of primary caregiver for their children, while more mothers assume the role of primary breadwinner. This is not to suggest that domestic violence does not occur in that dynamic, nor to suggest that the gender-based statistics on IPV automatically shift when traditional parenting roles shift in a relationship. It is merely to suggest that additional circumstances within a relationship and family must be considered for a fair and correct result rather than allowing gender assumptions to define outcome

(Dutton, Hamel, & Aaronson, 2010). Moreover, systemic support by family court personnel and other professionals of uncorroborated claims of domestic violence can, in fact, jeopardize parent-child relationships (Stark, 2009). Therefore, gender assumptions, although sometimes correct, should not become the decision-making tool in this context.

Hamel et al. (2009) suggested that the focus on women as the victims of IPV abuse created and perpetuated bias against men in the context of both domestic violence proceedings and also related custody proceedings, and were often related to advocacy. An extensive study involving various family court professionals revealed that assumptions were often made about gender when drawing conclusions about initiators and perpetrators of IPV (Hamel et al., 2009). Likewise, outcome for the best interests of children based on a clear recognition that children are harmed by exposure to domestic violence is compromised through faulty assumptions (Hamel et al., 2009). The importance of neutral, unbiased assessment of fact becomes critical for the welfare of children involved. Hamel et al. noted:

We act against those interests, and cause serious unintended emotional harm when, because of biases and faulty assumptions, we remove a child from a loving parent following unfounded allegations of partner abuse, or alternatively force one to live with a parent whose abuse has been ignored or minimized (Hamel et al., 2009, p. 46).

DeKeseredy (2011) deconstructed the IPV experiences of women and noted that when women are violent, the nature and circumstances of the violence is markedly different than when men are violent toward women. It appears, however, that regardless of gender, IPV issues compound the ordinary and expected challenges associated with

divorce (Hardesty & Chung, 2006). Safety is and should be the critical focal point in any end result (Dill, 2005). The feminist influence on advocacy in the domestic violence arena has had an absolute influence on the safety mechanisms available and on the debate over continued contact between former partners where IPV has occurred (Haselschwerdt, Hardesty, & Hans, 2011). Lawson (2013) compared cases of IPV and opined that there are different typologies within the context of IPV, such that the role of the perpetrator and that of victim have different characteristics. Lawson suggested that evaluators look deeper and consider specific factors, including history, frequency of events, nature of events, triggers, and motivations (2013).

Jaffe, Crooks, and Bala (2009) called for a “paradigm shift” from promoting collaborative solutions in ordinary divorce cases to “a parenting plan that protects victims and children” in case with domestic violence (p. 169). In the most extreme cases, court consideration of supervised parenting time, limitations on or even cessation of access to children by the identified violent parent may be warranted (Jaffe et al., 2008). However, Jaffe, Crooks, and Bala (2009) also called for substantial training and strategic interventions to meet the many-layered needs of families with IPV and high conflict dynamics. Since all cases are not alike, individualized modifications might be made to adapt to the needs of the specific presenting family.

A distinct area of further debate surrounds the impact of the role as a relational aggressor has on parenting ability, and more simply put, whether an individual who batterers their intimate partner is automatically a *bad* parent (Bancroft, Silverman, & Ritchie, 2012). Not every case of IPV also includes direct violence against the couple’s

child, as distinguished from the emotional impact that comes from a child witnessing violence between parents (Lawson, 2013). Silverman et al. (2004) in a qualitative study, interviewed a number of female-victims of domestic violence in Massachusetts who were also involved in custody litigation with the identified perpetrators. The authors pointed to a correlation between IPV and an increase in the likelihood that the victim's children would also be abused and classified the manner in which the courts handle custody and parenting time cases as a perpetuation of abuse, calling the process a *human rights violation* (Silverman et al., 2004). In an article that calls for systemic change, the authors noted, "It has been widely reported that child custody and visitation arrangements provide a context for abusive men to continue to control women and their children" (Silverman et al., 2004, p. 951). Moreover, the authors criticized the Massachusetts family court for failing to properly investigate claims of child abuse or documentation of IPV and then awarding custodial rights to fathers who were also perpetrators (Silverman et al.). Silverman et al. highlighted the comments of women who participated in their study, noting the feeling of helplessness described by members of the sample associated with an inability to protect their children and through on-going court-sanctioned contacts with their abusers. The authors suggested that the proposed answer to the problem is found in extensive and appropriate training of professionals rather than in a blanket denial of parental access, custody or parenting time for those found guilty of domestic violence (Silverman et al., 2004).

Additionally, Pate (2008), studied custodial parents (specifically five African American and nine non-Hispanic white mothers) who were victims of intimate partner

violence and also the recipients of welfare benefits. Federal guidelines require a level of cooperation among custodial parents on welfare to secure financial contribution from the noncustodial parents to offset the financial burden imposed on the state but offers a release of that obligation for IPV cases due to concerns raised by domestic violence victim advocates (Pate, 2008). Specifically, Pate concluded that many mothers in the described circumstances did want their children to enjoy a relationship with their fathers even though the mothers had been victims of IPV. Female victims in the sample reported experiencing a lack of trust and the importance of making safety for themselves and their children a priority (Pate, 2008). At least in the context of Pate's sample, there seemed to be not just a recognition that a parenting relationship would continue post-IPV experience, but a willingness to promote it under safe circumstances (Pate, 2008).

Safe circumstances can be relative. It is questionable as to whether the emotional needs of children from families with domestic violence are being addressed and/or met despite the fact that those needs might be recognized (Lee, 2001). To the extent that it has been acknowledged that there is a significant negative emotional impact on children who are exposed to domestic violence, it is curious that these children are seemingly left to fend for themselves in the context of joint custodial arrangements between their parents where restraining orders also exist (Lessard et al., 2010). Various studies have examined the overall impact of parental IPV on children and have offered links between parent-violence and parent-child violence, as well as identifying other risks (Lessard et al., 2010). It is noteworthy that various studies recognize the importance of maintaining relationships between children and both parents, while others still have explored

alternatives for balancing the safety of one parent with the parental rights of the other (Lessard et al., 2010).

Researchers have confirmed that children are harmed by exposure to IPV even post-separation, especially during custody exchanges. Authors have debated the role of gender-bias in domestic violence proceedings and outcome; while others have considered a path for the future, to include guidelines, education, and appropriate assessment that recognizes the individualized aspects of each unique case. One thing is clear – if parents are expected to co-parent notwithstanding the existence of IPV and co-parenting requires communication on some rudimentary level – absent an intervention that facilitates that co-parenting in a safe manner, the children are likely to be exposed to additional conflict post-separation, and that exposure will be harmful to those children in a variety of ways, as otherwise described herein. Joint interventions with IPV couples were explored by Stith, McCollum, and Rosen (2011) in the context of marital therapy for those seeking to remain married. It stands to reason that a joint intervention for those couples that are required by the courts to co-parent might be similarly possible and even beneficial.

### **Parenting Coordination**

#### **What it is.**

Carter (2011) best defined parenting coordination as “a new child-centered intervention for divorced and separated parents whose children are at risk for harm due to exposure to ongoing conflict and parents who are distracted by divorce” (p. ix). Actually, PC can also be utilized with parents who were never married and are not together, and those who are still together, but are contemplating divorce while residing together in the

same home. Historically, it evolved as a process from the work of Garrity and Baris (1994), who sought to develop an intervention designed to keep children out of the middle of parental conflict. PC continued to evolve as a professional role in interventions with the category of parents seemingly unable to resolve disputes outside of the court system (Deutsch, Coates, & Fieldstone, 2007; Deutsch, 2008; Greenberg, 2010). Questions have lingered regarding whether the intentions and expectations of those involved in the process were aligned with the process objectives (Beck et al., 2008). Despite great strides in the area, “research on parenting coordination is still in the early stages...[and has been] limited by small samples and low response rates” (Carter & Lally, 2014, p. 241). Many of the authors who have chosen to address the process of PC have done so from an observational and anecdotal perspective rather than through empirical research.

By 2003, the AFCC, through an appointed task force, developed and introduced aspirational guidelines for professionals practicing PC as an identified and specific field for work with high conflict families (AFCC, 2003). The American Psychological Association followed suit with guidelines for the practice of PC by psychologists published in 2012. It stands to reason that other professional disciplines will also introduce at least aspirational practice guidelines in the future.

Multi-disciplinary professionals who were already working in the proverbial trenches with high conflict families as custody evaluators, lawyers, mediators, and guardian’s ad litem invested in the evolution of the process to make it what it is today and viewed it as a new practice opportunity (Deutsch, 2008). Lally and Higuchi (2008)

examined the perspectives of efficacy of PC by soliciting qualitative feedback from judges, lawyers, advocates for children, and the participating parents and their children as well. While judges generally seemed to express positive regard for the PC intervention, lawyers responded with mixed results – some of which might be attributed to the role lawyers often play in on-going litigation (Lally & Higuchi, 2008). Other studies have focused more so on understanding the different roles assumed by parenting coordinators in connection with their efforts at conflict management (Hayes, 2010).

In addition to the intended benefit associated with efforts to remove children from the onslaught of parental conflict, PC also represents an effort toward judicial economy by addressing the families who are financially and emotionally drained through on-going litigation and frequent court involvement (Henry, Fieldstone & Bohac, 2009). The process of PC continues to evolve through on-going discovery and new innovations and strategies for practice. Currently, and as noted above, empirical research as to efficacy is extremely limited (Henry, Fieldstone, & Bohac, 2009). As new studies continue to focus on the effectiveness of PC practice, modifications emerge for the continued improvement of the intervention for the benefit of children (Brewster, Beck, Anderson, & Benjamin, 2011; Carter, 2011). There is evidence, based upon simple survey inquiry as to who is doing this work, suggesting a greater level of involvement by mental health professionals, most particularly psychologists, and by professionals with many years of experience in their underlying discipline – thus suggesting that the most seasoned professionals are often the ones serving in the PC role (Kirkland & Sullivan, 2008).

#### **How it works.**



PC is a form of alternative dispute resolution that has, in many jurisdictions, been embraced by the courts as a substitute for direct litigation through which individuals are assisted with the facilitation of their own resolution rather than having a resolution be the order of a judge (Coates, Deutsch, Starnes, Sullivan, & Sydlik, 2004). The PC process has been carried out in varying ways throughout the United States and throughout the world (Coates et al., 2004; Fidler & Epstein, 2008). Fidler and Epstein (2008) introduced both commonalities and differences in approach by examining Pc in Canada for example.

Essentially, the neutral third party professional serves in a role to facilitate joint parenting when the parents involved cannot do so without formal assistance (Coates, 2010). Some parenting coordinators have viewed roles as more enforcement-based and for conflict-management than about truly moving the family forward (Hayes, 2010). Hayes (2010) received responses from 24 parenting coordinators and interviewed 14 of them to identify the definitions associated with the roles of parenting coordinators and how those roles were actually applied by practitioners. In a subsequent survey-based statewide study in Florida, researchers found that although training and background vary among parenting coordinators, general experiences of parenting coordinators with the practice and with their clients were found to be remarkably alike (Fieldstone, Carter, King, & McHale, 2011). Based upon feedback from the study participants, these reported similarities are likely to be reflected in a broader study. The reflections of other professionals affected by the process, such as lawyers and judges, suggested that Pc serves to manage the burden caused by high conflict families on a clogged family court

system; but it is noteworthy that attorneys offered mixed reviews of the benefits of the intervention overall (Fieldstone, Lee, Baker, & McHale, 2012).

Sullivan (2008a) noted the value of *parallel parenting*, or a process by which the parents engage in independent guided parenting of their children while exchanging necessary information regarding their children and participating in a joint decision making process. This is effectively an extension of a widely recognized concept that co-parenting is premised on some level of parental interaction and cooperation.

McHale et al. (2002) stated:

Effectively functioning co-parenting units are those in which the significant adult figures collaborate to provide a family context that communicates to the child solidarity and support between parenting figures, a consistent and predictable set of rules and standards (regardless of whether the unit is in one household or multiple and a safe and secure home base) (p. 76, cited by Sullivan, 2008).

PC is an alternative dispute resolution technique which is designed to essentially re-route high conflict parents away from the constant negative engagement of quarreling, arguing, and gamesmanship to more direct, simple, and efficient communication for effective co-parenting outcomes designed to meet the best interests of their children (Carter, 2011). A neutral professional, usually foundationally trained with a graduate degree in mental health or law, meets with both parents, individually and together, and sometimes the children, to observe and identify interpersonal dynamic flaws and then develops an intervention strategy to re-structure the manner in which the separated, divorcing, and post-divorce family relates to one another and how the parents co-parent

(Kelly, 2008). Parenting coordinators are routinely appointed by the courts, by are sometimes engaged voluntarily by the participants through a consent agreement. It can be an expensive proposition as an intervention, particularly when one party attempts to engage the parenting coordinator over every minute issue or in an effort to drain the financial resources of the other party. Parenting coordinators usually require up-front retainers, the amount of which varies from state to state, to protect against not being paid if a recommendation or decision rendered is not popular with one of the parties.

Parenting coordinators monitor behavior of the parents and intervene to offer better methodology for accomplishing the tasks of parenting, usually rooted in making decisions for the best interests of their children and then implementing those decisions. It is a misnomer that if two adults didn't get along during a relationship and decided to divorce, that the relationship becomes better after separation and the severing of ties because the couple is no longer engaged. In fact, post-separation couples often engage in conflict more bitterly following separation simply because each, feeling that they are no longer *under the control* of the other becomes more assertive and more inflexible regarding positions related to their common children. This occurs with parents who are not primary custodians in an effort not to be marginalized or vanquished from their children's lives, and sometimes with primary custodial parents in an effort to assert as the primary authority over decisions related to the children, particularly if the adult relationship had a dynamic through which the other parent seemed authoritarian.

Additionally, disputes can be perpetuated through repeated involvement with the court system that brings with it significant time and significant cost for the parties

involved (Brewster, Beck, Anderson, & Benjamin, 2011; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). Though many parents who engage in PC post-divorce have custody agreements or orders in place for them to follow, litigation continues regarding interpretation of various clauses pertaining to “day-to-day issues” (Sullivan, 2008). The quasi-judicial nature of PC is popular in many jurisdictions due to the ability of the parenting coordinators to resolve some disputes outside of the court system, thus freeing up judges for other litigation, reducing the out-of-pocket costs for high conflict parents, and reducing the amount of time families actually spend raveled in the legal process (Brewster, Beck, Anderson, & Benjamin, 2011; Greenberg, 2010; Kirkland & Sullivan, 2008). In some states, the practice of PC is guided by court rule, regulation, or statutory authority; and in others, professionals strive to create some commonality or aspirational process guideline to create some uniformity and commonality among those providing the service (Shear, 2008). Consideration of a court rule or statute is currently underway in New Jersey, and I am a member of the multidisciplinary working group assembled for this purpose.

### **Training.**

Training efforts have focused on different practice approaches taken by those professionals in mental health fields whose primary practices are rooted in psychotherapy (Boyan & Termini, 2005) to practical considerations that transcend specific foundational professional identities and demonstrate how to practice PC from varied angles of family law involvement (Carter, 2011). Kirkland & Sullivan (2008) were among the first to examine who is doing PC by surveying 54 parenting coordinators identified as engaging in PC practice through the AFCC. The majority of those who responded came from the

mental health fields, with approximately 15% identifying as professional counselors (Kirkland & Sullivan, 2008). The authors also examined common practices, including the existence of a court order or agreement between the involved parties and the use of a retainer agreement (Kirkland & Sullivan, 2008).

Also in 2008, Beck et al. engaged 11 parenting coordinators in Pima County, Arizona, an interview process and learned that a mediation model was frequently employed to bring about conflict resolution, with some parenting coordinators taking a more judicial or more therapeutic approach depending upon their underlying discipline (Beck et al., 2008). Kelly (2008) focused on the need for cross-training and the use of interdisciplinary methodology in PC. Specifically, each sub-profession working in the PC field seems to incorporate different professional strengths and even a different skill set to the practice, with therapists being well-suited to work with processing feelings, while lawyers tend to be well-suited for making prompt, concrete recommendations (Kelly, 2008).

Collaboration between parenting coordinators and the therapists working with high conflict families is productive, and even essential in the context of increasing the probability of successful outcome because while the parenting coordinator is focused on co-parenting communication with the couple, the individual therapists can reinforce positive lessons and changes regarding interpersonal relational style (Greenberg & Sullivan, 2012). Training for parenting coordinators must necessarily include an emphasis on multidisciplinary collaboration skills and the enhancement of skills for

working as part of a team for the benefit of the subject family (Moore, Ordway, & Francis, 2013).

**Efficacy (empirical studies and qualitative studies).**

As noted previously, there is extremely limited research regarding the efficacy of PC, though some qualitative and even anecdotal research has been conducted (Brewster, Beck, Anderson & Benjamin, 2011). Professional parenting coordinators have been surveyed in different jurisdictions in an effort to identify commonality of practices and in an effort to identify the other professional affiliations (i.e. social work, counseling, psychology, law) associated with the individuals working as parenting coordinators (Kirkland & Sullivan, 2008). In this study, Kirkland and Sullivan (2008) drew conclusions regarding the likely efficacy of the process based upon the expertise of the professionals involved as parenting coordinators. Beck et al. (2008) were able to identify differences in the views parenting coordinators held about their role and responsibility, as well as regarding methodology for implementing the service, based largely on the underlying professional discipline with which the PC was associated. Henry et al. (2009) superficially examined process efficacy, while Brewster et al. (2011) developed a pilot study to provide a snapshot of efficacy through a longitudinal study based upon public court data related to motion practice and court appearances. Brewster et al. considered a number of variables, including the length of involvement by the parenting coordinator with each family considered, and the use of other resources, which may have contributed to outcome (Brewster et al., 2011). Two key recommendations evolving from the Brewster study is that professionals involved with PC practice collaborate to develop

more concrete and consistent theories for approach and methodology, and that consideration be given to the relationship between efficacy and therapeutic alliance (Brewster et al., 2011). From a practical perspective, as Sullivan (2008) correctly observed, the underlying toxicity of the dynamic between the parents must be addressed in the process or even if the parenting coordinator is able to successfully accomplish some of the core objectives such as a basic exchange of information and rudimentary decision-making, the negative effects of the parental relationship will still subsist and impact the children involved. Researchers have barely scratched the surface as to participant satisfaction with the pc process, though overall, there is evidence that “validates the importance of PC intervention in reducing relitigation among high-conflict divorcing couples” (Henry, Fieldstone, & Bohac, 2009).

Hayes, Grady, and Brantley (2012) more recently focused on a host of variables influencing process and examined characteristics of participants; tools utilized by parenting coordinators, such as e-mail for communication; and any existing local rules or statutes governing the pc process. Again, the subjects of the sample for the study were parenting coordinators; however, one significant aspect of this study highlighted the differences in PC regulation throughout the United States, from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, with some states having regulatory laws and others having no guidelines whatsoever (Hayes, Grady, & Brantley, 2012).

Hayes’ early work in 2010 involved a survey of parenting coordinators in North Carolina, but focused on a sample of only 14 individuals despite the initial solicitation of 54 professionals. Though the data has seemed to saturate from relatively small samples

across disciplines and across regions, the lack of response from larger solicited potential sample pools is curious. Nevertheless, participants reported viewing themselves as instruments of enforcement and conflict management; having limited concentrated training (an average of 24 hours); and as utilizing e-mail as a mode of communication with and between their parent-clients.

Kirkland (2008) also emphasized the vast differences among the jurisdictions where Pc is employed as an intervention, essentially underscoring the need to consider uniformity for better practice. Other factors that have been considered in research include ethical context for practitioners (Kirkland & Kirkland, 2006; Sullivan, 2004) and the importance of keeping matters in perspective due to the stress often created for professionals doing this work (Kirkland, 2010). Fieldstone et al. (2011) laid a foundation for further work regarding process efficacy through a statewide study in Florida, referred to also above. Fieldstone's study also surveyed PCs to determine characteristics of the individuals participating in the PC process, and expectations for the process. However, the study did not review the variables that might have contributed to positive, negative, or stagnant outcomes. Moreover, the study, once again, utilized a limited sample size of only 67.

In 2012, another study by Fieldstone et al., also in Florida, researchers focused on expectations and perceptions through a survey with 10 domains of investigation (Fieldstone et al., 2012). This cross-disciplinary study included parenting coordinators, judges and practicing attorneys, representing parties rather than working as parenting coordinators. The review of results proved complicated and was processed in composites



associated with the surveyed groups. Researchers reported that those surveyed believed additional training was necessary to increase efficacy in the field (Fieldstone et al., 2012). One additional benefit of this study is that the authors clearly examined perception of the efficacy of PC – essentially considering whether or not parenting coordinators doing the work in the field think it works (Carter & Lally, 2014).

Overall, success in PC is not unanimous and it was reported that about one-fourth of parent-clients fired their parenting coordinator before the process was completed (Brewster et al., 2011). The variables that contribute to success or failure have not been fully identified or studied (Carter & Lally, 2014).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Currently, there is no research directly on point regarding the use of PC with families that also have intimate partner violence experiences. Accordingly, there is also no research examining how a parenting coordinator might specifically approach the process when working with the described population, nor about the efficacy of the intervention for parenting coordinators who have had experiences working with individuals falling into this highly volatile category of *high conflict families*. Literature addressing various nuances of PC has included a call for additional research in this area and has included recognition that the intimate partner violence dynamic adds a complicated dimension to the work of parenting coordination (Carter, 2011).

It further seems to be a given that when parents share custody of their children, whether sharing is based on legal rights to joint-decision making and/or a physical sharing of residential custody, the children involved are likely to experience greater

absorption of parental conflict and of a higher degree triangulation due to restraining orders and the inability of their parents to communicate directly with one another. There are limited to no resources for IPV high conflict families due, in part, to restrictions on communication between parents and restrictions on the use of joint interventions.

Accordingly, while courts order risk assessments, forensic psychological evaluations, individual therapy, and participation in group treatment for anger management for perpetrators of violence within the family, the children seem to be abandoned in the context of an untreated family structure. Research suggests that PC is effective with traditional *high conflict families*, though the specific variables contributing to efficacy have not been fully identified. Current studies have not identified the degree to which, if at all, the underlying professional discipline of the parenting coordinator influences outcome; whether the specific nature of the underlying issues between a couple influences outcome; or whether the availability of resources, such as one or both parties to the couple can no longer afford to fund the litigation, influences the commitment people make to the success of an out-of-court intervention such as PC.

Nevertheless, various researchers, as noted above, have observed an overall decline in motion practice and a lightening up on the demands on judicial and non-judicial resources when a parenting coordinator is in place in traditional high conflict families (Brewster et al., 2011; Carter, 2011; Carter & Lally, 2014; Fieldstone et al., 2012) The research, however, did not examine whether any of the families about which researchers examined statistics and court records also had intimate partner violence

experiences. The domestic violence variable requires further examination for a clearer determination of the impact of that variable on the nature of *high conflict* and the appropriateness of the family as candidates for PC, (Sullivan, 2008a). Significant training regarding the assessment for the presence of IPV dynamics and the nuances of same are critical to effective work in PC with families entangled in this dynamic (Hass, 2014). Training must contemplate the Parenting coordinator's own foundation of experience and mindset related to domestic violence, as well as cultural influences for the parenting coordinator and the case-specific clients (Hass, 2014). Researchers have called for the domestic violence training and for the examination of this issue, but the research has yet to be done.

Additionally, there is no research examining what role the nature of the specific domestic violence dynamic, such as whether the dynamic is situational, based upon the couple dynamic for the presenting couple, or rooted in one individual's propensity for violence toward not just this identified victim but other potential victims as well, plays in the likelihood of success with PC as an intervention. Consideration of the parenting coordinator's personal safety when working with families with IPV dynamics has also not been reviewed. Finally, there is no research elucidating whether currently practicing parenting coordinators are truly willing to work with IPV families, and if so, how the intervention is modified to accommodate for the unique needs associated with this sometimes-dangerous family dynamic. In this regard, the potential for danger, physical, psychological, and emotional, cannot be minimized and should include consideration of

the potential danger not just to the participants, but also for the parenting coordinator (Hass, 2014). Some have suggested, “the risk outweighs the benefit” (Hass, 2014, p. 223; Martindale, 2007).

It would appear that there is a need for considerable research in this area and on a multitude of levels in order to address the needs of this population. Specifically, revelations from experienced parenting coordinators could give rise to new information about whether or not the use of PC with high conflict families with IPV experiences is an effective intervention for removing children in these dynamics from the triangulating events that exacerbate and intensify their absorption of parental conflict; and if so, in what ways and specifically how. Moreover, parenting coordinators doing this specific work are likely to shed light on modifications to the process to address safety and to increase the likelihood of successful outcomes, thus giving rise to a practice model for PC with IPV dynamics.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

As research has evolved to address the efficacy of PC as an intervention (Henry et al., 2009; Kelly, 2002; Kirkland, 2010) and to compare and contrast the implementation of the process in different jurisdictions (Henry et al., 2011; Kirkland, 2008), more focus has been shifted to the nuances of the variables that enhance or detract from efficacy (Carter, 2011). While there is also research on the appropriateness and efficacy of joint interventions with couples who have experienced IPV (Hardesty & Chung, 2006; Lessard, 2010), I have not found empirical or conceptual research on the use of PC with the IPV subpopulation of high conflict parents. Similarly, I have not found empirical or conceptual research regarding the experiences of parenting coordinators working with the high conflict IPV couple population, nor regarding input from parenting coordinators as to how the PC intervention is or could be applied in an effort to de-triangulate children or create improved efficacy with communication between coparents in the described dynamic. It is this gap in the literature that forms the basis for this qualitative research study with a grounded theory design. This chapter addresses elements of the research design and methodology, the role of the researcher in data collection and interpretation, the purposeful selection of sample participants, and considerations related to the ethics of implementing the design and trustworthiness of response and outcome.

In some jurisdictions, such as New Jersey, which is the focus in this study, courts are restricted from ordering joint interventions in cases where there is DV (Levin & Mills, 2003). The rationale behind this restriction stems from concern regarding the revictimization of an intimate partner who was first abused in the context of the

relationship, and now could potentially be bullied by the aggressor in the context of a process designed to perpetuate communication, despite the fact that one partner has and could exert a high level of power over the other (Sullivan, 2008). In contrast, if children absorb parental conflict in cases where parents are merely quarreling excessively (Boyan & Termini, 2005, Kelly, 2002), children are likely to absorb conflict at a high and more significant rate when the quarreling parents extend their conflict through the children as messengers and confidants (Kelly, 2002). Parents can agree to incorporate the use of a parenting coordinator for conflict resolution under certain circumstances when there is a history of DV, but aspects of the traditional PC process might need to be modified to address whether the parties are allowed direct communication in the parenting coordinator's presence or facilitated by the parenting coordinator, whether the parties are permitted in the same room or even on the same premises at the same time, as well as any presenting safety factors for the parties and the parenting coordinator.

A grounded theory approach allowed for the exploration of the experiences of parenting coordinators working with the described population. Specifically of interest is how, if at all, those PCs have modified their process to accommodate the special needs of HCC with IPV while still meeting the intended purpose of the traditional intervention. Due to competing existing research regarding the appropriateness of joint interventions with couples experiencing IPV, there are additional layers for consideration that were not fully explored in this study. This study represents the exploration of a controversial topic that lends itself to significant additional research, beyond the development of a theory, regarding whether this population can be serviced through PC at all (Ballard et al., 2011).

Specifically, once a theory emerges regarding effective practice, the practice model can be implemented for a mixed methods study regarding the efficacy of that model. A mixed methods study could easily lend itself for the accumulation of concrete statistical data as an objective measurement of efficacy, while also examining data regarding the experiences of the participants to determine efficacy on a qualitative level. Under all circumstances, this study is likely to form a foundation for future work in the field for the benefit of children caught in the triangulation of high conflict divorce with the added component of IPV between their parents.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The main phenomenon being studied is the experiences of parenting coordinators working with high conflict parents referred by the courts following IPV to develop a theory regarding the use of PC as an intervention to facilitate parallel parenting in a triadic model with a professional third party rather than the parties' children. The grounded theory approach, initially introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967), focuses on a phenomenon about which little is known in an effort to develop a beneficial theory about that phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006). There is research regarding the effects of divorce on children, the additional impact of divorce classified as high conflict, and regarding the efficacy of PC with high conflict parents. There is also research regarding the propriety of joint professional interventions with couples with IPV histories. However, there is no research regarding the use of PC specifically with the subpopulation of high conflict parents who have also had experiences with DV. Accordingly, the presented research

question coupled with the available knowledge and lack thereof point to grounded theory as an appropriate fit for the research for this study.

The subject of the grounded theory study is one of specific interest to the researcher (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Accordingly, the focus of this study surrounds the following research question: How do parenting coordinators work with HCC with IPV histories? For reasons previously stated, this specific population is in need of a specialized intervention, and I have a particular interest in identifying and developing a theory for modifying the PC intervention to meet this need.

The literature review process in the context of a grounded theory study helps the researcher identify the topic or problem for study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and this is often based upon a clear gap in the literature related to the identified topic (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Some researchers have suggested that the literature review prior to the commencement of data collection is harmful because the existing literature can influence the researcher's interpretation of the collected data with a preconceived notion of what to expect (Rich, 2012). However, in this study, the lack of research regarding the specific use of PC with high conflict parents with IPV experiences allows existing research on related topics to serve as more of a backdrop. The purpose of this study is to define how to use PC effectively with this population. The existing research merely serves to support the notion that the impact of DV on children within high conflict divorcing and divorced families is in a need of attention and the development of some appropriate intervention. PC may or may not be that appropriate intervention, but to begin understanding this, the first question to be answered is how it works.



With grounded theory, the researcher begins with a research question or questions to guide the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The research questions serve to frame the context of the study and the direction of data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Through the collection of data, the researcher observes the natural emergence of characteristics and categories related to the specific area of study, and the researcher is able to formulate a theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Sometimes, the data collection process leads to a clarification or further refinement of the initial research question (Charmaz, 2006). Data analysis is done by coding and characterizing themes and concepts that develop from the sample, on-going analysis of the emerging data, and the researcher's own evaluation and advancement of a theory through a constant comparison of the data (Charmaz, 2006).

There are several approaches to grounded theory. The constructivist approach will more likely to lead to further research and a practice model in the future (Creswell, 2007). Since the purpose of this specific study is to examine the current use of the PC intervention for the development of a practice model for HCC with IPV, the constructivist approach is logical. A constructivist approach allows greater flexibility for the manner in which the study is conducted and ultimately allows the researcher to embrace an active and participatory role.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary tool for data collection and analysis (Janesick, 2011). The researcher specifically participates when engaging in the interviewing process in an effort to absorb and record additional information offered by

participants in response to the interview protocol (Creswell, 2007). The data accumulated through participant response is enhanced through the additional data accumulated by the researcher from observation of the participants during the interview process (Janesick, 2011). In working from a grounded theory approach, I engaged in theoretical sensitivity and theoretical sampling to submerge in the phenomena and fully explore all aspects and from several angles, to include my own professional experience as a parenting coordinator. Theoretical sensitivity involves acute awareness by the researcher when considering and analyzing data so the process is about absorbing the data as they emerge rather than seeking out a certain kind of data to prove a theory or fit a hypothesis about what the theory should be (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978).

The researcher's personal and professional experiences essentially compliment the information derived from scholarly literature to enhance the researcher's observation, interaction with the sample, and interpretation and analysis of the data (Charmaz, 2006; Janesick, 2011). As a parenting coordinator with approximately 10 years of experience in the field, I am familiar with and have practiced within the aspirational guidelines established through AFCC. I am also familiar with procedures throughout the United States and especially within the state of New Jersey, where there are presently no statutes, rules, or regulations governing PC practice. My own involvement with the New Jersey Chapter of the AFCC and as a member of the New Jersey Parenting Coordination Roundtable, a network of professional parenting coordinators who provide peer supervision and brainstorming opportunities, both created a familiarity with the PC intervention that allowed better understanding of the process and its purpose, and

generated greater access to participants for interviews and data collection. Since the participants' experiences are the sole construction for this process, it was important for me to consider my own role as a researcher who has also participated in the PC field and specifically with the described population and the potential for guiding or influencing participant response, albeit unintentionally. In the context of the interviewing process, I closely followed my interview questions as a guide and I took due care to not comment or elaborate during interviews and not to add my own opinion or thoughts on the subject. Carefully constructed questions allowed me to elicit intricate feedback from participants belonging solely to them, without any significant influence from me. Where necessary, I asked clarifying follow-up questions to ensure the accuracy of my understanding.

The role of the researcher is unique from a constructivist grounded theory approach due, in part, to the role the researcher can play through the interface with participants, collection, and interpretation of data (Mertens, 2010). It is not uncommon for a researcher to share some of the experiences of participants through the researcher's own involvement in the field of study or for the interpretation of data, themes, and patterns to also be colored by the researcher's own experiences (Mertens, 2010).

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was a significant consideration in the selection of research methodology. Qualitative research in general is beneficial for the procurement of insight regarding a problematic experience for some of the individuals who know that problem best (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Although it would be reasonable to sample IPV litigants who match the description of the chosen population with the presenting

problem, parenting coordinators were chosen for this study because working with this population offered greater insight regarding the manner in which the intervention of PC is best applied for the greatest efficacy and outcome. The grounded theory approach served to generate a theory about whether the described population benefits from the PC intervention, and if so, how to implement the intervention for efficacy. Qualitative methodology, and specifically grounded theory, allowed for the exploration of an issue with an eye toward generating a new theory about the phenomena and new approaches based upon the lessons learned from those who have lived the experience (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). As a research method, the grounded theory approach for this study was promising because it could reveal new solutions that might help this population.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

Grounded theory research can routinely involve between 20 and 40 participants; the number of participants can vary and can be much smaller depending upon the nature of the study and the saturation of data (Charmaz, 2006). Due to the nature of this study as highly focused and with a specialized group of professionals, the data saturated within a smaller sample of 10 (Charmaz, 2006). Sampling for this study was both purposeful and theoretical in nature (Fassinger, 2005; Hutchinson, Johnston, & Breckon, 2010) since the purpose of this study was the development of a theory for the implementation of PC with high conflict parents with IPV experiences. As researcher, I interviewed 10 parenting coordinators. Saturation was achieved with a sample size of 10 using the Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) criteria. Specifically, participants in this study used often identical or highly similar language to describe their experiences with the HCC with IPV, as well as

regarding their observations and interactions with these clients. In fact, participants offered the same suggestions for implementing the intervention whether there were allegations or evidence of IPV between the couple and identified the same concerns regarding offering the PC service due to potential risk to the PC or to the participants.

If saturation had not been achieved with a sample size of 10 using the Guest et al. (2006) criteria, I would have continued to interview additional participants until saturation was achieved.

Since the AFCC is among the first organizations to provide interdisciplinary guidelines for PC work and the organization after which other organizations, such as the American Psychological Association modeled their guidelines, the sample for this study was derived from the membership of the New Jersey chapter of AFCC. The selected group represented a sample of individuals who specifically had experiences working with the defined population, and they were able to provide rich descriptions about their work and experiences with the defined population, regardless of whether they individually elected not to work with the defined population any longer. These descriptions further enhanced the development of a theory regarding what procedures do and not work as interventions with the identified families (Wolcott, 1994). A request for volunteers from the identified group yielded more potential participants for the sample than were necessary due to saturation of the data.

My own PC practice is a solo practice and I do not have any employees. While I was in a leadership position in the New Jersey chapter of AFCC, I did not and do not hold a supervisory role over anyone in the organization. Most of the potential

participants were also solo practitioners, who do not have employees and who are in no way subservient to me. I do not and did not play a role in the livelihoods of any potential participants and have no influence regarding their client base. Further, the members of the Parenting Coordination Roundtable are peers with different levels of experience and intensity of practice. None of the members of this group hold supervisory positions over the other, and even the leader of the group is a volunteer. Membership in the group is invitational and voluntary.

The American Counseling Association has not developed guidelines for the PC practice and has merely begun to scratch the surface of participation in this important work as a subdiscipline. Accordingly, it is difficult to obtain data strictly from licensed professional counselors practicing also as parenting coordinators. However, this research could well lead to greater involvement of counselors in PC and the development of appropriate professional guidelines for this practice by the American Counseling Association.

### **Instrumentation**

To develop an appropriate data collection tool, it is necessary to consider the sample population. With a Grounded Theory approach, the personal interview is the most appropriate data collection tool (Charmaz, 2006). Accordingly, an interview protocol specifically designed to seek information from the identified population regarding their experience with PC, where the participants are both high conflict and have also experienced intimate partner violence, was appropriate (See Appendix A). The inquiry was fairly specific. Aside from demographics, it was appropriate to ask only a

few focused, open interview questions, designed to inquire whether the participants work with the identified population; what each participant considers when deciding whether to work with this population; how the parenting coordinators experience and modify the process when working with the defined population; what occurs within the intervention with this population; and whether the experience is effective from the perspective of the parenting coordinators. Accordingly, the core interview questions included:

1. What should the role be of parenting coordinators in cases with domestic violence?
2. What decisions have you made regarding your role in such cases?
3. Please share with me some examples of cases you have had where the parents have had domestic violence experiences.
4. What, if any, modifications do you put in place to accommodate work with this unique population?
5. If you do make modifications to the process, why?
6. How is work in cases with domestic violence different from traditional parenting coordination?
7. Please bring to mind some ways in which there might be improvement in the interactions between the high conflict parents with IPV after engaging in this process.
8. What improvements you have experienced?
9. In what ways have the dynamics between the couple with whom you have worked remained unchanged?

10. To what do you attribute the identified improvement or lack thereof?

11. If you could change anything about how the parenting coordination process is implemented with this population based upon your experiences in working with them thus far, what would you recommend changing and how?

For the most expansive results, I evaluated instrument fidelity, or the appropriateness of the questions posed, to determine if those questions are yielding the rich and detailed information I was seeking (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). This proved true in that the transcripts of individual interviews were rich with data for the study participants.

Additionally, the core questions represented a guide, which invited the participants to offer expansive, detailed answers that described their experiences. Modifications could be made throughout the data collection process to accommodate information that was revealed and which in turn generated new questions or identified a new avenue for exploration. Finally, the Chair and Methodologist of my dissertation Committee, as well as the IRB for Walden University specifically reviewed research questions prior to the actual study commencing.

### **Procedure for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

I initially solicited volunteer participants through the membership of the New Jersey Chapter of AFCC, based upon specific criteria, including that all participants are trained professional parenting coordinators, who have worked with HCC with DV histories. Initial solicitation occurred through brief personal telephone calls with short invitations (See Appendix B). I essentially followed a prescribed format through which I briefly identified the topic of my research, the criteria for participation as a member of



the sample, and inquired as to the interest and availability of the person to whom I was speaking. I had a pool of approximately 20-25 from which to draw in the event I needed additional participants. The data saturated, per the established criteria for the study, within a smaller group of participants, but it was important to allow a sufficient margin. For the convenience of the participants, interviews were conducted at their individual respective offices, or in one case in the participant's home upon request, in the environment in which each participant was most comfortable. This also allowed me to observe the professional environments in which each participant interacts with the population being discussed. Participants were able to show me any modifications they have made to their environment to accommodate work with these clients, such as additional avenues of ingress and egress, an escape plan, or other physical safety precautions that are environmental in nature. A comfortable environment for participants is an important element to consider for qualitative research (Fassinger, 2005). In this case, using the participants' own environments also allowed me as a researcher to visualize and observe the context the participants described. I could visualize avenues of ingress and egress related to the space where participants worked with the clients they discussed and could therefore better understand their meaning. As participants offered examples of interactions with specific clients, they could show me by pointing to where one of the clients was sitting or standing at the time of a described event – thereby bringing the event to life. Since the participants are private, solo practitioners, they each have discretion over the use of their professional space and so no additional authorization was necessary. However, location was strictly voluntary and if any participant preferred

not to use personal office space, those individuals were welcome to meet with me at my office or possibly at another location of their choosing which would allow for sufficient privacy for a professional interview. One participant did, in fact, ask for an alternative but private meeting location. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Prospective participants were provided with a Committee and IRB-reviewed Consent Form, describing the purpose of the research, guidelines with respect to confidentiality and specifically noting that while I know the identity of each participant, their individual names and identifying information are not used in the published study (See Appendix B). I included instructions for withdrawal from the study in the event any participant elected not to complete participation (See Appendix B). However, none of the participants sought to withdraw and every person who began the study concluded it. Since this was a non-vulnerable population (and if there was any vulnerability, it was not visible and not declared), and since all participants were already members of at least one if not both of two significant support groups for professionals doing this work – AFCC and the New Jersey Parenting Coordination Roundtable, the participants already had resources in place to which they could turn in the event they experienced any discomfort related to this study and the availability of those resources were reinforced.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis in grounded theory is fluid and involves constant comparison of data by the researcher (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researcher must select participants who have specific experience with the phenomena being examined, but who will also be able to fully express those experiences in a manner that will provide the

researcher with rich themes, descriptions, and details (Charmaz, 2006). Moreover, the underlying goal of a qualitative research approach is to invite the participants to identify their experiences in a natural and non-contrived manner so the researcher is ultimately able to interpret those experiences in the context of the people who share those (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). The researcher then is both an instrument for data collection, but also for analysis (Janesick, 2011). Charmaz (2006) suggested the importance of the researcher's own connection to the phenomena as a lens for data analysis. The researcher's experiences should not lend themselves to preconceived notions about what the emerging theory should be, but rather allow the data to guide the researcher to the theory (Janesick, 2011). The process of open coding allows the researcher to consider the data as it emerges rather than trying to fit concepts into a pre-existing idea of what the theory should be (Rich, 2012).

As theoretical concepts begin to emerge, the researcher can consider strategies to flush out and collect additional data. Memoing during the process allows the researcher to identify additional codes and themes, developing additional categories, and tracking strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). However, there are multiple analysis tools that can and should be utilized to expand consideration of the data and what the data can tell the researcher about the phenomena (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). These include “methods of constant comparison, keywords-in-context, word count, classical content analysis, domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, and componential analysis” (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007, p. 562). In the context of this study, the constant comparison of data through classification and categorization techniques (Rich, 2012) became the most

important tools for identifying the emerging theory and then interpreting the data to develop a model for the practice of PC with high conflict parents with IPV experiences. As discussed in greater detail below, some of the specific themes included the projection of confidence in how the parenting coordinator presented himself or herself to the clients; the importance of establishing pre-determined rules for the comings and goings of the clients related to the PC's office; and the rules of engagement and guidelines for all modalities of communication between the parties. This process allowed me to find existing patterns and identify practices that my participants utilize purposefully or sometimes without even fully recognizing they are going so (Rich, 2012). I maintained memo practice as to emerging themes – with the intention of viewing themes which were more concrete, as well as those which were more creativity-based (Patton, 2002). By grouping themes, I was also able to record sub-patterns possibly related to the attitudes of my participants when working with a high conflict couple that has also had a history of domestic violence. This allowed me to explore two additional key concepts: first, whether the professional parenting coordinators had preconceived notions about the individual members of the couple based upon the label of *victim* or *aggressor* the individual may have been given by the court; and second, to what degree any preconceived expectations based upon those labels influenced modifications to the process or the manner in which the professional approaches work with the couple. In addition, I reviewed triangulate emergent results with my Dissertation Committee methodologist to ensure the fidelity of my research findings.

Since the sample size for this study was relatively small, data was processed and analyzed through hand-coding. This also enabled me to submerge myself in the data as a researcher (Charmaz, 2006). Through hand-coding, the researcher can also submerge in the data and develop the theory as it emerges (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). NVivo10 was utilized as a supplemental tool for data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I identified patterns and themes surrounding the impressions of the participants with the effectiveness of PC with this population. Interviews were recorded and additional hand-written notes served as additional summaries, along with transcripts of each interview. I stored the data from interviews individually, as NVivo10 has the capacity for this practice. Specific themes emerged from comments provided by each participant. NVivo10 served to insure quality control and reduce bias by cross-referencing the data and identifying themes and patterns from a neutral standpoint (Hutchinson, Johnston, & Breckon, 2010). Further, review and discussion with my methodologist also introduced an additional layer of quality control for this study.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

An additional discussion of trustworthiness is provided in Chapter 4.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Since my sample population was drawn from an organization of professionals, members of this sample population were not particularly vulnerable. Vulnerability could have potentially increased if a participant had a specific traumatic experience while working as a parenting coordinator with a high conflict couple with domestic violence issues. No such scenario was reported among the group from which the sample would be

derived and therefore, this issue was not a complication in my study. Accordingly, any risk to the participants was minimal (See Appendix B), and none was subsequently identified during or following the interviewing process.

Additionally, I have been a professional parenting coordinator since approximately 2005; and am fully familiar with practices in the field; have worked with HCC with IPV histories and experiences; and am familiar with many of the participants in this study through the New Jersey Chapter of AFCC and the New Jersey Parenting Coordination Roundtable. I took great care to follow the approved interview protocol and to record and transcribe interviews to ensure that responses represented views of the participants and accurately reflected their responses. It was critical for participants to share their interactions as they have experienced them to ensure the internal validity of this study (Brod, Tesler, & Christensen, 2009; Maxwell, 2005; Shenton, 2004).

### **Summary**

This grounded theory study designed to explore the experiences of parenting coordinators working with HCC who have also had IPV experiences was focused on determining whether PC is an effective intervention with a population that is frequently underserved due to restrictions placed by courts on joint interventions. Since PC work is designed to remove children from the middle of parental conflict often associated with high conflict divorce, it stands to reason that children from families with domestic violence experiences would benefit from having a professional third party parenting coordinator manage conflict, facilitate necessary communication for necessary exchange of information and decision making; and make recommendations for dispute resolution.

The experiences of parenting coordinators already working with this population have been utilized to develop a theory regarding whether the intervention is effective, and as to how to modify the intervention to create and/or increase efficacy of PC and to develop a model of PC intervention specifically for high conflict families struggling with IV issues as well. The outcome of this study can be utilized to challenge and re-structure current administrative mandates in New Jersey and other similar jurisdictions restricting any type of joint intervention with couples who have restraining orders due to domestic violence. Finally, this study can lead to other research regarding the efficacy of the new model once implemented in PC work with this population.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to discover and develop a substantial theory stemming from the experiences of parenting coordinators working with HCC who also have IPV in their dynamics. The basis for the participant interview questions and the constant comparative method of coding the interviews originated from the research question: How do parenting coordinators work with HCC who experience intimate partner violence (IPV)? Though IPV, also known as DV, was broadly defined for discussion purposes, study participants were not specifically advised as to how to define IPV in their own analysis of their experiences, nor were they advised as to whether the existence of temporary or final restraining orders (TRO or FRO) were necessary for a couple to fit into this classification. Instead, study participants were asked to elaborate on their own understanding of IPV concepts in the context of their experiences with this population. The decision not to impose a constrictive definition on research participants lent itself to an added dimension to this research, including the unexpected discovery that many of the couples who might be classified as traditional clients in PC (without formal or documented histories of DV) actually share the characteristics and behaviors of those couples who would be more likely recognized for their overt IPV behaviors.

The grounded theory approach in qualitative research allowed for the formulation of my theory related to experiences, practice strategies, and protective measures necessary for PC work with the identified population. Characteristics and categories related to the phenomena of PC with HCC with IPV emerged using grounded theory,



resulting in new insight and generating theoretical formulation. It is significant that many professionals in the field have identified this specific phenomenon as worthy of study and have called for this research. However, this appears to be the first study of its kind. The theory that developed through the discovery of the experiences and strategies of parenting coordinators working with high conflict parents with IPV dynamics in their relationships is adaptive PC for IPV (APCIPV). The purpose of my theory is the development of practice guidelines for adaptations to traditional PC to fit the nuances and needs of parents whose high conflict dynamics also include IPV.

This chapter begins with a description of settings pertaining to recruitment of volunteer participants and a brief description of the participants' demographics. Next, I list the steps taken for this study to ensure trustworthiness and an in-depth discussion on the data collection and analysis. The final sections of this chapter include results of the grounded theory method analysis of data and summary of the answers to the research question.

### **Settings**

Voluntary participant recruitment began with phone contact with professional parenting coordinators in New Jersey. Potential participants were identified through membership of the New Jersey chapter of the AFCC. Participant recruitment and collection of data was not a particularly challenging endeavor. Though there is limited to no current research available regarding the feedback of parenting coordinators working with IPV, quite a number of parenting coordinators reported having experience working with the described population, recognized the substantial need of postdivorce families

with IPV to have parenting interventions available to them, and were interested in contributing to the development of professional methodology for practicing PC. All but three of the initial parties contacted were willing to participate in the study. The three professionals who declined cited their busy professional schedules and lack of availability as their reason for declining to participate. Participants were able to ask initial questions about the study during the initial telephone contact to afford them an opportunity to determine if they wanted to participate. During the initial telephone contact, once potential participants were in agreement to participate in the research interviews, the balance of the call was devoted to determining a location, date, and time for the interviews. I scheduled in-person interviews with each of the participants and arranged to meet all but one participant in their respective professional offices, where there was sufficient privacy for confidential interviewing and discussion. The last participant requested that we meet at the home of that participant on a day not otherwise scheduled with clients.

The entire study sample ultimately consisted of 10 professional parenting coordinators who agreed to be interviewed as part of the research project. All of these volunteer participants for my study indicated that two primary reasons they participated in my study were the belief that children in IPV cases absorb additional parental conflict due to the limited or nonexistent communication between their parents, and the concern that couples facing the added complications presented by IPV dynamics were often underserved, but in need of more, not less, professional intervention.

## Demographics

Participants who took part in face-to-face interviews consisted of six adult females and four adult males who met the criteria for the study. The central criteria for recruiting study participants were that they were each professional parenting coordinators who had worked with HCC with IPV. This initial criterion assisted in ensuring that the participants had the familiarity and expertise necessary to speak about their experiences in a meaningful way that would inform a theory for how PC work should most effectively be performed with this population. As previously noted, there are no statutes, court rules, or official requirements for the practice of PC in New Jersey, while other states do have substantial legislation and requirements in place. A pilot project to study PC in New Jersey required those participating in the project to at least have Masters degrees and licenses as mental health professionals. The list of parenting coordinators for the pilot project in New Jersey did not include attorneys or other nonmental health professionals. However, the project was disbanded and PC in New Jersey has continued without formal guidelines or restrictions in place.

All 10 professionals who participated in my study held doctoral degrees, with eight holding their doctoral degrees in mental health and two holding Juris Doctor, or law degrees. All participants also held professional licenses in their respective primary disciplines. Two of the participants were hybrid professionals, meaning that they were licensed attorneys with training and background or licenses as mental health professionals as well. The remaining eight participants were mental health professionals. All participants are considered experts in the PC field.

All 10 participants reported having been parenting coordinators in some variation or form for at least 10 years, with two specifically reporting that they had provided PC services in some capacity long before PC was named or officially recognized as a viable intervention in New Jersey. In fact, it is likely true that several more of the participants were providing PC services before the intervention was officially named as such or formally recognized—but that was not explored as part of this study. The mention of the two participants who added this information is not meant to suggest they were the only two, but rather a reflection of the fact that they were the only two to mention their involvement at the early phases of the evolution of PC in New Jersey.

Every participant was employed on a full-time basis in a professional capacity and specifically in private practice. One hybrid professional worked exclusively in alternative dispute resolution interventions and as an advocate for children, while the other also practiced advocacy-based law. All 10 participants were involved in practices that were exclusively or almost exclusively devoted to family matters, and all 10 had extensive experience working in forensics or court-involved practice. Every participant had served as an expert witness of some type in custody matters in New Jersey and had experience testifying in court. Two participants reported that their expert testimony was limited to work as parenting coordinators or as guardians ad litem (court investigators and advocates) for children, while the remaining eight participants had performed a variety of forensic evaluation and assessment for the court related to custody of children in both divorce and nondissolution (never married parents) proceedings. Each participant was able to provide at least one example of a case they encountered in their capacity as

parenting coordinators involving IPV. None of the participants reported ever having been harmed by a client, though several reported having been threatened either personally or professionally. Each participant referenced in this study was assigned a pseudonym, which are listed here in no particular order: Susan, Marie, Penny, Grace, Wendy, Tina, Scott, Henry, Rodney, and Grayson. Table 1 shows the underlying professional disciplines of the participants.

Table 1

*Underlying Professional Disciplines of Participants*

Participant	Primary discipline
Susan	Hybrid-Lawyer and LCSW
Marie	PsyD Clinical Psychologist
Penny	Psychologist
Grace	DSW
Wendy	Hybrid-Lawyer and MSW
Tina	Psychologist (School Experience)
Scott	Psychologist (School Experience)
Henry	Psychologist
Rodney	Psychologist
Grayson	Psychologist

### **Data Collection**

During the initial telephone contact, I described the intended research study to each participant. I confirmed the criteria necessary for participation, specifically that the individual was a professional parenting coordinator and that the individual had experience working with HCC with IPV. Upon their stated willingness to participate, I briefly reviewed expectations for the interviewing process, as well as the terms of the Informed Consent document (See Appendix I). I scheduled the date, time, and location for the interview. Participation in the interview process consisted solely of the time commitment related to the initial interview, during which they were also asked to talk about their experiences, any nuances associated with IPV dynamics in a subclassification of high conflict parents, and any modifications they may have made to the traditional PC process to accommodate the needs of the described population. Interviews varied in length, with the longest being just over 2 hours in duration and the shortest being just under an hour in duration. None of the interviews were disrupted due to time constraints imposed by me or by the individual participants.

At the beginning of the interview, I verbally reviewed the Research Consent Form with the participants after they read it. Each participant and I then signed two original consent forms. The individual participants received an original signed Consent Form. Individual participants also completed demographic surveys. Interviews took place in five different counties in northwest New Jersey (Bergen, Essex, Morris, Union, and Somerset) and almost all in the private practice offices of the participants, where the participants felt comfortable and where confidentiality for the interviewees could best be

ensured. As noted, one participant sought to meet at her home. At the beginning of each interview, the participant and I went over the Walden University approved Consent Form and each participant received a signed copy before each interview commenced.

The method of data collection consisted of in-person interviews. Each interview included 11 core interview questions and follow-up questions related to the participants' experiences with high conflict parents with IPV. As noted above, the participant interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The sample size for my study was 10 participants. Saturation occurred early in the data collection phase. I attribute this largely to the level and years of experience of the participants and the fortuitous circumstances that my participants came from among the seasoned parenting coordinators in New Jersey. Their responses were well developed, detailed, and rich with examples of their proposed methods applied to practice. They were able to discuss tools and techniques that have been successful and those that have not been, along with some analysis of the likely reasons for degrees of success. During the initial data collection phase, no new properties or insights were established or developed based on the main categories. Further explanation of my data collection and analysis process is included in the data analysis section of this chapter. The next section of this chapter includes the procedures I used for ensuring trustworthiness of the research.

My laptop, specifically a MacBook Air, was used to audio record participant interviews via a program called Audionote, transferred to a dedicated password secure file on my computer, and then transcribed by a retained transcriber, who executed a confidentiality agreement. Furthermore, participants were asked to avoid identifying

information during their interviews, and the recordings were labeled with only the initials of the participants and the date of the interview, but not their actual names or locations. Accordingly, even the transcriber was not provided with identifying information related to the participants.

Audio files were transmitted to the transcriber via a password protected DropBox to which only the transcriber and I had access, and transcriptions were returned in identical fashion. The transcriber was also asked to de-identify any identifying information that any participant accidentally disclosed during an interview, to include neutralizing an actual name by replacing them with initials. Each final transcription was then stored in a password secured file before being hand-coded and transferred to NVivo10. The audio files and transcriptions are currently on a specific flash drive, which is stored in a locked container in a locked closet in my home. I personally reviewed the transcripts to ensure that any identifying information had been removed.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

I implemented several strategies to establish trustworthiness in my research and to maintain the credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of my study. Trustworthiness begins with self-disclosure of preconceived ideas of the research phenomena and the basis for those preconceived notions that may stem from the researcher's life. I included a discussion of my connection to this research earlier in this dissertation. Specifically, this includes acknowledgement of my own role as a parenting coordinator in New Jersey, my own experiences working with the described population, and my own professional association with members of the participant pool through my



involvement with the New Jersey Chapter of the AFCC. Further strategies I implemented to ensure trustworthiness included my interview procedures, the third-party transcription process, and use of NVivo10, and checking procedures.

I increased credibility for my grounded theory research through the use of consistent interview procedures, triangulation methods, and a detailed description of my study included in this chapter. To further credibility, consistent interview procedures included obtaining and maintaining copies of signed Informed Consent, completed demographic sheets, my own notes pertaining to each interview, digital audio recordings, and third-party professional transcription of all audio recordings. I reviewed and hand-coded all transcripts and then uploaded individual transcriptions to the NVivo 10 program for additional coding and analysis of the data.

An additional triangulation method occurred during the data collection process after the initial interview and transcription process concluded. My dissertation committee reviewed the transcription and provided feedback on the participant's responses and my interview techniques. I applied feedback provided by my methodologist to successive interview participants and the coding and analysis process. Dependability for my study included reviewing procedures with my dissertation methodologist during coding and data analysis. Upon completion of my 10<sup>th</sup> interview and the coding process, my methodologist and I reviewed the categories, themes, and coding. My methodologist also provided feedback and discussion on the levels of analysis of the data during the reviews. The establishment of criteria for saturation also affects trustworthiness in that there is an independent standard against which to measure the sameness and similarity of the

responses provided by research participants. For example, when the themes and concepts identified through NVivo-10 and in discussion with my dissertation committee mirrored those I derived in my hand-coding process and through journaling, I had an independent verification of my sense of saturation.

I maintained careful documentation of notes during interviews, coding of the data, the basis for the determination that data had reached saturation, and development of categories are all exercises that apply to the confirmability of my research. In addition, I used journaling as a method of confirmability. I transferred field notes taken and developed during the process, records of my research steps, and feedback received from my methodologist into a secured file on my computer.

In the next section of this chapter, I discuss the data analysis process and provide a foundation for the results of my study.

### **Data Analysis**

Coding is the process through which the researcher begins to sort through data in an effort to better understanding the meaning. Researchers categorize the derived data and attach meaningful labels to segments of the research searching for explanations and the foundation of the evolving theory. There are three levels of coding in the analysis of the data using classical grounded theory. These are: open, axial, and selective (Creswell, 2007; Janesick, 2011).

The foundation of a theory emerged for my study through further examination and analysis of the research, developed through the processes of coding, and categorizing of the data from interviews with participant parenting coordinators. Open coding is the first

phase of grounded theory. I coded concept with descriptive words attached and identified meaningful categories to which those concepts were assigned.

As the open coding phase progressed, I was able to identify a list of four main categories of response and seven general repetitive themes that became obvious throughout each transcript. These themes identified the participant's experiences, and their specific approaches and methodologies in their work with HCC with IPV. Moreover, through these common themes, I was able to also sense the early saturation of data as it became apparent that participants were reporting similar and sometimes identical practices in their interactions with HCC with IPV dynamics. After open coding interview transcripts, I reviewed the codes and I considered next steps for axial coding.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) described axial coding as the analysis phase involving the evaluation and comparison of the open-coded data as well as questioning of the concepts and picture that have started to emerge. During axial coding, several broader, main categories of analysis unfolded and the open coding categories fell into place as sub-categories. As described in Chapter 3, by asking participants specific questions and then comparing their responses during the data analysis phase, I identified multiple layers, enhancing my theoretical sensitivity while discovering and relating categories and themes with subcategories. The main categories consisted of Behaviors, Safety, Communication, and Environment.

Saturation of data in my study was achieved relatively early in the process. Interestingly, nine out of 10 participants offered very similar observations and responses to the core interview questions, and it was only one participant, who provided my third

interview, that offered some distinct viewpoints or viewpoints that deviated from the appearance of consensus among the others. Further review of the data suggested that this particular participant was more conservative than the other participants in her approach to forensic family work in general, in the context of PC and in her primary discipline. Moreover, this lone participant expressed the importance of practicing cautiously so as to not invite Board complaints or other professional-based attacks by disgruntled litigants.

As I continued to interview beyond my third participant, the data I transcribed and coded fit into existing codes. It became apparent that even though the third interviewee offered some different responses than the other participants, the general responses still fit into the specific existing codes and categories. If anything, the responses of the third interviewee served to expand open coding subcategories, even though those subcategories were not addressed in the same fashion by subsequent interviewees. There was not a need to generate new codes at this point, with analysis resulting in saturation of data. Upon completion of analysis of the axial coding phase, my dissertation methodologist and I discussed the categories that emerged and confirmed the likelihood that data had saturated. This consultation resulted in the identification of the central phenomena associated with PC. The next step was the implementation of selective coding of characteristics and themes previously identified and expanded through the open and axial phases of coding.

Straus and Corbin (1990) also defined the selective coding phase as the final phase in the grounded theory data analysis process. During selective coding, I was able to identify and confirm a single central phenomenon that emerged from my data. I

maintained four main categories of focus presented by my interviewees and was able to better concentrate the subcategories applicable to each. My next step in the selective coding process was to integrate the two phenomena into a central phenomenon. The story line of my participants evolved from the data, thus allowing me to see a clearer picture for the foundation of my theory. The labels for the four main categories remained the same (Straus & Corbin, 1990).

### **Descriptions of the Four Main Categories**

Adaptive Parenting Coordination for Intimate Partner Violence Theory (APCIPV) is essentially evolves through considerations and appropriate adaptation in four pillar categories: behaviors, safety, communication, and environment. The first category labeled as *behaviors* relates to the manner in which clients conduct themselves in the PC process, leading up to and during the process, and the manner in which professional parenting coordinators react and respond. Under this category are the subcategories of expectations based on traditional process, preconceived notions based upon confirmation of IPV, typologies of IPV, and the responsive presence of the parenting coordinators. Participants agreed that each couple set is individual in nature and it becomes critical to get to know and to understand the special nuances attributable to each couple. A common phrase that arose in this discussion was simply that “one size does not fit all.” Participants also commonly reported that “not all couples are good candidates for this process” and “not all domestic violence cases are alike.” In general, participants reported that the tone and manner in which their establish their presence as a parenting coordinator in a case makes a difference in terms of how clients behave during the process, regardless

of whether the clients have IPV in their dynamic. In this context, participants in my study discussed the importance of conveying confidence and expertise as a parenting coordinator. Henry emphasized that PC is not for someone who is faint of heart, as it is a process that requires the ability to make decisions, be responsive, and remain unflinching in the face of occasional efforts of the parties to intimidate or change the position of the PC. One participant, Grace, described these factors as the foundation for respect, noting: “if the clients respect you, they are more likely to listen to your recommendations and you have a greater opportunity for helping them change the way they deal with each other.”

It is in this category that the participants revealed one of the most significant findings for this study – namely, that degrees of behaviors associated with IPV dynamics are relatively common between HCC regardless of whether there is a formal accusation, adjudication, or label of IPV placed on the couple. Grace described “sometimes the clients who have had restraining orders in the past behave better than those who do not and never have.” Grace also shared that it is pretty common for HCC to report incidents of pushing or shoving, threats, name-calling, and arguments that erupted into a physical event. In some fashion, all 10 participants made similar statements. Penny discussed how, in her relatively small office, she would not leave clients alone together in the waiting room and would schedule appointments accordingly so this would not occur. She stated, “You never know what is going to happen even when they do not have a restraining order. There is a lot of anger and hostility in these cases.” Henry described the physical behavior of a client who is particularly agitated and said, “sometimes

someone will stand to intimidate the other person or voices get raised and there is yelling. I have to intervene so it doesn't escalate." Marie identified PC clients as often "being out of control" in their dynamic with one another regardless of a formal or recognized history of IPV and noted that "just being in the same place together triggers all sorts of anger and bad feelings. Rodney suggested that, with all clients in PC, "it is necessary to give them rules, but to also meet them where they are." Rodney added, "It doesn't always matter what really happened as much as it matters that you understand how they feel about what they believe happened." Rodney vividly described that female clients often tell him that they are "scared" of their former spouse. He said, "I meet with them separately. I make sure they do not run into each other. I make sure when they are together that they both know I will intervene if I have to. It doesn't matter if I think she has a valid reason to be afraid. It matters that I understand that the process will not be productive if she is afraid during the session."

Participants generally agreed that for many HCC without documented or formal IPV adjudications such reported incidents were isolated or situational in nature, meaning that such incidents never occurred prior to the decision of the couple to divorce, did not re-occur after the divorce was final, and actually seemed to be related to escalated emotions associated with the separation and divorce experience.

The second core category labeled as *safety* is more concentrated and relates to determinations of appropriateness as to whether a couple are good candidates for PC notwithstanding IPV experiences and where to draw the line. Under this category, consideration is given to the safety risks for clients and for the professionals involved in

the PC process. Penny, who expressed discomfort with taking cases with formal adjudications of domestic violence, was willing to accept cases with reports by one or both members of a couple describing isolated or situational couple violence. However, all 10 participants agreed that cases with substantial or extensive histories of domestic violence, especially where the identified aggressor was also reported as having been violent with third parties outside the couple dynamic, such as in the context of

The third category labeled *communication* is a collection of themes related to the establishment of guidelines for communication between the parents for the exchange of necessary information as a foundation for joint decision-making in the best interests of the clients' common children. Subcategories include a variety of modes of communication, including joint meetings, the "shuttle diplomacy" variation, separate meetings, telephone conferences, and e-mail – all of which include emphasis on the importance of establishing protocols for clients to follow. Participants varied in response regarding effective forms of communication. Penny and Grace indicated that they preferred not to work with e-mails, with Penny indicating that she would not be copied on emails between parties and would only view essential hard copies should the clients choose to produce them. Henry, Rodney, Marie, Susan and Wendy viewed being copied as parenting coordinator on emails between the parents as an opportunity to monitor communications. Henry stated, "by reviewing the emails, I am able to assess the dynamic as it is, but also to watch to see how they do with modifications and edits I suggest. It is important to see the changes rather than to just assume they are occurring – and if they aren't happening, as a PC I know I have to develop other strategies." Those



who preferred to work with emails spoke about the use of red-lining or a process by which they could receive and correct an email from one party to another as a means of filtering and improving communication to reduce the potential for further IPV, at least from a verbal perspective. “Some people are very visual,” Scott reported, “And it is like being a teacher. By marking up their email, they can see what is right and what is wrong – but I also like to show them how it could be said better. You know, to say the same thing but in a non-offensive way. The message is more likely to be received if the other side is not put on the defensive.”

The fourth and final main category labeled as *environment* is focused on modifications implemented by parenting coordinators to accommodate the intensity that accompanies high conflict parents with the added component of IPV. Subcategories include consideration of the physical set-up of the locations at which the parenting coordinators provide services, such as their offices; arrangements made for specialized ingress and egress for clients; emergency planning; and the manner in which the process is implemented. Susan described a conference room in her office, with a long table, that allowed for parents to be seated in a manner that created sufficient space between them so as to reduce the potential for physical harm. She also identified seating parties in a manner that would put an identified victim nearest to the door so the identified victim could leave the room quickly if the need arose. Susan stated, “It is less intimidating if someone knows they can leave quickly if a problem arises. Though I have never had a problem on that level, I find that feeling safe is a mindset.”

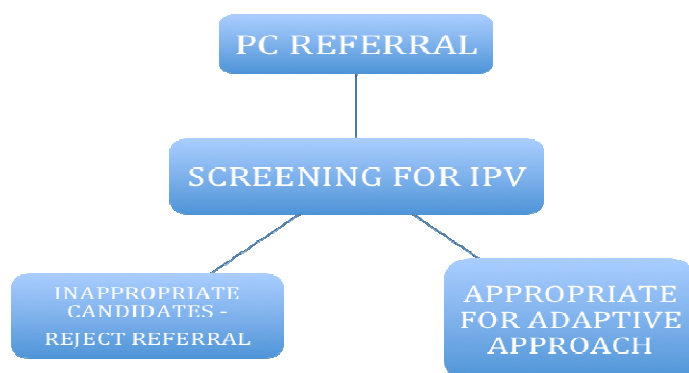
### **Impact of Journaling**

My own experiences as a parenting coordinator afforded me a unique additional angle for data analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Mertens, 2010). The experiences of the participants as reported by them largely resonated with me and my reflections on my own work with HCC with IPV were consistent with the information provided by the participants. While my own work is not a direct part of this study, thoughts and concepts reflected in my journal served as an additional consideration when identifying themes and categories, as well as the saturation of data. Had my experiences been drastically different than what was reported by members of my sample, there would have been an added complication and I might have chosen to continue interviewing to determine if the data had indeed saturated or if my experiences in the context of work with the described population were merely an anomaly? Fortunately, that was not the case. Significantly, however, the participants in my study offered a collective concept related to the adaptive modification of the PC process that I had not previously recognized or considered.

### **Data Analysis Results**

Adaptive Parenting Coordination for IPV (APCIPV) theory emerged from the data collection and analysis phase of my study through the stories provided by the participants. This theory began with the consensus that PC could, and indeed, should be offered to HCC with IPV, subject to screening focused on the IPV typology and with certain extreme cases ruled out for participation. Essentially, when a referral is received, the parenting coordinator should first screen for IPV in the relational dynamic. However, identifying an IPV dynamic is not simply about confirming the existence of a restraining

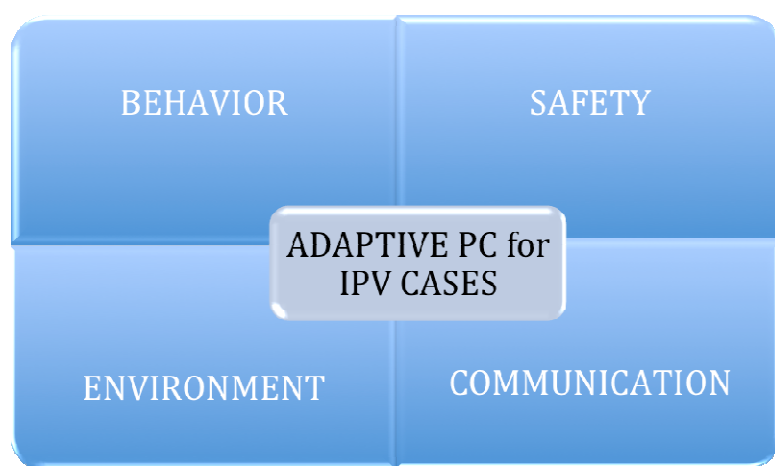
order between the parties. Screening involves consideration of the manner in which the parties behave toward one another, and how each of them feels, as well as whether they are open to making changes in the way they communicate and coparent. In cases where there is a high risk of physical violence either by one party against the other, by both, or potentially against the parenting coordinator, the parties are likely inappropriate candidates for the PC process, and the PC should decline to accept the case. However, in cases where the IPV dynamic is manageable such that the PC identifies minimal or no risk of physical danger, the case could be accepted and the PC would proceed through the adaptive approach (Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Decision making model for IPV PV referrals.

Participants identified specific behaviors of the clients that would allow those clients to be categorized as IPV clients, and the behavior of the clients with each other and toward the parenting coordinator once the process did commence. Participants also focused on safety concerns and identified themes for ensuring their own safety and the safety of the clients in the PC process, with many identified themes overlapping with the areas of communication and environment. The participants spoke about the purpose of communication between co-parents, and of modes of communication that could be

modified as needed to allow for improved efficacy in communication between IPV couples with children. Finally, the parenting coordinators discussed environmental and environmentally-related process modifications, again to ensure safety, and to allow the PC intervention to meet the intended purpose notwithstanding the additional intensity and potential risk posed by this particular type of clients. I substantiated this theory through exploring and providing individual participant accounts based on the four main categories of the theory. Once the case is deemed appropriate to proceed, the parenting coordinator should make adaptations to the PC process for the specific couple to address the nuances associated with their relational dynamic based upon the four main categories discussed (Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Adaptive parenting coordination for IPV cases (APCIPV).

In presenting summaries of key points raised by each of the participants, I have endeavored to maintain their confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms. New Jersey is a relatively small state, and the community of practitioners working as parenting

coordinators is likely even smaller. All 10 participants are active in the practice of PC, well known and well respected. For that reason, I have chosen to minimize references to any information that might allow anyone reading this study to identify them. I have also taken care with the reiterations of stories and experiences so as to not identify individuals who may have been clients of my participants.

### **Susan**

Susan was a hybrid professional, having a law degree, as well as a Masters in Social Work. She was licensed in both areas and practiced almost exclusively in the field of PC. Susan has served as a parenting coordinator in hundreds of cases over the last ten years and she has worked with many couples with adjudicated and unadjudicated domestic violence dynamics. It was through Susan that the first similarities in behaviors of traditional high conflict parents, and those specifically labeled as having IPV, were identified. Susan described, “It is pretty common for the parties to complain about pushing and shoving, throwing things, name-calling – you know, that kind of thing, even though neither of them ever actually filed for a restraining order. Sometimes even the police have been to the house, but they just never pursued it. Some of the cases without a restraining order are worse than the ones with a restraining order where, you know, someone called someone a name or made a threat that they probably didn’t mean.” She added, “I am not saying that the cases with restraining orders are not serious. Some are and some are not. I am just saying that sometimes the stories I hear from people without restraining orders – well, the behavior is even worse.” I naturally wondered if this was an anomaly or simply because Susan also provided my first interview. However, as I

progressed through interviews with each of my participants, there were striking similarities regarding the lack of distinction attributed to those couples with formal IPV experiences as opposed to those HCC without formal IPV experiences.

Susan offered the longest interview. During her interview, Susan grappled with whether or not certain clients actually had restraining orders or had ever been to court due to domestic violence, as she recounted allegations, accusations, and incidents described by those clients clearly meeting the definition of IPV.

**Behaviors.** Susan described an initial assessment process whereby she meets with each party of the couple individually to allow each party an opportunity “to vent” and “to tell me what they see as issues, why there is a parenting coordinator, what their particular attitude is.” Susan has handled cases where there are temporary or final restraining orders because the clients agreed to be involved in the process. She stated “some judges change the title of the intervention so the work can be done.” She added that there are sometimes allegations of IPV which “turn out not to be true.” Susan said that while women usually have the label of “victim” she has had cases where the opposite was true and she opined that it was “important to observe and get to know the individual parties and not to make assumptions about their dynamic.” Susan underscored the importance of building rapport with both clients regardless of IPV and said “trust is the foundation of a successful outcome.” Susan also pointed out that “clients are often angered by situations and that their individual behavior might be poor with their former spouse, but not anywhere else.” In such cases, Susan believed such a parent could be diffused so that behavior would improve over time. “Sometimes,” Susan said, “The anger

dissipates over time and as people go on with their lives, they let go of some of the bad feelings.” She added, “However, some people just fester when their issues and concerns are not addressed. PC gives them a platform – someone who will listen and hopefully not judge.”

**Safety.** She added that she had never been physically threatened, but that disgruntled litigants had certainly threatened her with Board Complaints and professional attacks. “There was this one guy,” Susan shared, “who wanted me off the case. He filed a frivolous complaint alleging all sorts of things that were not true. The aggravating part is I had to spend hours responding and providing the evidence to refute his claims.” Similarly, disgruntled litigants have tried to have her removed from cases, and she has also stepped down from cases where she believed she was no longer effective. Susan talked about transference and projection as common in this work. In other words, the threatened action is often not actually about something the PC did or did not do, but rather a way to act out the anger they feel. She explained, “It could be that I remind them of someone else, or that they take it out on me because they can not get to the ex-wife. Maybe it is because I agreed with the other party and they just refuse to see that my recommendation is about the merits of the issue and not about favoring the other guy. I feel like ‘go ahead, if you need to do that.’ Whatever they need to do to process those feelings and be able to move on, within reason. I do not take it personally and I know it really is not about me.”

Separate meetings, meaning meetings with each party separately, is an accommodation when one party does not want to meet in the same space with the other.

Sometimes it is not about actual safety, but about perceived safety. Susan described another case where “a woman obtained a temporary restraining order, which was later dismissed by the court following a hearing.” She stated, “the husband was very resentful that the wife had ever filed the domestic violence case.” Whether or not there had been domestic violence prior to the issuance of the temporary restraining order, Susan encountered verbal behavior with IPV traits. She was able to have that couple meet together in her office without incident, but communication via e-mail was described as poor and derogatory in nature. Susan also suggested that when there are safety concerns, it can also be prudent to introduce a recommendation for individual therapy for the person acting out and a client can be referred to anger management counseling as well. She stated, “I am not the therapist. I can manage their reactions toward one another so it does not get out of control and I can tell them what to do by making recommendations – but that does not really fix the underlying problem. I mean, I use my skills as a therapist and I can help – but that is not the same as the guy sitting down with his own therapist to really talk about why he is so angry or what may have lead to him doing this or that. It just offers a much deeper exploration of self. A PC can only do so much within the role, but the PC can and really should make recommendations for clients to get individual help when they need it.”

**Communication.** Susan identified anger and frustration as factors in the poor communication styles that come up in PC. Essentially, “some clients seem to have an inability to get past their negative and emotive orientations. When their thoughts are emotional, the words they choose to communicate reflect that emotion.” Susan explained



that it is critical for the parenting coordinator “to maintain a calm, focused demeanor no matter what happens.” Susan identified parameters for communication as more important in cases with IPV dynamics, but she uses parameters “and boundaries” in all cases. Poor communication was viewed by Susan as “the biggest issue for correction with high conflict couples” – with an understanding that even small positive changes can modify the parenting dynamic for the better. Susan added, “Even if it gets a little better, it is still better.”

**Environment.** Susan described cases in which she has met with clients with IPV at the local courthouse, where Sheriff Officers were present. She has also kept parties in separate spaces in her office, or at opposite sides of a long table in a conference room in her office. She talked about the importance of varying arrival and departure times “so clients do not end up sitting together in the lobby or running into each other in the parking lot.” She also mentioned allowing the “victim” to leave first while the aggressor waiting in the office. Susan said, “This way, there is less chance for a potential problem.”

### **Marie**

Marie has been a parenting coordinator “in some form or fashion for more than 20 years.” She has also handled hundreds of cases and has worked with couples with domestic violence dynamics, both adjudicated and not. Marie spoke at length about her own training experiences and the critical importance of individuals doing this work being well-trained and expert. She was very involved in efforts in New Jersey to create legislation governing PC practice and continues to devote herself to such efforts.

**Behaviors.** Marie stated that cases vary in degree of severity and she pointed out that “some of the conflict could be prior accusations of domestic violence or psychological abuse, power imbalance, something, but they have never ended up with a final restraining order. Many of these people have had TROs for sure that come in.” She added “I think part of the problem with New Jersey is there is no differentiation between the one case where the guy throws the spaghetti against the wall and a case I had where the guy was taping his wife at the instruction of his lawyer. The final restraining order is not necessarily diagnostic in the slightest.” She also elaborated, “I see lots and lotsa bullies in here; be they men or women.” Boundary development becomes very important in this work according to Marie.

**Safety.** Marie ends sessions immediately if anything that even closely resembles violence occurs. Her focus, however, is on “keeping the children out of the middle.” She stated that high conflict has a negative impact on the children, but that “children are at risk of psychological harm when they are put in the middle of parents with little to no communication due to domestic violence.” Marie introduced the typology of domestic violence and spoke about the different kinds of domestic violence and how some of the behaviors are actually common regardless of whether high conflict parents have restraining orders. When there are allegations of IPV, Marie “assesses to see where the couple fits in terms of the typology” and she is interested in “whether the dynamic is situational or if it is rooted in psychopathology.” Marie stated that “not all couples are good candidates for parenting coordination” and that cases with “pathological IPV pose significant increased safety risk.” In one case she handled, her efforts to be a buffer for

the victim resulted in a shift where “it ended up becoming my relationship with the perpetrator and I was getting abuse in the same fashion. I was afraid of him. It was constant threats. He would, like show up to the office and wanna wait in the waiting room until I could see him and you know, scream and carry on. It was displaced onto me. And teachers, not just me, but everybody who came into contact with this particular guy. He had a real rage problem.” She said it is rare, however, for her to feel afraid. When she has felt that way in the past, she has reported it to the court, has gotten out of certain cases and has even had restraining orders in her favor. When someone needs outside intervention or personal therapy, the parenting coordinator can refer someone for individual therapy to address behavior and the PC can become the “captain of the ship” with a multidisciplinary team designed to change some of the behaviors that are causing or perpetuating conflict.

**Communication.** Marie reported that one of the first things she does with a new case is to assess “what state of severity and how broken it is.” She added “one of the first things I do is try to put structure cause I think structure and guidelines and rules helps when there is high conflict.” She offers the clients handouts with guidelines for e-mail communication, how to write the emails, what is acceptable and what is not. She provides similar guidelines for text messaging and telephone communication. She also reviews calendars with the parties to confirm the parenting schedule and eliminate conflict before it happens. Clarity for the parties reduces the potential for conflict according to Marie. “They can coparent in a business like manner. I do not think they are ever going to be buddy buddy or friends or anything, but that they can take the emotions out of it.”

**Environment.** Marie stated, “It is a liability issue so in those cases I have people come at different times, I usually have the one party come five minutes earlier or 10 minutes earlier. I have them leave at different times. I usually let the victim so to speak leave early.” Marie expressed concern about consistently meeting with people separately due to the “suspiciousness and lack of trust” and the increased chance that one party will believe the other party has an advantage. She addresses this by doing “a lot of conference calling.” She also said, “I think I try to tailor make it to each family that comes in. It might be more compliance monitoring, but it is the facts that dictate my role and how I do the work. It is such a hybrid model. It has to be neutral, transparent, consistent, accountable.”

### **Penny**

Penny is also a parenting coordinator who has practiced in this role in different contexts over the course of more than 10 years. She is very conservative in her practice approaches and closely adheres to guidelines and protocols for practice. Her office environment is noteworthy because clients walk into a small lobby and then into her private office. There are limited options for ingress or egress - that is for entrance and exit, and there appeared to be only one option for exiting in an emergency. Her office is located in her personal home and it is set back off the street in a very quiet, low-traffic neighborhood.

**Behaviors.** Penny was clear about the typologies of IPV and expressed that “a lot of times TROs are really more having to do with just the initial breakup. So you know, it is not unusual in the course of a divorce especially in the beginning phases for there to be

a lot of anger and a lot of times, the police are called, and a TRO is issued, and it is not true domestic violence. Penny does not accept cases with final restraining orders or with “true domestic violence.” Some of the cases of this nature with which she has worked either involved past IPV behaviors which were not adjudicated or even presented to the court or cases where domestic violence issues were brought to her attention after she was already involved in the case. In cases where allegations were alarming or where there was a restraining order about which she was not aware, Penny has written to the court to withdraw from the appointment. Penny described a single case where there had been an incident in her office. Specifically, one parent brought a companion with her to the office for the meeting. At one point, that parent was in the office with Penny while the other parent and the companion remained together in the lobby. The door was closed and Penny did not see what occurred. However, she “heard a commotion and opened the door to find the two men in the midst of a physical altercation.” The police were called. Penny resigned from the case because she determined the couple “was too high conflict.” When asked if she is afraid for her own safety after the described incident, Penny responded “Well, going forward, yes. You know with other people, I wanted to make sure that I really screened cases more carefully and definitely from that point forward have always asked has there been any parenting coordination before too.” Penny also does not take cases where the parties “have failed parenting coordination in the past.”

**Safety.** Penny expressed that she does not believe cases with Final restraining Orders are amenable to parenting coordination and suggested it is not necessarily safe to take those cases. When necessary to accommodate the discomfort of the parties, Penny

has had clients come into her private office while the other waits in the lobby area, but she has done so in short intervals and never for meetings. Meetings are always joint, or the parties would not be candidates for her process. Penny stated, “When you meet separately, you open the door to one assuming you are favoring the other.” She added, “These clients are very suspicious of one another and we do not need to feed into that.” The only individual meeting is the intake that carries the purpose of gathering intake information and history. For safety purposes, Penny also described a protocol for having the parties come and leave at different intervals “to eliminate the chance for conflict in the parking lot.” She stated, “Within the session if it’s getting a bit out of control I will have one of them leave and sit in the waiting room to calm down. Kind of like a time out.” Penny reported that she ends sessions if there is disruptive or threatening behavior and a safety issue.

**Communication.** All meetings conducted by Penny are joint sessions, and it has been her experience that clients with isolated IPV or situational IPV are “reasonably well behaved in session.” She reported that she has never had a problem with that population and is willing to work with them. In other words, Penny did not view couples who report a single domestic violence incident, such as “in the heat of a bad argument” as problematic, nor did she have a concern about couples whose “domestic violence only erupted in the context of the separation and divorce but never happened before and has not happened since.” Penny did not work with emails but allows clients to bring hard copies to her to review if the clients believe the emails are relevant. Penny added, “Emails can get out of control and are very time-consuming.” Penny also does not do

telephone conferencing routinely and will only utilize that mode of communication “occasionally in established cases if an issue arises that needs prompt attention.” Penny noted that rules are highly important for the establishments of boundaries and protocols for behaviors in session. She noted that clearly communicated rules establish expectations. She also stated that parenting coordinators, “notwithstanding IPV issues first try to help the parties communicate and make decisions for their own children. When such efforts fail, the PC should clearly communicate recommendations for resolution” and should do so promptly.

**Environment.** Penny did not modify her environment, other than making arrangements for staggering arrival and departure times of clients. However, she added that in the case where the physical incident did occur in her office, the wife was in her office waiting and the other parent had just left the meeting so he could vacate the premises first. The incident occurred in the lobby before he exited the building. Staggering arrival and departure times for Penny were also about discomfort and the preference of the clients, and not necessarily just about domestic violence. She offered, “Even when there is no domestic violence per se, people sometimes are uncomfortable running into each other unsupervised and that is when arguments erupt.”

### **Grace**

Grace, a similarly long-term practitioner, advised me that she recently decided she would not be doing parenting coordination any more. She described the work as “extremely taxing” and actually described “the intensity of the client population regardless of whether the presenting couples experienced IPV issues.” She stated “my

impression has been over the years that parenting coordination was the wastebasket where the court threw a lot of cases they just did not know what to do about.” However, she believed the “couples with IPV could be candidates for the process depending on the nature of the IPV and a determination that the level of risk was not too high.” She described parenting coordination as “mediation with a kick,” but added that a key difference being that mediation “is a closed process, while parenting coordination is not.” Grace did not decline cases based upon an IPV dynamic between the parties, but she would decline cases if the parties had tried parenting coordination with another profession, and failed. She explained that the dynamics in such cases are fairly similar whether the parties have formally reported domestic violence and obtained restraining orders or they have experienced incidents but not reported them. Generally, the process Grace implements is the same across her client base and she offered observations about techniques that have been problematic for her across the board.

**Behaviors.** Grace started her process differently than some of her colleagues. Specifically, she would meet with the clients jointly, primarily “because I did not want them to be concerned about who got their foot in the door first...a lot of people have concerns about that.” Very early in her process, Grace was focused on the interactions between the parties and the immediate opportunity to observe it. She was open to individual meetings as needed and as the process evolved.

**Safety.** Grace thought that domestic violence “is a very tricky issue.” Individual meetings, Grace explained, “Engenders distrust.” She will stop a joint session if the parties are “out of control” and have one of them step outside the room for “a grownup



time-out.” Safety considerations vary, according to Grace, depending on the nature of the behavior defined as IPV. Grace stated, “If it was something physical, I am not sure I can be of help because I am little and I am not strong. I mean I think sometimes I can be strong, forceful, but if something happened I do not feel that I could control it.” Grace also offered a procedure for staggering arrival and departure times so the feuding parents with IPV histories do not encounter each other in the lobby or parking lot unsupervised. Some domestic violence, according to Grace, is not rooted in physical violence, but rather rooted in control. The parenting coordinator can take the control over the process by making decisions/recommendations with confidence and by conveying to the aggressive party that they are not the one in charge.” Grace described a case where the mother was verbally and emotionally abusive to the father, always threatening to go to court and take the child away from him. In that case, Grace focused on communication boundaries and tried to eliminate the use of threatening language, even though the threats were not physical.

**Communication.** Grace added that she would have telephone calls with the parties “only if there was a follow up issue that I needed to address.” She does not email at all, and explained that she does not even have Internet in her office. She added, “I think one can get carried away with emails, and they think, you know, they are sending an email at midnight and why have you not responded by 7am. She also does not work with editing client communication.” Grace explained, “I tried that. I applaud anyone who is able to do that. But the amount of time, energy and money that goes into that. There are no parameters. There was one case that was so labor intensive that I decided

after that I was not going to do it. I do set protocols for emails and communication.”

Grace noted that she would limit communications between high conflict parents, such as suggesting no more than one or two emails a day; or by arranging parenting exchanges at the school to keep the parents from having contact with one another. When parents email one another, they do not need to copy Grace – but “emails need to be brief, informative, and not confrontational.” Her focus is for communication to be “effective.” When she does review emails, she asks the clients, “What was the purpose of this? Or what would your son think if he knew this is how you were talking to each other?” For Grace “it is helping them to understand how to communicate to make sure they do communicate, to make sure they do not communicate too much, and that the purpose of the communication is informative.” She added “communication is not just about setting up boundaries with you as the professional, but so they have boundaries with each other.” Grace viewed negative behaviors as being rooted in a “symbolic divorce” or the end of a relationship. Understanding this concept provided insight for the development of a process designed to guide the parties toward more effective communication.

**Environment.** Grace talked about the importance of where folks sit in her office and the importance of “allowing the person who feels vulnerable to be in a place where they can leave free from interference.” Grace thought that environment was partially about establishing relationship between the parenting coordinator and the parties. If the parties participated in the process in a welcoming, safe, environment and trusted their PC, they were more likely to conduct themselves appropriately.

**Wendy**

Wendy was the other hybrid professional interviewed. Wendy maintains a practice through which she provides parenting coordination services, child advocacy, and also representation of individual clients in the court system as a lawyer. She is involved in collaborative law efforts and highly invested in collaborative and conciliatory practices. Wendy received a Bachelors Degree in child development and family relations. She worked for a child protective services agency, received her Masters in Social Work and then went to law school. Though she does not hold a mental health license, she is a licensed attorney. Wendy saw parenting coordination as an intervention that could be helpful in a “variety of contexts, not that it is only needed in the most high context situations.” She said that reserving PC “for only the worst cases has kind of served to demean it in a way or make it seem like it is a problem in itself.” Wendy has had extensive training as a parenting coordinator and views the training as very important – but she added, “You know, you can train people [referring to PCs] forever and they never get it, and then there are people who are just great at it. Extensive mediation training and regarding domestic violence are also important.” Wendy has been very instrumental with efforts to establish PC Guidelines and legislation in New Jersey.

**Behaviors.** Wendy viewed parenting coordination “as a tool to help implement whatever the parenting plan is so that people who have problems scheduling, have problems communicating, they have problems – and sometimes it is high conflict, just with access to kids.” She stated that she has had many cases with allegations of IPV and emphasized, “it is the behavior that defines the condition – not the existence of a

restraining order.” Wendy mentioned that many HCC have IPV behaviors, but do not necessarily receive the legal label. She also distinguished circumstances and said that an isolated incident or a case where violent interaction is mutual or situational might not be deserving of the label. Established boundaries are very important for managing behaviors and setting expectations about conduct in the office and during sessions. Wendy shared that, for some reason, “I tend to see more men who are victims, not because I view it that way but I’ve just seen more of that.” She described an incident where a female client just would not let her male counterpart leave. “She was standing in front of his car so he could not exit the parking lot. I mean, that is a form of domestic violence.”

Wendy does not see the need to terminate a case because of an accusation or even an incident of poor behavior. In fact, she often meets with the couple together to assess how they interact with one another. In some cases, “people make allegations which are just not actionable and would not likely result in a TRO. In other cases, someone makes allegations to get the upper hand.” She returned to the example of the woman in the parking lot who would not allow her spouse to leave. She said a similar incident occurred again but later on and the woman was apparently hit by the car (no injury), applied and received a restraining order – which was later dismissed because of the role the woman played in the event.

**Safety.** Wendy reported, “I think domestic violence cases should have the whole range of alternate dispute resolution, and I consider parenting coordination to be in that category, available to them. I do not think there is one kind of domestic violence and I

have seen lots of domestic violence.” She offered the example of someone who has a temper tantrum over a specific issue being a candidate for mediation “with the right mediator, with training to manage the situation.” She offered the example of someone who has rage issues and added that the condition does not necessarily mean there is a cycle of violence or a predictable pattern. Wendy noted that behaviors vary, so safety is partially about knowing the dynamic of the presenting clients.

**Communication.** Wendy, like many of the others, established protocols for separate and staggering arrivals and departures of clients, “especially when there is a potential for altercation or explosive interaction.” She described neutrality and trust as important factors for the success of the process. Parenting coordinators, according to Wendy, “need to be responsive, but also clear about their recommendations and the reasons behind them.” In terms of communication between the parties, Wendy employs corrective and educative tools in her practice. She also utilizes email protocols for guiding the nature and frequency of communication between the parties – and since IPV behaviors are common with the populations seen in PC, this is particularly helpful. Structure is beneficial “even though it sounds like I am treating them like children.” She cautions very high conflict parties not to discuss issues outside her office or without her help to avoid escalation of tempers and ugly exchanges in front of the children. She also edits email communications to reduce or eliminate accusatory or inflammatory language so the email has the sole purpose of conveying necessary information between the parents. “This is hands-on. We have to show them how” she explained.

**Environment.** Wendy has a large office with several conference rooms available. She often meets with clients in a conference room so the parties have more space. Wendy does not really modify her process or environment even when there are allegations of or IPV behaviors. She emphasized, “If I am attempting to avoid conflict it does not matter to me whether it was physical violence or harassment or stalking, it is I guess I want to be more future focused. If I am setting up parameters then it is in a public place. It is to avoid the he said, she said, to avoid anything, to reduce the conflict regardless of how bad the conflict may have been or whether it is physical or not. We are trying to avoid a lot of contact.”

### **Tina**

I met with Tina at her home. She was newer to parenting coordination than some of the other interviewees, but had nonetheless been serving as a parenting coordinator for approaching 10 years. She described her work as “parenting coordination light, meaning I confine myself to helping the parents carry out the parenting plan and to resolve disagreements and disputes.” She stated that she “generally meets with both parents together for the first time and then with each of them individually so they can speak freely and give me whatever background information that they feel is necessary, and then subsequently with them together as much as possible.” She acknowledged there is “a wide range” of presenting cases and noted that the typology associated with presenting IPV in a case made a difference in terms of whether the clients were appropriate candidates for the PC intervention. Initially, she identified as having had one IPV case, but as she spoke and considered the topic, she realized she had more cases, and that it

was difficult to distinguish cases with formal adjudication from those with histories, allegations, and experiences, but no adjudication.

**Behaviors.** Tina said of IPV “there can be violence that had a long-standing history within the relationship but this is nothing novel toward the end of the relationship, or trying to resolve the conflicts that have arisen upon dissolution of the relationship. And that more likely reflects a personality style, if you will of a person wanting control. There are extremes on the continuum that have to be treated very differently.” Again, the circumstances and nature of the behavior should be considered, as domestic violence is “not a one layer concept.” Tina agreed with other interviewees that extreme cases, with a pathological pre-disposition or propensity toward violence were more than likely not appropriate for PC due to the fact that such dynamics presented a higher level of risk for the parties and even potentially for the professional.

**Safety.** Tina said of IPV, “the type of violence can range from the more situational based, something that is more specific to or in the relationship or the earlier phases of developing how the children are to be scheduled or managed.” In the case she initially identified, Tina stated that she wrote to the assigning judge and requested that the order be modified to allow the parties to work with her in the PC process. Tina also staggered arrivals and departures for HCC that were more likely to have negative or violent exchanges unless supervised. She stated “the vulnerable party should leave first and exit the premises before the aggressive party left so there was no chance of confrontation.”

**Communication.** Tina stated that the parenting coordinator “needed to be responsive and needed to make timely recommendations when required, and to offer reasons for any recommendations that were made.” She added, “You cannot just say ‘because I said so’ and expect they will just follow the recommendation without question.” She explained that a parenting coordinator should “maintain neutrality, but also have a good relationship with both parties, built on trust.” Tina shared that she had a case where there was an FRO and where the parties could not meet together – but she said the same couple visited a boarding school and toured together and had other described events where they were in the same space without incident. Tina also worked with email and communication protocols to weed out extraneous allegations and accusatory language so the parties could focus on exchanging necessary information only.

**Environment.** Tina was clear that she would not be involved in extreme cases with hard-core histories of physical violence and threats of violence, regardless of whether there was currently or ever had been a restraining order. Tina described “shuttle diplomacy” where she would carry communication between clients in two different rooms. She shared a story where the woman refused to be in the same room with her former husband due to his “machine gun style of communication” and her feeling that she was always being attacked and intimidated. Tina tried to explain that “shuttle diplomacy” was an expensive and time-consuming approach – but the woman insisted. Tina accommodated her until Tina suffered an injury that made it harder for Tina to get around. She asked the parties to meet together as “a personal favor” and the parties



agreed and their behavior drastically improved and the meeting was successful. Tina believes that high expectations for the parties that they can behave well actually invites better behavior.

### **Scott**

Though Scott was also newer to the parenting coordination field, his experience with law enforcement and also as a mental health professional in a school setting, lent itself naturally to the new role. He had been working as a parenting coordinator for “about 5 or 6 years” at the time of the interview. He spoke about the training he had taken for the parenting coordination role, and added that he is a certified mediator. Scott meets with new clients individually for background and to assess the situation. “I try to just meet with them as a couple and I really do not have any separate communication with them other than that. On some rare occasions if one want to meet with me, I will also have a meeting with the other individually – so it is parallel.”

**Behaviors.** Scott described the population with whom parenting coordinators work as being “high conflict and having suspicious natures.” He said, “it is not uncommon for one party to behave like a bully against the other.” He stated that “it is not uncommon for one party to agree with a recommendation, while the other does not.” He described a “high presence of personality disorder and personality disorder traits among PC clients,” which he added “is a further complication to an already complex dynamic.” Scott described himself as “no nonsense” and also saw his physical presence as a deterrent to poor behavior. He stated that he was able to sit in the room in a manner so he could quickly intervene before an aggressive party could get to or harm a victim – and he

believed his physical appearance and the fact that he was male offered vulnerable parties a sense of security and safety, allowing them to feel protected and more comfortable. On occasion, he has simply had to stand or slightly elevate his voice to tell an offending party to “knock it off” as an exchange started to escalate.

**Safety.** Scott had no problem working with the IPV population in PC, but like others emphasized that not all cases were appropriate. Safety is a huge consideration and “it is important to screen for cases where extreme behaviors, to include involvement of weapons or physical violence are real concerns.” Scott implements staggering arrivals and departures with his clients who should not have chance meetings and who should not be left alone together. He invites the identified victim to leave first so the vulnerable party is long gone before the aggressive party departs. He stated, “I am no nonsense and when they get huffy I will immediately say ‘hold on, knock it off, that is not going to get us anywhere.’ And in some ways I guess what I try to do is try to, again counsel and educate and show how that kinda stuff interferes with what we are trying to accomplish, interferes with the ability to establish communication, and takes that negative crap and turn it in some way into a learning experience.”

**Communication.** Scott reported the importance of parenting coordinators being “transparent, consistent, responsive, and timely.” Scott noted, “teaching the parties how to communicate via email is an important part of the process.” He offers guidelines to his clients that both limit and define the communication between the parties. He feels that parenting coordination can be helpful when someone has had an experience as a victim because the parenting coordinator “is giving her a voice.” He believes in a “modeling

approach” – he is strong and confident and emphatic, but also professional and speaks in a clear, calm voice. He offers the parties things to think about, such as “you are making me impotent; you are not allowing me to help you, this is going nowhere and it is not because of me. You know the success or failure of this largely depends on you guys. I am just your golf coach and you are here to see how you can improve your game.” Scott shared that emails can be “incendiary devices” and he implements guidelines so emails are brief, informative, factual, and friendly (which he refers to as the BIFF model).

**Environment.** Environmental modifications depend upon the nature or typology of IPV involved in a case since “the New Jersey statute is so broad, including everything from harassment to false imprisonment, to physical violence.” As previously noted, he will arrange seating in the room so he can maintain a presence and a level of control over the process and to be proactive in the event something occurs. When there is IPV, Scott intentionally shifts his focus to the victim to help her have a voice in the process “so she does not feel so victimized.” He believes this shift is key to changing the dynamic and neutralizing the IPV dynamic. He also puts focus on the importance of taking the children out of the middle and acknowledged “kids in domestic violence cases have it worse than usual because their parents can’t talk to each other or when they do, it is volatile and sometimes dangerous. Those kids have to be messengers and absorb the conflict because there is no choice. A parenting coordinator deals with the communication so the kids don’t have to as much.” Scott viewed his appearance as a part of his environment. He added, “I am a big guy and I think I could handle myself if I have to.” He described a case where the father and the mother’s finance got into an altercation.

Apparently, the finance had been abusive to the father's daughter with the mother and the father "got in his face in the waiting room." Scott was able to intervene quickly and guided the father to go to his car and leave the premises, reminding him, "you are going to get into trouble and it is not worth it." Scott blamed the mother for bringing her finance without discussing it with Scott in advance and for not even telling Scott he was there.

### **Henry**

Henry had been practicing as a parenting coordinator, like many of the other participants, in one form or fashion for many years before the formal establishment of the intervention. Henry represents a unique blend of confidence and authority, presented in a very soft-spoken, calm persona. Henry attributed his success as a parenting coordinator with HCC with IPV to his ability to maintain a calm demeanor. He was not at all reticent about working with the IPV population and acknowledged that he had quite a few cases in the described category. Henry reported that he was willing to take cases with restraining orders and had worked with such cases in the past. He spoke of the importance of "modified orders to allow for meetings," and again emphasized the importance of establishing clear expectations for appropriate behavior in his office. Henry expressed his belief that parenting coordination is especially important for the IPV population due to the limited resources available to people in this category and the impact of the dynamic. He reported that he lets his clients know at the beginning of the process that threatening behavior will not be tolerated.

**Behaviors.** Generally, Henry believed that "the expectation for appropriate behavior in his office set the tone and often caused people to rise to the expectation."

Moreover, he identified a few incidents where he has had to stand from his seat to create a presence and to diffuse an escalation before it erupted- but he stated that he can often convey a message of “knock it off” verbally to control a brewing problem. He has made accommodations to include separate meetings at times, but “prefers to have joint meetings to avoid accusations about one party having more of an audience with him than the other.”

**Safety.** Henry reported that he staggers the comings and goings of clients with IPV dynamics, but “also in traditional parenting coordination cases where the conflict is excessive.” He noted, “The existence of a restraining order does not define the couple dynamic” and added that he has “encountered couples without restraining orders who behave much worse than couples with restraining orders.” He also noted that screaming; name-calling, and isolated IPV incidents related to separation and divorce were “not uncommon in the dynamics of traditional high conflict couples.” Sometimes couples described incidents that had not been officially reported. Couples also described TROs that had been dismissed prior to the commencement of parenting coordination. Henry indicated he would have the vulnerable party sit nearer to the door so that party could leave if necessary and he was careful not to have the parties meet and be left alone in the waiting room. Henry preferred not to engage in too many individual meetings “to avoid potential for mistrust or a misperception of an alliance between one party and [himself]” as the PC. He would do so if a restraining order required it, but also worked toward an amendment of the order to allow for joint meetings. Henry was not as reticent to take on some of the more challenging IPV cases because he recognized a “serious need” and also

identified “the impact on the children when their parents cannot communicate at all.”

Henry also identified the risks of extreme, pathological cases, where there was a danger and he noted those cases simply “would not be appropriate for this process.”

**Communication.** Henry shared his thoughts about similar practices discussed by his colleagues. Namely, he “imposes email protocols for his clients, including suggesting limitations on the level and amount of communication to ensure that parties are not over-communicating.” Henry noted that this was particularly true when the court previously imposed a condition of “non-abusive” contact between the parties. Henry explained that “couples with IPV are more likely to attain that condition when their communication is monitored, and kept simple and to the point.” In other words, if the parties are limited in terms of how much they can say beyond the absolutely essential information, there is less room for them to get themselves into trouble. HCC also seem to watch what they say and how they say it when a professional third party is monitoring.

**Environment.** Henry was one of the participants to acknowledge that the gender of the parenting coordinator might influence the tone of the environment. He noted the importance of the parenting coordinator conveying “confidence and authority”, as well as “establishing a safe environment where bad behavior would not be tolerated.” Henry emphasized that expectations of civilized behavior established something for the parties to strive for, and neither party would want the PC to think they were the problem. He would sit in the middle of the parties or in a manner where he could intervene if he had to. He would end sessions if an incident or exchange escalated and got out of control.

**Rodney**

Rodney is another parenting coordinator who had been doing the work for many years prior to the interview. He had vast experience and had encountered many different couple dynamics over the years. However, like several of the others, he was looking to reduce his level of practice and gradually stop doing this work. He explained that his decision had nothing to do with IPV, but rather the intensity of the work in general. He added that it was “sometimes difficult to even tell which cases had IPV and which cases did not because the behaviors were so similar across the board.” Rodney described himself as having an “eclectic approach” to parenting coordination because “one size really does not fit all.” He noted that it was important to get to know each couple individually to determine what they need, how to address them, and to identify what approaches will get the best outcomes. Regarding his involvement with IPV cases, he offered “I have worked with couples where there have been some allegations of people having been threatened, people having felt harassed, people having been physically pushed a little bit or bumped into, which may or may not have risen to the level of a domestic violence, but certainly there was a sense that one of the partners felt very threatened and unsafe in the relationship.” Due to his years of experience doing forensic work, Rodney believed he “had a level of expertise necessary to recognize and identify IPV, as well as to work with couples where IPV was part of their dynamic.” He observed that it is typically the female partner in an opposite sex couple who reports feeling unsafe. He stated that he does “not challenge the feeling regardless if the evidence supports the feeling. He endeavors to meet the parties where they are, even when one party is alleging

there had been IPV and the other is denying it.” Rodney expressed a belief that parenting coordinators should be involved in cases with IPV and said, “It should not be a deal buster.”

**Behaviors.** Rodney reported many similarities in the behaviors of HCC, to include allegations of IPV behaviors regardless of whether there had been or were restraining orders. He stated that he addresses his process based on the specific dynamics of the presenting couple and his observations of them rather than just based upon a court history of domestic violence proceedings. Rodney emphasized that “labels imposed by others should not dictate how I do my work. I owe it to the clients to get to know them and then see for myself.”

**Safety.** Rodney stated “I might just do individual sessions with each of them; one a day or with the other coming an hour or two or three later. I do not do a Kissinger. I do not put them in separate rooms and do parenting coordinating that way. But I certainly respect the fact that there needs to be separation and space between them, but that does not mean I can not be effective, with doing the job. I will not jeopardize them or their sense of security. It is their trust in me.” He will stagger arrivals and departures where joint meetings are possible, but where the chance exists for confrontation or a negative exchange outside his office. Rodney also makes referrals to other professionals for individual counseling and support for individuals in need of additional help outside his role as the parenting coordinator. Rodney reported that he had been threatened professionally and with board complaints, but that he had never been physically threatened, nor physically harmed. He was not afraid for his safety even when there were



allegations of domestic violence because in the cases he has encountered as a PC, the concentration of the IPV dynamic was between the parties and not directed at him or other third parties.

**Communication.** One core role of parenting coordination is the resolution of disputes. Rodney spends time helping each party better understand the source of the dispute and the interpretation of the incident conjured for the other party. Rodney “reviews transcripts of prior domestic violence proceedings in court to see exactly what” he is dealing with, “as well as to have a better understanding of what the judge heard before making a finding one way or the other.” He offers email and communication guidelines and serves as an “editor” to filter out negative communications and re-draft so only necessary information is conveyed. He believes that by monitoring emails and communication between the parties, the parties naturally improve because “someone is watching.” He added “People do not generally want to single themselves out as the problem, so they clean it up just because they know you see it. But there are always those who think they are not doing anything wrong. Those folks are more of a challenge.” Rodney said that it was important to be the facilitator of communication between the parents so their children did not have to be.

**Environment.** Rodney identified the establishment of trust as an essential component of the environment and the process. By having separate sessions when there is even a feeling of being unsafe, he modifies his environment to accommodate the perception or individual feeling of one of the parties regardless of whether there is documented IPV. He stated “I tell the other party that on some level I am protecting

them as well because it is protecting them from another accusation, or it helps him not be provoked, well usually him, it helps that person not be provoked by something the other person might say which might result in a strong angry reaction, which would then reinforce the other party's sense that, oh he is, that person is threatening me again."

### **Grayson**

Grayson was also younger and a newer professional than most of the interviewees. However, he had also been serving as parenting coordinator for about 10 years. He noted that the PC role was "quasi-judicial" and added that clients "take your word as Gospel much of the time." He starts with a joint session unless there is a reason not to. "If there is a restraining order, there is not." He stated, "Normally, I like to establish the idea that they are in this together and that the issues that we have to discuss have to be worked on together and then that communication between them has to improve for the benefit of their child or children." During the first meeting, he has "a sense of whether the couple can be in the same room together, even where there is no restraining order." Grayson stated that a lot of the behaviors of high conflict parents are the same, and the level of intensity in their dynamic plays a role in whether the couple needs to be seen together or individually. He reported that more people are resistant to having joint meetings than individual meetings when the dynamics are that poor.

**Behaviors.** Grayson felt that IPV dynamics had the potential of "drawing a PC into a quasi-therapeutic role" and he noted that "parenting coordinators need to be careful to maintain boundaries in the face of potentially manipulative behaviors or a desire to help." Grayson saw the opportunity for the parenting coordinator to help each develop

understanding about the perceptions of the other party and the reasons for those perceptions. There is a lot of psycho-education involved and through education; the parties have an opportunity to make changes because they understand why changes are needed. Grayson stated that these cases cannot be successful with a “cookie cutter approach” and required specialized and individual assessment, and then interventions tailored for their specific needs. “These are not case studies. They are real cases.” Grayson observed that it is “almost impossible to maintain joint custody with no primary parent for children of young ages when there is a restraining order between the parents.” He expressed concerns about the impact of those behaviors and this dynamic on the children who get caught in the middle.

**Safety.** According to Grayson, “intimate partner violence introduces a significant impediment to co-parenting.” It changes the dynamics of parenting coordination. He elaborated on the importance of screening to determine the typology of IPV and noted that extreme cases of physical violence would not be as appropriate due to added risks. He also said that where the parties are in their own experience is a factor in whether or not they can participate. Grayson suggested that a past dynamic that has not been recurrent may not have as big of an impact as an on-going IPV experience, even if at this point it is about a victim being intimidated or afraid to speak honestly about feelings and thoughts or opinions. According to Grayson, perpetrators of domestic violence often do not come to terms with the wrongfulness of their behavior and tend to view their experiences as having been provoked or deserved by the victim, viewing the victim as the

cause. Similarly, many victims walk on proverbial eggshells long after the experience due to a fear that it could happen again, even if it has not for a very long time.

**Communication.** Grayson noted that recommendations from the parenting coordinator must be issued “pretty quickly.” He elaborated, “I like to get to the point.” He offered that attorneys sometimes complicate matters by trying to advocate to the PC on behalf of their respective clients, which essentially stirs the pot and makes the dynamic worse. Grayson indicated that he does not entertain communications for attorneys or third parties that interfere with or undermine what he is trying to accomplish. Grayson also reinforces that the clients are in control, not over each other, but over the process and the foundation for communicating and establishing an effective co-parenting relationship. Grayson also works with email modifications and provides guidelines and editing when necessary, regardless of whether there is IPV in high conflict cases.

**Environment.** His environment is modified primarily through “an adaptation involving individual versus joint meetings.” However, he implements staggering arrival and departure when there are joint meetings so the environment is safer for the person who is feeling vulnerable. As a male practitioner, Grayson believes his presence as part of the environment creates some unspoken security. He tries to be creative with solutions so the process is engaging and fair. He reported that he has not had occasion to feel unsafe in his own environment, but that he has been threatened with Licensing Board complaints.

### **The Theoretical Concept**

PC is an intervention that can be effective with HCC that also have IPV dynamics. It is important to note that IPV dynamics include a broad range of definition and there are specific cases, with pathological patterns of violence that would not be appropriate for PC. However, in cases where IPV is situational or specific to the presenting couple, the behavioral dynamics between the couple often seem to have striking similarity to behavioral dynamics of traditional HCC. Moreover, the behaviors described by HCC about their interactions with one another frequently including incidents of pushing, shoving, name-calling, threats, and even police visits, regardless of whether there are formal complaints of IPV or adjudication. Parenting coordinators can put into place certain specific guidelines for communication between the parties and can modify their environments, to include staggering arrival and departure times, arranging for separate meetings, or employing technology-based tools, to address safety concerns. Many of these process adaptations actually also benefit traditional PC clients that are very high conflict in nature. Ultimately, the parenting coordinator serves to replace the children as facilitators of communication between the parents. The parenting coordinator can serve as a layer of protection for the identified victim, and as both an educator and a filter for the identified perpetrator.

The research question for this study was as follows: How do parenting coordinators work with high conflict couples (HCC) who experience intimate partner violence (IPV)?

Based on the data derived from participant interviews and the analysis of that data four main categories emerged: *Behaviors, Safety, Communication, and Environment*. The four main categories related to the experiences of PC working with HCC with IPV gave rise to the hypothesis that HCC with IPV often present with a more intensified version of the same behaviors as HCC without formal documentation of IPV. The existence of a restraining order in a couple dynamic restricts communication between parents. However, interpersonal communication between high conflict parents is usually strained, limited, or counter-productive. Parenting coordinators routinely modify the routine PC interventions to meet the specific needs of each presenting family based upon the premise that all tools and techniques will not work in the same manner with all clients. It seems that when working with couples with identifiable IPV components, certain modifications to the process become implemented as a must. In other words, while modifications are available to parenting coordinators in traditional cases, some of those modifications are necessary and should be *required* for safe and effective practice. Examples of modifications that should be required include provisions for separate meetings or communication between each party and the parenting coordinator to manage conflict so it does not escalate, rules for ingress and egress to keep the parties separate outside of any PC meetings to reduce the likelihood of an IPV or IPV-like incident while the parties are engaged in PC. Moreover, when there is a restraining order in a case, additional modifications must be made to ensure the parties are kept separate and apart and not put in direct contact with one another in contradiction to a court order.

It is important to recognize that not all couples are candidates for PC, especially when there are IPV components in the dynamic. This is regardless of the formality with which allegations of IPV are documented or established. IPV is a substantial problem whether or not the matter has been presented and adjudicated in court or whether or not there is a restraining order. Restraining orders are in place to reduce safety risks associated with direct contact between specific parties – usually a victim and an aggressor – in the context of an intimate relationship. Restraining orders, however, do not guarantee safety. Cases where domestic violence are pathological, such as where violence is extreme (perhaps involving weapons or threats with weapons, the infliction of serious physical injury, or where the violence is so routine that it occurs with a pattern regularity), or where a perpetrator is also violent with others outside of the marital dynamic are not appropriate for PC due to the heightened risk to the victimized partner, other family members, and potentially even the professional PC. A screening process at the commencement of the case must be in place to ensure that the PC intervention is only implemented with appropriate cases when IPV is identified. The theory stemming from my study begin with a presumption that the identified couples have been vetted and have been determined to be appropriate candidates for the PC intervention process. Vetting begins with a presumption that parenting coordinators, who will be working with this population, where safety risks are potentially heightened, have been fully trained both as parenting coordinators, and also in the nuances of IPV. Indeed, specialized training in IPV, something identified by all of the participants in my study, should be required prior

to engaging in a joint professional intervention such as parenting coordination with HCC who also have IPV.

In this section, findings from my study have been addressed based on the participant interview questions, which were as follows:

1. What should the role be of parenting coordinators in cases with domestic violence?
2. What decisions have you made regarding your role in such cases?
3. Please share with me some examples of cases you have had where the parents have had domestic violence experiences.
4. What, if any, modifications do you put in place to accommodate work with this unique population?
5. If you do make modifications to the process, why?
6. How is work in cases with domestic violence different from traditional parenting coordination?
7. Please bring to mind some ways in which there might be improvement in the interactions between the high conflict parents with IPV after engaging in this process.
8. What improvements you have experienced?
9. In what ways have the dynamics between the couple with whom you have worked remained unchanged?
10. To what do you attribute the identified improvement or lack thereof?



11. If you could change anything about how the parenting coordination process is implemented with this population based upon your experiences in working with them thus far, what would you recommend changing and how?

When asked what the role of parenting coordinators should be in domestic violence should be, participants invariably responded with “it depends.” While all 10 participants quickly agreed that couples with children in IPV dynamics needed professional assistance, it was here that the participants also identified the importance of including a preliminary screening process because not all couples with IPV dynamics would be good candidates for PC. Penny noted that she “would not take cases with restraining orders” and stated that she believed she was “restricted from doing so” by the state legislature. All participants were under the impression that a judge could not order a couple with IPV and a restraining order into any joint process, including PC and mediation. They also understood that they could take on such cases if the parties agreed to participate voluntarily, and if any existing restraining order was appropriately modified to allow for some joint contact between parents in the context of the PC process or under the supervision of the PC.

Marie indicated that one of the key discrepancies in the concept of a restraining order is that such an order “restricts or prevents contact between the adults, while the same adults are then required to communicate regarding children of whom they share joint legal and/or physical custody.” Marie noted, “some restraining orders, where children are involved, include language to the effect that parents may have ‘non-abusive contact regarding their children,’ but she added “the term ‘non-abusive’ is rarely defined

and conjures different meaning for a victim and for an aggressor. “ In similar fashion, Susan used an example to illustrate the same point. She spoke of a case where the husband who was restrained from having contact with his wife sent her flowers. Susan explained, “The husband maintained that he viewed the flowers as a gesture of conciliation, while the wife viewed them as a manipulation to get her to give in.” Susan offered another example of a father who called his estranged wife’s cell phone multiple times. She explained, “The wife filed charges alleging that he had harassed her, while he claimed he was trying to speak to his children and she would not allow him the access to which he was entitled by a separate parenting order.” Susan also stated, “A lot of alleged violations are about one parent calling the other to get in touch with the children – and if anything gets a parent angry it is when they want to speak to their kids and the other parent isn’t allowing it.”

In response to the second question, Henry, Marie, Scott, Rodney, and Grayson identified an enforcement component of their roles as PC in this context. Specifically, they were involved to help the parties convey information, resolve issues that arose between them, enforce the pre-existing terms of their parenting agreement, and facilitate necessary joint decision making. Tina described, “editing e-mails so they can see what it should look like rather than just telling them.” Marie identified “out-of-control” behavior that required correction, while Wendy referred to certain behaviors of the parties as cause her to “speak to them like they are children.”

Henry specifically emphasized the importance of a parenting coordinator being both “responsive and decisive,” noting that it is worth facilitating an agreement so clients

learn to resolve issues for themselves – and adding “it does not serve the family if the parenting coordinator doesn’t make a recommendation when needed.” When the parties don’t agree, the parenting coordinator should make an effort to effectuate compromise, but when that is not possible, the parenting coordinator must make recommendations that are designed to resolve specific issues. Grayson suggested that “two problems with parenting coordination are enforceability of the recommendation and the ability to rely on a Judge to back up the PC when challenged.” First, recommendations are not enforceable unless adopted by the parties, with the onus being placed on the party who wants to adopt the recommendations to return to court if the other party objects; and secondly, there is inconsistency as to whether judges back up the parenting coordinator or not. The participants, including Penny, agreed that recommendations that are not enforced “do not carry very much weight,” with it being “potentially disheartening to a party who seeks resolution partnered with someone who never agrees to anything just to perpetuate the dynamic of power and control,” according to Grace.

Examples offered by the participants to my study regarding cases they have had involving IPV have been discussed above. It is curious that several female participants experienced efforts by the putative aggressor to bully the parenting coordinator. There are several important points derived from the general responses. The male parenting coordinators also told stories illustrating similar experiences, but the male parenting coordinators conveyed that they were not intimidated. Several male participants identified their gender as a factor in how they were treated by the more aggressive party and a confidence regarding their own ability to contain any potentially explosive

situation. Both Henry and Rodney emphasized their ability to stand and assert a presence that contrasts drastically from Grace's description of herself as "little and not strong." Despite efforts by some aggressive clients to bully or intimidate the professional, the professionals emphasized the importance of conveying confidence and some authority, as well as not showing outwardly if they felt afraid or uncomfortable. Rodney described having had a background in law enforcement and spoke of incidents where he stood in his office in order to get an aggressive client to sit back down "and behave." Rodney, a tall, well-built man, suggested that his physical presence is a deterrent to bad behavior in his office and that he is clear up-front that such bad behavior will not be tolerated. Nevertheless, Grace, a female of slight stature, pointed out that if someone became violent in her office, "what can I really do about it?" It is from a practical perspective that the need for screening for appropriate participants when IPV is involved was re-emphasized.

As participants told stories about their experiences with IPV clients in PC, it was also noteworthy that several of them struggled to remember whether the couple they called to mind had a restraining order or not. Participants called to mind the behaviors of the parties in their offices or behaviors accused by one client of the other rather than a legal adjudication as the criteria for determining the presence of IPV as a factor or not. Wendy highlighted the importance of observation when she said, "sometimes someone says they are afraid but then I see them deliberately antagonize the other in a very obvious attempt to set the other person up – and sometimes the other person plays right

into it. I want to say ‘what are you thinking?! Don’t you see what he is doing?! But of course they don’t. They are blinded by anger.’”

In the context of HCC in PC, participants pointed to the fact that some of the dynamics were mutual or had a duality to them. Susan offered several examples of cases where the female client was actually the aggressor, where both husband and wife had previously been physically abusive toward the other, or where one party was seemingly antagonistic to “set the other party off.” Wendy explained that she had similar experiences where one party, identified as the victim, would be the one to wait for the aggressor in the parking lot for “what seemed like to pick a fight so she could then say he did something wrong when he really didn’t.” Wendy opined that knowing the particular couple dynamic rather than making assumptions based upon labels provided or “strictly on the he said-she said” is really important for process efficacy.

All 10 participants identified making modifications to the process when they were aware of IPV and/or some propensity for aggressive behavior between the parties or by one against the other. Independently, participants each described the importance of establishing a policy for ingress and egress, meaning that they would have the more vulnerable party sit nearest to the door, and that they would have the more vulnerable party leave first at the end of the meeting so they could get into their car and drive away before the aggressor left the office. Varying arrival times and having the parties wait in separate areas of the office also reduced the risk for incidents in the lobby of the parenting coordinator’s office or in the parking lot. This was not possible for Penny and may have played a role in her reluctance to take on overt cases.

Penny told a story regarding a physical fight in her office – however, she actually had one parent in her office while the other parent was in the waiting area. The parent who was waiting was in an altercation with a third party related to the parent who was in her office. It was not the parents who became physically aggressive. Tina spoke about a couple with whom she was working and they would be in separate rooms in her office. She used the term “shuttle diplomacy” to describe how she traveled back and forth between the parents to convey messages and facilitate discussion. Tina suffered an injury having nothing to do with the case and the “shuttling back and forth became burdensome” for her. She shared, “I asked the parties if, as a courtesy, they would meet in the same room. The meeting was successful and the parties were very well behaved.” Tina suggested, “They lived up to the expectation. If we expect people to behave badly, we are giving them permission to behave that way.”

In addition, participants described email as an effective way of conveying information when protocols are in place in advance. Grace, however, preferred not to be involved with the e-mail directly because she felt “bombarded” and believed “it quickly gets out of control.” Penny agreed.

When the PC is copied on the emails, the PC knows what is going on, but can also intervene. Through red-lining, a parenting coordinator who sees a party unwilling to modify their communication style can have that party send a communication only to the parenting coordinator, who then would re-write the email to convey the substantive message without the aggressive tone. As noted, Grace and Penny preferred not to work

with email. Grace said she did not have Internet in her office, while Penny stated that she just preferred live communication.

Penny also would not speak with one party without the other unless she absolutely “could not avoid it” – while most of the other participants were willing to have some one-on-one interaction when the parties could not be together in the same room. Rodney emphasized “the need for flexibility and the importance of meeting people where they are.” When separate meetings occurred, parenting coordinators took great care to ensure a parallel process so neither party had the impression that the other parent had a greater audience with the parenting coordinator. In other words, as Rodney explained, “If I meet with one of them, I make sure I also have a meeting, generally on the same topic for the same length of time, with the other one. This way it is less likely they would complain that one got more of an audience than the other.”

Ultimately, the consensus was that were positive changes occurred, those changes were largely about “letting go” and were communication style related. Where the couple dynamics remained unchanged, it was largely because the parties were uncommitted and remained rooted in their own agendas, anger and frustration. Marie talked about “high conflict parents not changing because it is all about their anger toward one another and what he did or what she did and they cannot seem to get beyond it.”

All participants agreed that with or without an IPV component, PC cases are unique and case-sensitive and “one size does not fit all.”

## Summary

This chapter explored the development of Adaptive Parenting Coordination for IPV (APCIPV) theory. APCIPV involves four pillars for modification, including behavior, safety, communication, and environment. The development of theory accomplished through analysis of relationships among and between concepts derived from data, is the purpose of a grounded theory (Strauss & Glaser, 1967). Following the interviewing process and the collection of data from participants, I presented an overview of the analysis through open, axial, and selective levels of coding. Based on the described process, I identified four core categories as noted above and identified the relationship between the categories for the further identification of the emerging theory. I discussed the interrelationship between the subcategories associated with each of the core categories and how those connections offered support for APCIPV as the foundation for practice methodology for PC work with IPV couples.

What emerged from the data indicates the participants unequivocally agreed that families with IPV are often part of an underserved population, denied services or for whom services are not available due to their dynamics. Children in these cases were viewed by my participants as being more vulnerable to absorbing conflict than children in traditional high conflict cases. While not all participating parenting coordinators were willing to continue working with the described clientele, and while at least one identified as being unwilling to do PC in any form in the future, all of the participants recognized that some intervention with the described clientele seemed to ease the burden on the parties' children, while also providing a professional middleman to facilitate



communication leading to some resolution of arising issues, and to manage, not absorb, conflict between the parents.

The participants further agreed that even small modifications in the manner in which the couple communicated changed the dynamic and that PC, in their respective views and experiences, had yielded some positive results in their own practices with their own clients with HCC who also had IPV. Success appeared to be relative, in that all participants noted that PC is not a panacea and results vary conditioned upon a number of factors, not the least of which is the commitment of the individual parties to the couple and openness to change.

It was particularly noteworthy that participants emphasized the importance of screening couples for candidate appropriateness before commencing the intervention process and that participants identified far more similarities between traditional HCC and those HCC with IPV. Essentially, the existence of a restraining order or court adjudication was not the deciding factor for inclusion in the special subcategory of IPV. Finally, I ended this chapter with a discussion of my research study results in response to the study's research questions. Chapter 5 includes an interpretation of the findings, limitations, and recommendations.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory study was to develop an informational theory that was constructed through identifying and reviewing the experiences of parenting coordinators working with HCC who also experienced IPV dynamics. While this is a controversial area of study due to often extreme opposition to joint couple interventions in DV cases expressed by victim advocates, it is noteworthy that the opposition focuses on the greater concern, but does not at all address the existing dilemma created by continuing creation of coparenting/joint custodial arrangements with the described couples. In other words, opposition notwithstanding, courts continue to award joint legal and physical custody to parents with DV histories, thus creating a requirement for these couples to communicate and work together for the parenting of their common children. While victims' advocates in the DV arena can be vocal about their belief that identified victims of IPV should not be required to share custody with adjudicated batterers, joint custody is relatively common. These arrangements are primed for conflict related to issues ranging from the exchange of children for parenting time, responsibility for the children's personal belongings, decisions related to medical interventions and participation in activities, and sometimes even whether both parents are allowed to be present for special activities and events involving their children. Victim advocates have argued that joint custody arrangements offer abusers the opportunity to continue to abuse victims verbally, emotionally, and psychologically—and sometimes affords physical access, which places adjudicated victims at risk of harm (Stark, 2009).

Moreover, when custodial coparents are restrained from communicating with one another, children can more easily become messengers, thereby causing the children to absorb some of the conflict and potential abuse. While these arguments are likely valid in many cases, the fact that such joint custody arrangements exist suggests that some monitoring, management, and intervention by trained third-party professionals is prudent, rather than leaving families in the described situation to their own devices. This may not be the bigger result victim advocates strive for, but such intervention serves to provide an interim response while advocacy efforts continue. Through this study, I explored the viability of a joint intervention for use with the IPV coparent population based upon the experiences of parenting coordinators who have provided the service. However, viability—that is whether or not PC worked with the IPV subclass of high conflict parents was not the primary focus. Instead, through this study, I explored what experts thought about how to make the intervention work. The input of the participants provided the social change impetus through an elucidation of why there is a dilemma for the identified population, and through better definition of who might be benefited from the development of a substantive theory of how PC should be most effectively implemented.

The goal has not been to challenge the efforts or beliefs of DV advocates, but rather to address the present and pressing concerns for families in crisis while those advocacy efforts continue. In other words, it is a given that courts grant joint legal custody to parents even where there is a history of DV between the parties, and even when that history has resulted in a restraining order. Moreover, even when some restrictions are in place regarding a parenting plan for a parent determined to have

committed IPV, those restrictions rarely create severe limitations or eliminate parenting time for that parent. This study is not meant to be a commentary of the propriety of that result. Researchers have suggested that the most effective parenting arrangements require communication between parents (Carter, 2011). However, in the described parenting dynamics, parents with IPV with or without restraining orders have problems with communication. In this study, I invited input from expert parenting coordinators to set the framework for a theory on how to use PC with a population of parents who have essentially been put in the position of having to coparent without sufficient resources to do so effectively in many instances. Further, the shared experiences of participating parenting coordinators also served to draw attention to the added benefit of PC to children who have been embroiled in the IPV parenting dynamic by the involvement of a neutral third party to facilitate coparenting communication and manage conflict.

With the data acquired from this study, future researchers, parenting coordinators, the courts, and even state legislatures can begin to implement procedures for work with this specialized population in an effort to remove children from the crossfire of the parenting dynamic, insulate victims who share joint custody, in one capacity or another, with a estranged spouse who has been domestically violent, and educate purported batterers who seek to invest in shared custody of their children following separation and/or divorce. Although there are some risks associated with this potentially explosive parenting dynamic, parenting coordinators who are willing to participate in PC as an intervention with and for this population have identified methodology through which the work can be somewhat successful and through which some of the risks can be managed.

Currently, there is neither a court rule nor a statute in New Jersey regarding PC. Task forces have been assembled to discuss the creation of legislation and have dissolved without result. Most recently, a pilot project, which has included a domestic violence-training component, has commenced in New Jersey for mediators to work with divorcing couples with IPV dynamics. This is experimental—but the inclusion of an intensive training component focusing on the nuances of IPV reinforces one of the key points derived from the data in my study; namely, that for PC or any joint intervention to be effective with this population, specific training and a level of expertise regarding IPV is essential. The data from this study, as well as from subsequent related studies, will likely be used to inform how the DV issue is addressed in any future legislation in New Jersey, and potentially in other states.

Contemporary literature related to PC is sprinkled with research studies that explore efficacy of PC as an intervention. There is no current research specifically focused on the experiences of parenting coordinators working with nontraditional high conflict parents, and specifically with those who also manifest IPV dynamics. Through the experiences shared by participants to this study, I was able to identify some best practices for PC work with this population. In the course of this study, I was also able to distinguish severe DV cases where the couple would simply and absolutely not be appropriate candidates for PC at all from DV dynamics where PC could be helpful. Surprisingly, participants identified behaviors in the dynamics between more traditional HCC that mirror behaviors related to IPV—essentially demonstrating that elements of IPV often manifest with HCC referred to PC regardless of whether the behavior has been

specifically labeled as DV or adjudicated as such through the entry of a restraining order. Name-calling, verbal threats ranging from threats of physical violence to more litigation-oriented or financial threats, some pushing and shoving, physical intimidation, and throwing things seem to be commonly reported among HCC as part of their separation and divorce dynamic even when neither party has ever sought a restraining order. Similarly, some HCC report to their parenting coordinators that there has been police intervention or law enforcement visits to their homes, sometimes witnessed by the children, regardless of whether either party ever actually applied for a restraining order with the court. For some, the definition of IPV is relative and not rooted in a determination by a court or the existence of an order of restraint.

In this chapter, I discuss and interpret the research findings in relation to the parenting coordinators' interpretations and framework for best practices. I also present the limitations, recommendations, and implications of this study. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes with a summary of the research study and the need for positive social change regarding the use of appropriate joint interventions for HCC with IPV for the benefit of the individual members of the couple and their children and also as a measure of relief on judicial resources.

This study has resulted in several core conclusions and a theory that I have termed APCIPV. First, parenting coordinators, or at least those interviewed, are working with HCC having IPV dynamics. Second, DV is not identified merely by the existence of a restraining order, but rather through described and observed behavior. Third, parenting coordinators described a gender neutral quality to DV in their experiences, such that both

men and women were viewed as potential perpetrators, and both men and women were viewed as potential victims, even though the participants agreed that women were more likely to be classified as victims and men were more likely to be identified as the perpetrators.

Fourth, modifications regarding environment related to ensuring the parties were not left alone together in a waiting room or in a parking lot, as unsupervised encounters were identified as opportunities for negative events. Along these lines, several participants described circumstances where an identified victim of DV made allegations about the conduct of the identified perpetrator at times where the parenting coordinator was not present and there were no other available witnesses. This observation is not meant to suggest that allegations were untrue, but several participants offered experiences with clients who did make false allegations as an exercise of power in the dynamic, but also regarding the difficulty of addressing consequences for negative conduct without proof.

Fifth, and perhaps one of the most important elements of this study, parenting coordinators identified the importance of rules of engagement to define the framework, nature, and purpose of communication between parents. The more structure provided by the parenting coordinators, the more likely the parent-clients were able to engage in some productive coparenting communication, even though limited to the necessary exchange of information and joint decision making. Specifically, parenting coordinators described a definite observed impact that stemmed from the parents' knowledge that someone, namely the parenting coordinator, was paying attention to their exchanges and was

prepared to intervene if necessary. Sixth, and related, parenting coordinators emphasized the importance of projecting professional confidence and boundaries in sessions with IPV clients and conveying recommendations with clarity and that same confidence.

While there are other concepts that emerged through this study, the seventh core conclusion was somewhat surprising. Specifically, parenting coordinators recognized that some of the behaviors attributable to high conflict parents with IPV dynamics were, in fact, also exhibited by high conflict parents in general, and the suggested process modifications for working with those parents with IPV experiences are also helpful when working in parenting coordinators with high conflict parents in general.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The data collected from parenting coordinators who participated in this study has given rise to a theory regarding the modification of PC as an intervention when offered to high conflict parents who also have IPV dynamics. APCIPV is constructed from this grounded theory study. The theory evolved from the parenting coordinator's experiences, which provided a foundation for the conditions upon which PC can be effective with the described population. This research study is based in structural family theory, which focuses on the interplay between each individual member of a family and the family as a whole (Carter, 2011). From a family systemic perspective, the therapist, the parenting coordinator, has a relatively active role in facilitating change through integration with the family system. Where triangulation is a common dynamic with high conflict divorce litigants, the PC steps into the family triangle to replace the child or children in an unhealthy triangle and to constructively manipulate the unhealthy couple dynamic more



effectively in a more productive direction toward necessary communication (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

Another theoretical concept is known as parallel parenting (Carter, 2011; Sullivan, 2008). The purpose of parallel parenting is to facilitate communications through new methods in an effort to allow the parents to disengage and participate only in necessary communication regarding the exchange of information and decision-making for the benefit of their children (Carter, 2011). In this context, high conflict parents seem to focus on what they want to say when communicating, with little or no focus on whether the other party will accurately receive the intended message. This is because the attempt to convey a message is shrouded in anger, frustration, and sometimes an unrealistic desire to have a noncompliant former partner be reasonable and cooperative. A parenting coordinator facilitates communication by establishing clear guidelines for how to convey necessary information for coparenting joint decisions. AIPVPC underscores the critical nature of establishing clear communication guidelines from the commencement of the process so the parenting coordinator's expectations of how the clients will communicate with one another from that point forward. The following is an example of a memorandum that I created based upon criteria established by parenting coordinators as derived from interviews conducted during this study.

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO: CLIENTS**

**FROM: PC**

**RE: COMMUNICATION PROTOCOLS**

**MODE OF COMMUNICATION**

1. Oral communication should be restricted, except under specific circumstances.  
First, if you find yourself in the company of your children, you should try to exchange pleasantries such as a simple “Hello” and “Good-bye” in the presence of the children. **DO NOT** endeavor to have a substantive conversation at this time outside of my office.
2. Phone calls should be reserved for emergencies or situations with time constraints – such as if your child has been hurt and is being taken to the emergency room or if you are running late for a parenting time exchange.
3. Texts are hard to monitor. In this case, if it is **NECESSARY** to text, copy me in so it is a group text. Again this should be reserved only for situations with time constraints or emergencies.
4. E-mail is going to be our preferred mode of communication outside my office.  
The following are the protocols for e-mail communication:
  - Use a simple caption to identify the subject
  - Captions should include RR or FYI
  - FYI does not require a response – only an acknowledgement
  - Use polite format – Hi, Dear, Please, Thank you
  - Copy me as PC on all emails – I will correct or respond as necessary
  - Emails are not dissertations, complaints, or history lessons.
  - **DO NOT** use old emails for new subjects. It is difficult to find a specific email in a sea of unidentified emails.
  - Send no more than 1 email per day – with no more than 4 topics
  - Use sub-captions to identify topics in the email
  - Use bullet points to address key points for each topic. No subject requires more than 3 or 4 sentences.
  - Respond to the other party within 24 hours
  - Only respond to the response if a question is posed or additional information is necessary

- DO NOT allow or encourage children to read emails
- Properly identify yourself; do not have others write as if they are you.

It is suggested that such clear guidelines or some close variation thereof offer high conflict clients with IPV experiences parameters for how to communicate, to include eliminating extraneous verbal attacks and accusations and reducing the potential for defensive response.

This study draws also from the Aspirational Guidelines developed in 2003 by a task force of the AFCC. The AFCC guidelines were the result of a comprehensive analysis of practices primarily in the United States and Canada for conflict management with high conflict families. Essentially, the AFCC Task Force created aspirational guidelines for PC for the establishment of credibility and validity for PC as a professional practice (AFCC, 2003). These relate to the current study in that these guidelines form the basis for core practice requirements and ethical practice in the field and will often serve as a guide for how PC is implemented regardless of the population with which the parenting coordinator is working. In context, the role of the parenting coordinator is defined clearly through the guidelines to include clarification that while a parenting coordinator may make recommendations for the resolution of identified issues raised between the parents, the parenting coordinator may not opine as to custody or a change in the custodial arrangement for the children. The guidelines promote the use of professional boundaries for maintaining neutrality and for essentially guarding against manipulation by one of the parties or both. The referenced boundaries reinforce the approaches described by parenting coordinators who participated in this study as an essential component for process efficacy with IPV parents.

This study is also rooted in the constructivist approach to grounded theory research (Creswell, 2007). Specifically, a constructivist subscribes to an emphasis on diverse perspectives and the complexities associated with different views and approaches (Charmaz, 2006). This allowed me to submerge myself as a researcher in the richness of response provided by my participants and further allowed me to better understand the subtle nuances of their responses to the interview questions through a lens associated with their individual styles and personalities. Most significantly, the constructivist lens led to the discovery that one size does not fit all. Even in the traditional application of PC, there needs to be some adaptability and flexibility based upon the needs and individuality of the presenting family.

The sub-tools associated with the PC intervention do not fit neatly for application across all clients – and there is a level of assessment required to identify the dynamic and then to discover which techniques work and which ones do not. Furthermore, the constructivist approach also opened the door to the discovery that it can be difficult to distinguish couples with IPV and couples with what can best be termed more traditional high conflict divorce dynamics, largely because so many HCC describe experiences in their histories, particularly in the time period closely related to their separation and divorce, that closely resemble what the legal community defines as domestic violence.

Many presenting couples seem to have histories which include explosive arguments erupting into a physical act by one party against the other or which are not uncommonly mutual in nature. Many couples report visits to their homes by law enforcement, and threatening behaviors in front of or within earshot of the children.

Though some of the described incidents appear to be situational, reactive, or isolated – they nonetheless mirror behaviors reported in cases with formal legal findings of domestic violence and existing restraining orders. This information is disconcerting – but as a parenting coordinator who has worked in the field with this population, a concept that resonates as accurate, even though I had not considered this concept prior to engaging in the interview process with the participants in this study.

### **Applicability of Structural and Family Systems Theories on the Data**

Responses from all 10 participants indicated agreement with literature suggesting that efficacy of PC could be subtle. Though sometimes identified through a reduction in motion practice and court involvement, efficacy is also identified through even minor changes in the manner in which the parties communicate with one another – or simply, an increase in the efficacy of the sending and receiving of necessary information between the parties and some evidence of an increased ability to choose battles and to compromise as opposed to feuding over everything. Any improvement was connected by participants to clear guidelines for the manner, mode, and frequency of communication between the parties. A second factor was the hands-on, structural integration by the PC in the parent-parent dynamic; with availability, responsiveness, and confident authority of the PC being important factors in how the integration is received. In other words, participants uniformly noted that parents in the process were more likely to accept the guidance and recommendations when those parents perceived the PC has confident and as having some authority, also described as “knowing what I am talking about.”

A confident authority figure in the form of a PC who integrates in the family structure manages the potential for conflict before it erupts and manipulates the triangulation to facilitate communication in a direction toward resolution and outcome rather than the conflictual limbo with which the parties are most familiar. The parents' ability to reach the PC when issues arise and the responsiveness of the PC were also reported as being factors in whether parents accepted and/or reached proposed resolutions. These factors were viewed as more important in IPV cases due to the fact that unresolved issues frequently lead to violations of restraining orders or new domestic violence incidents; and also because victims view their aggressive counterparts as seeing themselves as "above the law" while putative batterers perceive their accusers as "playing the victim card to get [her] way." The parenting coordinators served to shift each party's focus from identifying the source of blame, namely, the other party, to finding a resolution for the presenting dilemma.

Clearly, all 10 participants acknowledged that PC does not work with every family – and it is not uncommon for the party who is not getting their proverbial way to project negative feelings onto the parenting coordinator, to seek the end of the process, and even to threaten the parenting coordinator with licensing or board complaints. The results of this study suggest that families may be inappropriate for this service when there is a history of other parenting coordinators having been unsuccessfully involved, where service was terminated due to direct threats or unwarranted action or complaint against the parenting coordinator. This experience was heightened in cases with clear IPV. The literature is largely silent on how parenting coordinators should handle threats of board

complaints and legal action, but practice in the field supports withdrawal from the case. Theoretically, if the PC is supposed to be a neutral party, and it follows that it is difficult to remain neutral once threatened by one of the clients, the position of the PC becomes compromised in such a situation, thus being rendered less effective and possibly ineffective. For example, in this situation, the non-threatening party might attribute recommendations from the PC that do not favor that party as being the result of intimidation and threat by the other party even when they are not. Once the appearance of neutrality is compromised, the efficacy of the PC can also be compromised.

Male parenting coordinators generally reported feeling less physically intimidated by the identified aggressor in the IPV couple, several female participants projected confidence and suggested that success was less about whether or not the PC actually felt intimidated and more about whether the clients knew they were intimidated or fearful. The participants also unanimously agreed that threats of board or licensing complaints were much more common with this client population than physical threats. Three PCs reported having been physically threatened but none of those reporting such threats were actually physically harmed. All reported at least one incident of some one “puffing up” during a meeting and endeavoring to be intimidating toward their co-parent, but only one reported an incident of an actual physical fight that occurred in the PC’s office during a meeting, The physical altercation, however, was not between the parents, but rather between one of the parents and a third party who accompanied the other. The literature is also silent regarding the involvement of additional third parties, such as new spouses or romantic partners, in the process – particularly when there is a risk that the additional

third party is more of a problem or threat to the process than either member of the couple. Through this study, it appears that best practices would be to restrict attendance by third parties unless both clients agree. When there is an agreement for attendance, there must also be a plan as to the manner in which that party will be involved in the process. The PC did not witness the fight, but withdrew from the case partially due to that incident. That PC identified the potential safety risk, the potential compromise of neutrality, and the potential for being a witness as reasons for withdrawing as PC.

Key to a successful process in general, but especially in the context of IPV dynamics, is balancing a relationship with each party. Due to the suspicious nature that often accompanies high conflict parents, PCs must develop a quasi-therapeutic alliance with each party notwithstanding the competing interests of the parties – which the participants reported as being accomplished identifying the children as the common interest of both. Though clients are divided by their vies, most agree that their children deserve to have their best interests served.

The participants in this study acknowledged lack of resources for the IPV couples is problematic – and even where concerns were expressed regarding how the PC process could be implemented with certain couples, all 10 participants recognized the importance of and need to develop resources for the described couples and their children. The participants in this study also demonstrated awareness of the limitations of PC, especially where IPV is involved. As one participant noted, PC as a process “is not a magic wand.” The ability to recognize and understand the different typologies of domestic violence and the likelihood for violence in the PC process is critical. The subjects unanimously



agreed that not all cases with IPV are appropriate for PC interventions and identified certain cases, specifically with severe pathology and anti-social personality typology, they would not accept. All participants indicated that there is a high presence of personality disorder traits among high conflict parents, and IPV behaviors can be related or connected to that condition. None of the participants were willing to put themselves at risk for physical harm, nor were they willing to be involved in a scenario with heightened risk of physical harm for the parties or one of them. Even when the PC was willing to work with IP cases in the context of joint meetings with the parties, every one described a plan for ingress and egress, such that the parties would arrive separately, never be left alone together in a lobby or anywhere in the office, and where the victim would leave first and leave the premises completely before the putative aggressor would be permitted to vacate the office. One participant indicated an unwillingness to do PC at all where there could not be joint meetings. She indicated that it is a joint intervention and if the parties cannot meet together, there is too much room for misinterpretation of what the PC said and whether the PC was taking sides. Another participant shared a story where, due to a personal injury she suffered, she asked the clients to agree to meet in the same room as an accommodation and favor to the PC so she wouldn't have to run back and forth. The parties agreed, were very well behaved, and met successfully without incident. According to the participant, the clients were pleasantly surprised and continued to meet jointly and productively hereafter. She emphasized the notion that when asked to rise to an occasion and held to a high standard, some parties can meet the expectation.

Participant responses also indicated the importance of addressing the basic conflicts arising between the parties by first establishing ground rules for meetings, whether joint or separate. Most participants found email to be helpful in working with this population, while only one participant would not work with email at all.

### **Maximizing the Benefits While Minimizing the Risks**

The data revealed that for all 10 participants, there was a clear consensus that the PC intervention should be available to HCC with IPV histories and experiences, with a screening out of the most severe and dangerous cases. One participant felt the work could be done if called something else, simply because PC was designed to involve joint meetings and if such joint meetings were not allowed, the purpose of the intervention was defeated.

It appears that the formal training and personal experience also impacted PC attitudes. Overall, nine of the total 10 participants held positive attitudes about working with HCC with IPV dynamics, so long as the IPV was situational or isolated, and so long as there was limited risk for reoccurrence in the PC process. The remaining 1 participant holding mostly negative attitudes expressed an overall more conservative approach to PC practice, and fairly strict adherence to the practice guidelines of AFCC and APA. It is noteworthy that the lone participant was supportive of other professionals providing this service, and identified that she might consider doing some variation of the work in certain cases if called something other than PC.

Most importantly, everyone identified the important of having an emergency plan, to include a means of intervening or separating the parties quickly should there be an

indication of a potential interpersonal eruption. For some, with office environments with only one entrance or exit, modifications to the process included having the identified victim sit nearest to the door, or having the PC situated in the room nearest to the identified aggressor – or in-between both parties so they are not directly next to one another.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations in my study. First, the grounded research design and sample size were a limitation for my study. Despite evidence-based support advocating the efficacy of qualitative research as a credible means of inquiry, there are still biases held by some professionals supporting the notion that qualitative is less reliable and scientific than quantitative studies (Patton, 2002). In this study, a qualitative approach served to create a foundation for other, future, and quantitative and mixed methods inquiries to further evaluation nuances of the particular research question. This study utilized a sample of 10 parenting coordinators whose experiences may not be reflective of others who may be experiencing the same phenomenon.

Second, the sample size, which is relatively small, is a potential limitation in that it reflects a simple snapshot of the topic. However, the data saturated rather quickly in terms of providing the foundation for the theory sought, as well as the particulars for further, more expansive future research. Third, the geographical location presented another limitation. My sample was primarily recruited through telephone invitation of parenting coordinators in New Jersey and those who responded were largely located in the northwest corridor of New Jersey (Bergen, Essex, Morris, Passaic, Somerset and

Union Counties). Though this might not be significant considering New Jersey is a relatively small state, it has been observed by those residing in New Jersey that there is a cultural difference between the northern and southern portions of the state – including the use of terminology and certain iconic experiences. Moreover, PC does not currently have as widespread a presence in the southern region of the state – thus making the potential pool of participants from that region very limited. It is noteworthy that the represented counties in New Jersey do, generally, reflect relatively rich cultural diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status – essentially meaning that parenting coordinators in the represented counties are likely to encounter a broad range of multicultural concepts among their clients. The aforementioned counties also reflect both urban, suburban, and rural environments, with same being further sub-reflected in the professional environments in which subjects were interviewed.

Fourth, there are limitations in many states, including New Jersey, regarding allowances for joint interventions in cases where there is an adjudication of domestic violence and the issuance of a temporary or final restraining order. The participants in this study described cases where the clientele were participating by consent rather than as imposed by a judge. Accordingly, it is not clear whether experiences with court-ordered couples not necessarily committed to the process would be the same. Similarly, commitment to the process is also relative. Since I did not interview the clients about whom the participants spoke, the levels of their commitment and the reasons for commitment were not reviewed and these may be variables in perception of outcome. It is noteworthy that, following the conclusion of my data collection but before my

completion of this dissertation, New Jersey independently implemented a pilot project through which cases with domestic violence histories could be referred to economic mediation with trained professionals. A concentrated training program has been created to ensure potential professional mediators will be versed in the nuances of intimate partner violence to manage implications associated with a power differential within the couple dynamic. A key difference is the focus of the mediation project on the economics of divorce, not at all on custody and shared parenting. Results of this pilot project remain to be seen, as the actual work had not begun as of the completion of my study. Outcome of that project, however, might have implications for whether PC could also be mandated for the described population down the road – and it would be prudent to revisit the experiences of the participants after they are also able to work with couples who have been directed to participate in the process.

Fifth, the majority of my participants were of advanced age, and all had substantial experience as professionals in their underlying primary disciplines and as parenting coordinators. I believe their years of experience as parenting coordinators and as professionals in general likely contributed to their level of confidence in dealing with a potentially explosive clientele. I am uncertain whether newer, less-experienced parenting coordinators would have the same level of confidence or would even be as willing to work with the described population. Sixth, the experiences of the professionals providing the PC intervention might not mirror the experiences regarding efficacy of the couple participants and their children. For example, individual participants might express a lack of success or might be disgruntled if outcomes have not favored their positions or if,

borrowing from the arguments of victim advocates, the power differential and locus of control are disrupted, thus denying someone who seeks to negatively affect a former partner that opportunity when they encounter a professional buffer zone.

Seventh, and finally, my own prior role as a parenting coordinator in New Jersey and as immediate past president of an organization in which all of the participants have membership could be viewed as a limitation that could either color my view of or response to my participants' reported experiences. If anything, my familiarity with the professional reputations and work of the participants, added to the depth of response during the interviews. Several changes occurred over the course of this study which, I believed, lessened the impact of this potential limitation, including my transition from president of the New Jersey Chapter of AFCC to immediate past-president, and my personal relocation from New Jersey to Tennessee, such that I no longer maintain a presence as a parenting coordinator in the state where the research took place.

Though the conclusions and implications derived from the data have been broadly analyzed to fit the needs of most populations, there are always exceptions and there is clearly more research to be done. Whereas these are the limitations, my research study provided an in-depth look at the experiences of my participants in their work as parenting coordinators with HCC with intimate partner violence dynamics. The level of experience and qualifications the participants to this study brought to the table enhanced the complexity and likely applicability of their responses to successfully implementing a practice methodology. This study has added to the body of literature that seeks to address

strategies for maximizing the benefits of PC to include work with the described population as an underserved population appropriately and more expansively.

According to the findings of my research study, and somewhat surprising, the subject parenting coordinators implement some of the same strategies in their work with non-violent HCC as they do when there are clear IPV factors to consider. Equally surprising, as participants explored their own experiences with me, they recognized similarities between HCC considered to have IPV dynamics, and those who theoretically did not. Participants noted that many high conflict couples without any formal IPV history (i.e. no court involvement for DV proceedings, no restraining orders, and sometimes no formally reported incidents) did report to the PC that the police had been to their homes because of an escalated exchange or incident; that there had been at least one incident of pushing, shoving, or some form of simple assault; and/or that name-calling and elevated voices or harsh language, to include threats, were a part of the couple dynamic. All of these descriptions can fall within the definition of intimate partner or domestic violence, with courts often reviewing degrees of severity. Additionally, participants discussed levels and categories of IPV and unanimously agreed that cases where domestic violence is rooted in overt pathology and where risks of physical harm transcend that couple's relationship are not appropriate for PC. Moreover, cases where interpersonal violence is more situational isolated, or rooted in the dynamic of the two individuals presenting as a couple are more appropriate candidates for the PC intervention.

Participants unanimously saw merit in PC as an intervention but viewed efficacy as a measurement of outcome based upon the investment and commitment of the individual couple-clients. This was the case regardless of IPV dynamics. Significantly, one participant indicated a decision to no longer do PC work due to the exhausting and depleting nature of the work for the professional; and another reported not being open to taking cases with clear (adjudicated or documented) domestic violence due to an incident that occurred in the professional's office. Yet, most of the participants acknowledged that they were often only aware of the domestic violence dynamics in advance of beginning work with the clients when there had been a formal court proceeding, whether or not that proceeding resulted in a restraining order. With the most volatile interpersonal dynamics, parenting coordinators saw merit in alternative communication methods, ranging from having separate individual meetings with the parties to engaging in "shuttle diplomacy," where the professional would travel between separate rooms housing each individual rather than having both parties in the same room at the same time. Participants identified methods for employing telephone conferencing and email to allow for communication between people with IPV. Flexibility, adaptability, and confidence on the part of the professional were identified as essential traits for success in PC work with this population.

### **Recommendations**

Further research is necessary on multiple levels. It is important to test whether the results of this small study in New Jersey is reflective of the sentiment of the larger, national and international population of parenting coordinators regarding work with high



conflict parents with IPV experiences. A broad survey with follow-up qualitative interviews of random participants could be enlightening in this regard. A mixed methods study could easily lend itself for the accumulation of concrete statistical data as an objective measurement of efficacy, while also examining data regarding the experiences of the participants to determine efficacy on a qualitative level.

More specifically, my own intended next step in the further research of the subject of this study is for the study itself to be expanded to include a broader sample. While it would be beyond ambitious to seek expansive interviews of parenting coordinators nationwide and in Canada, it makes sense to focus on the development of a survey instrument, seeking a reconstructed version of the same information through a quantitative design. The survey would be disseminated via a tool such as Survey Monkey to reach the largest potential sample pool of professional parenting coordinators. The survey responses would generate quantitative data addressing the same areas of inquiry addressed through this study. However, from the responding participants, a random sub-sample could be identified for follow-up qualitative interviews that replicate those conducted for this study. This mixed methods approach would serve to test the validity and reliability of my findings in this study and shed additional light on the AIPVPC theory for development and implementation in the field.

A review of existing literature revealed that there has been virtually no research conducted, qualitatively or quantitatively, focusing on the role of IPV dynamics between HCC in the PC process. Accordingly, and due in part to the research conducted by victim advocates in domestic violence, additional qualitative inquiry through which identified

victims are asked to share their experiences in shared custody arrangements with their identified batterers, would be enlightening for identifying problems PCs would face when working in the context of that dynamic. Moreover, identified victims could be invited to share their thoughts about having a professional in the PC role to facilitate required interaction brought about by a mandated shared custody arrangement notwithstanding the IPV dynamic. Further research should focus on the experiences of identified victims who agree to participate in a PC process with their former spouse or partner also identified as the relational aggressor in the relationship, and on the experiences of the identified perpetrators after their participation in the PC process. Since the nuances of DV are highly individual, qualitative research seems to be the approach more likely to identify necessary data to further develop the APCIPV theory, and then to further tailor the PC intervention to meet the identified feedback and needs of the study participants, with the hope of increasing PC efficacy with this population.

Additionally, participants in this study identified stressors associated with performing PC services, both in general and with the IPV population. Research is needed regarding vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout associated with this field and toward identifying triggering and contributing factors.

### **Implications**

The findings of my study have implications for social change that can lead toward advancements in a variety of areas. First, the thorough development of PC as a viable intervention for HCC engaged in intimate partner violence creates an option for many couples who are currently left to their own devices, with little to no guidance or

protection other than through the court system. For many, the courts are accessed through attorneys and through motion practice, which can be expensive alternatives.

There are waiting periods and time-frames imposed by court rules and statutes which delay the access individuals in problematic interpersonal dynamics to the court's attention and to a justice-based resolution. There is often urgency associated with the need for resolution on presenting issues when IPV is part of the couple dynamic. More expedient resolutions are often extreme, including the arrest and incarceration of the aggravating party. I am not suggesting that arrest and incarceration are not an appropriate result for the violation of a restraining order or an act of domestic violence in some cases. I am, however, suggesting that such results do not adequately address the underlying problem – a potentially explosive communication dynamic between high conflict parents with some history of violent interactions who have been commanded by the courts to co-parent their children, with little or no third party assistance. The arrest, even when warranted, does not address the continuing need to co-parent in joint custodial or shared parenting arrangements, after the incarcerated person is released.

With a methodology in place for how to incorporate PC with the described population, two things naturally occur. First, there becomes an avenue outside of courts to which parents in this dynamic can turn for guidance, corrective feedback, and recommendations – all of which become available much more quickly than gaining the attention of the court; and second, judicial resources will potentially be freed up through an identified step prior to litigation that saves courts and litigants' time and litigants' money. Second, one of the core objections asserted by victim advocates is that joint

interventions provide putative batterers with access to their victims, thus perpetuating the IPV dynamic.

In fact, the presence of a trained, third party professional or parenting coordinator offers a tri-fold answer to this concern. First, the parenting coordinator is a buffer for the victim by providing a filter for communication by the abusive party, thus endeavoring to reduce verbal and psychological abuse in every day communication. Second, the parenting coordinator, through direct access to the batterer, has occasion to work directly with the aggressive party to educate and potentially alter the aggressive behavior by intervening before the problem occurs, and sometimes to prevent miscommunication that would otherwise result in punitive measures. From this angle, PC also satisfies the concerns of advocates for individuals maintaining that they were wrongfully accused of domestic violence, now concerned that they will be falsely accused of violating a restraining order. The third party, neutral witness can be both a deterrent and insurance of truth in the otherwise *he said, she said* battle that perpetuates the IPV dynamic. Finally, and maybe most important, the parenting coordinator replaces children as the middlemen and messengers in their parents' high conflict divorce. If there is recognition that high conflict parents frequently triangulate children, and that high conflict divorce has a pervasive, negative impact on children, it stands to reason that removing the children from the family triangle through replacement by an experienced professional who can monitor and facilitate parental communication, while better insulating children, is a positive.

Implications of this study relate to how this study will impact social change. The results and interpretation can better inform the court system, and potentially lead to some relief on judicial resources. In some respects, this is breakthrough research in an area of study previously untouched or only superficially touched through previous research and it will hopefully lead to further development of the AIPVPC theory for the betterment of the population it is designed to serve.

### **Conclusion**

This grounded theory study took an in-depth look at the experiences of parenting coordinators working with HCC also engaged in intimate partner violence and specifically sought data in response to the question: How do parenting coordinators work with HCC with IPV histories?

Though the statements of participants identified some challenges and reflected both positive and negative implications associated with providing PC with and for the described population, proper utilization of the PC intervention with this population appears promising and worthy of further research efforts. All participants responded favorably with recognition that the described population is often left underserved and that it is not in the best interests of the parents or the children to leave this population to their own devices. Participants defined proper utilization as including proper training and familiarity by parenting coordinators with the nuances and levels of IPV before offering services to this population, and the express modification of the delivery of services, to include keeping clients separate for communication rather than engaging in joint meetings.

Next, once a theory emerges regarding effective practice, the practice model can be implemented for a mixed methods study regarding the efficacy of that model. In this case, parenting coordinators identified techniques for interfacing this the couple to include separate meeting, or simply housing each party in a separate space during the same meeting, or having one party present and one party of the phone. Adding clarification and definition to parenting terms and schedules outlined in parenting agreements from the get-go and how to do that is a critical component, as is the parenting coordinator quickly establishing themselves as a confident authority. Participants emphasized the need for support from the Judges for enforceability of their recommendations and for accountability and consequences for violating or recalcitrant litigants. Tools such as email, with highly defined guidelines, allow for a structured, necessary exchange of information and monitored efforts to make joint decisions about the best interests of involved children. Follow-up research focusing on the experiences of the parenting coordinators applying the specific model would shed light on the efficacy of the model in practice. Certainly, additional research examining the experiences of parents utilizing services pursuant to the prescribed model would add the dimension of consumer feedback. An additional component of consumer-based research would include focus on whether the availability of PC in this form would be appealing to victims of domestic violence who are currently thrust into co-parenting arrangements with their former partners following or in the context of IPV experiences.

The topic examined through this study is worthy of further exploration and development. Under all circumstances, this study is likely to form a foundation for future

work in the field for the benefit of children caught in the triangulation of high conflict divorce with the added component of IPV between their parents.

## References

- AFCC Task Force on Parenting Coordination. (2003). *Parenting coordination implementation issues*. Association of Family and Conciliation Courts.
- Amato, P. R. (2000). The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 1269-1287. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.01269.x
- Amato, P. R. (2003). Reconciling divergent perspectives: *Judith Wallerstein*, quantitative family research, and children of divorce. *Family Relations*, 52, 332-339. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2003.00332.x
- American Psychological Association (2012). Guidelines for the practice of parenting coordination. *American Psychologist*, 67(1), 63-71.
- Baker, A. J. (2005). The long-term effects of parental alienation on adult children: A qualitative research study. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 33(4), 289-302. doi: 10.1080/01926180590962129
- Baker, A. L., & Darnall, D. C. (2007). A construct study of the eight symptoms of severe parental alienation syndrome. A survey of parental experiences. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 47(1-2), 55-75. doi: 10.1300/J087v47n01\_04
- Ballard, R. H., Holtzworth-Munroe, A., Applegate, A. G., & Beck, C. J. A. (2011). Intimate partner violence in family and divorce mediation: A randomized trial of intimate violence screening. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 17(2), 241-263. doi:10.1037/a0022616



- Bancroft, L., Silverman, J. G., & Ritchie, D. (2012). *The batterer as parent: Addressing the impact of domestic violence on family dynamics*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Barnett, J. E. (2009). Ethical and professional considerations in divorce and child custody cases. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 40(6), 539-549.  
doi:10.1037/a0017853
- Bartell, D. S. (2006). Influence of parental divorce on romantic relationships in young adulthood: A cognitive developmental perspective. In M. Fine & J. Harvey (Eds.) *Handbook of divorce and relationship dissolution* (pp. 339-630). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Beck, C. J. A., Putterman, M. D., Sbarra, D. A., & Mehl, M. R. (2008). Parenting coordinator roles, program goals and services provided: Insights from the Pima County, Arizona program. *Journal of Child Custody*, 5(1/2), 122-139. doi: 10.1080/15379410802070468
- Bedi, G., & Goddard, C. (2007). Intimate partner violence: What is the impact on children? *Australian Psychologist*, 42(1), 66-77. doi: 10.1080/15379410802583742
- Bemiller, M. (2008). When battered mothers lose custody: A qualitative study of abuse at home and in the courts. *Journal of Child Custody*, 5(3/4), 228-255. doi: 10.1080/15379410802583742

- Biringen, Z. (1994). Attachment theory and research: Application and clinical practice. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 64(3), 404-420. doi:10.1037/h0079540
- Blaisure, K. R., & Geasler, M. (2006). Educational interventions for separating and divorcing parents and their children. In M. Fine & J. Harvey (Eds.), *Handbook of divorce and relationship dissolution* (pp. 575-602). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. New York, NY: Aronson.
- Boyan, S. M., & Termini, A. M. (2005). *The psychotherapist as parenting coordinator in high conflict divorce: strategies and techniques*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Brewster, K. O., Beck, C. J. A., Anderson, E. R., & Benjamin, G. A. H. (2011). Evaluating parenting coordination programs: Encouraging results from pilot testing a research methodology. *Journal of Child Custody*, 8, 247-267. doi: 10.1080/15379418.2011.620926
- Brod, M. L., Tesler, L. E., & Christensen, T. L. (2009). Qualitative research and content validity: Developing best practice on science and experience. *Quality of Life Research*, 18, 1263-1278. doi: 10.1371.0085287
- Carter, D. K. (2011). *Parenting coordination: A practical guide for family law professionals*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company.
- Carich, M. S., & Spilman, K. (2010). Basic principles of intervention. In: Readings in family therapy: From theory to practice, Rasheed, Rasheed, & Marley (eds.) Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory*. London, England: Sage.

- Coates, C.A. (2010). Parenting plan coordinators: When you need professional help to make joint decisions. *Family Advocate*, 33(1), 20-23. doi: 10.2307/25806857
- Coates, C. A., Deutsch, R., Starnes, H., Sullivan, M. J., & Sydlik, B. L. (2004). Parenting coordination for high-conflict families. *Family Court Review*, 42(2), 246-262. doi: 10.1111/j.174-1617.2004.tb00647.x
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- DeKeseredy, W. S. (2011). *Violence against women: Myths, facts, controversies*. New York, NY: University of Toronto Press.
- Deutsch, R. (2008). Parenting coordination: A new practice opportunity. *Family Psychologist*, 24(2).
- Deutsch, R., Coates, C., & Fieldstone, L. (2007). Parenting coordination: An emerging role. *Interventions with high conflict parents*. Madison, WI: Association of Family and Conciliation Courts.
- Dill, K. (2005). Review of child custody and domestic violence: A call for safety and accountability'. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 29(9), 1065-1068.
- Dillman Taylor, D., Purswell, K., Lindo, N., Jayne, K., & Fernando, D. (2011). The impact of child parent relationship therapy on child behavior and parent-child

- relationships: An examination of parental divorce. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 20(3), 124-137. doi: 10.1037/a0024469
- Dutton, D. G., Hamel, J., & Aaronson, J. (2010). The gender paradigm in family court processes: Re-balancing the scales of justice from biased social science. *Journal of Child Custody*, 7, 1-31. doi: 10.1080/15379410903554816
- Ellis, E. M., & Boyan, S. (2010). Parent coordinators in parental alienation cases. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 38, 218-236. doi: 10.1080/01926181003757074
- Elrod, L. D. (2001). Reforming the system to protect the children in high conflict custody cases. *William Mitchell Law Review*, 28, 495-551.
- Fassinger, R. E. (2005). Paradigms, praxis, problems, and promise: Grounded Theory in counseling psychology research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52, 156-166.
- Fidler, J. B., Bala, N., & Saini, A. M. (2013). *Children who resist post-separation parental contact: A differential approach for legal and mental health professionals*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Fidler, B. J., & Bala, N. (2010). Children resisting postseparation contact with a parent: Concepts, controversies, and conundrums. *Family Court Review*, 48(1), 10-47. doi: 10.1111/j.1744.1617.2009.01287.x
- Fidler, B. J., & Epstein, P. (2008). Parenting coordination in Canada: An overview of legal and practice issues. *Journal of Custody*, 5(1/2), 53-87. doi: 10.1080/15379410802070393

- Fieldstone, L., Carter, D., King, T., & McHale, J. (2011). Training, skills, and practices of parenting coordinators: Florida statewide study. *Family Court Review, 49*, 801-817. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01415x
- Firestone, G., & Weinstein, J. (2004). Models of collaboration in family law: In the best interests of the children: A proposal to transform the adversarial system. *Family Court Review, 42*, 203. 2003. doi: 10.1111/j.174-1617.2004.tb00644.x
- Friedman, E. (1991). Bowen theory and therapy. In A.S. Gurman & D.P. Kniskern (Eds), *Handbook of family therapy* (Vol. II, (pp. 134-170). New York, NY: Brunner/Mazel.
- Frost, N. A., Holt, A., Shinebourne, P., Esin, C., Nolas, Mehdizadeh, L., & Brooks-Gordon, B. (2011). Collective findings, individual interpretations: An illustration of a pluralistic approach to qualitative data analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 8*, 93-113.
- Garrity, C.B., & Baris, M.A., (1994). *Caught in the middle: Protecting the children of high-conflict divorce*. New York, NY: Lexington Books.
- Geffner, R., Conradi, L., Geis, K., & Aranda, M. B. (2009). Conducting child custody evaluations in the context of family violence allegations: Practical techniques and suggestions for ethical practice. *Journal of Child Custody, 6*, 189-218. doi: 10.1080/15379410903084608

- Glaser, B.J., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Goldenberg, I., & Goldenberg, H. (2004). *Family therapy: An overview* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Gould, J. W., Martindale, D. A., & Eidman, M. H. (2008). Assessing allegations of domestic violence. *Journal of Child Custody: Research, Issues, and Practices*, 4(1-2), 1-35. doi: 10.1300/j190v04n01\_01
- Greenberg, E.E. (2011). Beyond the polemics: Realistic options to help divorcing families manage domestic violence. *St. John's University School of Law, Legal Studies Paper Series*, Paper #11-006; retrieved <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1816635>.
- Greenberg, L.R., & Sullivan, M.J. (2012). Parenting coordinator and therapist collaboration in high-conflict shared custody cases. *Journal of Child Custody*, 9, 85-107. doi: 10.1080/15379418.2012.652571
- Guba, E.G., & Lincoln, Y.S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N.K. S. Denzin & Y. ivS. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., pp.191-216). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A. & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18, 59-82.
- Haberman, P. S. (2005). Before death, we must part: Relocation and protection for domestic violence victims in volatile divorce and custody situations. *Family Court Review*, 43(1), 149-163. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-1617.2005.00014.x

- Hamel, J., Desmarais, S. L., Nicholls, T. L., Malley-Morrison, K., & Aaronson, J. (2009). Domestic violence and child custody: Are family court professionals' decisions based on erroneous beliefs? *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research*, *1*(2), 37-52. doi: 10.1108/17596599200900011
- Hammond, R.T., & Nichols, M.P. (2010). How collaborative is structural family therapy? In: Readings in family therapy: From theory to practice, Rasheed, Rasheed, & Marley, (eds.) Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Hardesty, J. L., & Chung, G. H. (2006). Intimate partner violence, parental divorce, and child custody: Directions for intervention and future research. *Family Relations*, *55*, 200-210. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-3729.2006.00370.x
- Haselschwerdt, M. L., Hardesty, J. L., & Hans, J. D. (2011). Custody evaluators' beliefs about domestic violence allegations during divorce: Feminist and family violence perspectives. *J. Interpers Violence*, *26* (8), 1694-1719. doi: 10.1177/0886260510370599
- Hass, G.A. (2014). Parenting coordination and domestic violence. In Parenting coordination in postseparation disputes: A comprehensive guide for practitioners, (Higuchi & Lally, Eds.) Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Hayes, S. W. (2010). "More of a street cop than a detective": An analysis of roles and functions of parenting coordinators in North Carolina. *Family Court Review*, *48*(4), 698-709. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-1617.2010.01343.x

- Hayes, S., Grady, M., & Brantley, H. T. (2012). E-mails, statutes, and personality disorders: A contextual examination of the processes, interventions and perspectives of parenting coordinators. *Family Court Review*, 50(3), 429-440. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-1617.2012.01458.x
- Henry, W. J., Fieldstone, L., & Bohac, K. (2009). Parenting coordination and court relitigation: A case study. *Family Court Review*, 47(4), 682-697. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-1617.2009.01281.x
- Henry, W.J., Fieldstone, L., Thompson, M, & Treborne, K. (2011). Parenting coordination as an antidote for high-conflict divorce and court relitigation. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 52, 455-471. doi: 10.1080/10502556.2011.609421
- Hetherington, E.M., & Kelly, J. (2002). *For better or for worse*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Hutchinson, A.J., Johnston, L.H., & Breckon, J.D. (2010). Using QSR-NVivo to facilitate the development of a grounded theory project: An account of a worked example. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 13, 283-302.
- Jaffe, P. G., Crooks, C. V., & Bala, N. (2009). A framework for addressing allegations of domestic violence in child custody disputes. *Journal of Child Custody*, 6, 169-188. doi: 10.1080/15379410903084517



- Jaffe, P.G., & Crooks, C. V. (2007). *Assessing the best interests of the child: Visitation and custody in cases of domestic violence*. In: Parenting by men who batter: New directions for assessment and intervention, In: Edleson & Williams (eds.), New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jaffe, P. G., Johnston, J. R., Crooks, C. V., & Bala, N. (2008). Custody disputes involving allegations of domestic violence: Toward a differentiated approach to parenting plans. *Family Court Review*, 46(3), 500-522. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-1617.2008.00216.x
- Janesick, V. J. (2011). *"Stretching" exercises for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kane, C.M. (2010). Family-of-origin work for counseling trainees and practitioners. In: *Readings in family therapy: From theory to practice*. Rasheed, Rasheed, & Marley (eds.) Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Kelly, J.B. (2002). Psychological and legal interventions for parents and children in custody and access disputes: Current research and practice. *Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law*, 10, 129-163.
- Kelly, J.B. (2007). Children's living arrangements following separation and divorce: Insights from empirical and clinical research. *Family process*, 46(1) 35-52. doi: 10.1111/j.1545-5300.2006.00190.x

- Kelly, J. B. (2008). Preparing for the parenting coordination role: Training needs for mental health and legal professionals. *Journal of Child Custody*, 5(1/2), 140-159. doi: 10.1080/15379410802070476
- Kelly, J. B., & Johnston, J. R. (2001). The alienated child: A reformulation of parental alienation syndrome. *Family Court Review*, 39(3), 249-266. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-1617.2001.tb00609.x
- Kirkland, K. (2010). Positive coping among experienced parenting coordinators: A recipe for success. *Journal of Child Custody*, 7, 61-77. doi: 10.1080/15379410903554840
- Kirkland, K. (2008). Parenting coordination (PC) laws, rules, and regulations: A jurisdictional comparison. *Journal of Child Custody*, 5(1/2), 25-52. doi: 10.1080/15379410802070377
- Kirkland, K., & Kirkland, K. E. (2006). Risk management and aspirational ethics for parenting coordinators. *Journal of Child Custody*, 3(2), 23-43. doi: 10.1300/j190v.03n02\_02

- Kirkland, K., & Sullivan, M. (2008). Parenting coordination (PC) practice: A survey of experienced professionals. *Family Court Review*, 46(4), 622-636. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-1617.2008.00228.x
- Lally, S. J., & Higuchi, S. A. (2008). The American Psychological Association Parenting Coordination Project: Development of the project and initial review of the first two years. *Journal of Child Custody*, 5(1/2), 101-121. doi: 10.1080/15379410802070435
- Leech, N. L., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2007). An array of qualitative data analysis tools: A call for data analysis triangulation. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 22(4), 557-584.
- Lee, M. Y. (2001). Marital violence: Impact on children's emotional experiences, emotional regulation and behaviors in a post-divorce/separation situation. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 18, 137-163. doi: 10.1023/A:1007650812845
- Lessard, G. (2010). Child custody issues and co-occurrence of intimate partner violence and child maltreatment: controversies and points of agreement amongst practitioners. *Child and Family Social Work*, 15, 492-500. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2206.2010.00705.x

- Levin, A., & Miller, L. G. (2003). Fighting for child custody when domestic violence is at issue: Survey of state laws. *Social Work, 48*(4), 463-470. doi: 10.1093/sw/48.4.463
- Mahoney, G., Haracz, K., & Williams, L.T. (2012). How mental health occupational therapists address issues of diet with their clients: A qualitative study. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal, 59*, 294-301. doi: 10.1111/j.1440-1630.2012.01028.x
- Martindale, D. A. (2007). Introduction to the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts' model standards of practice for child custody evaluation. *Family Court Review, 45*(1), 58-60. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-1617.2007.129\_1.x
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- McHale, J.P., Khazan, I., Erera, P., Rotman, T., DeCoursey, W., & McConnell, M. (2002). Coparenting in diverse family systems. In M. Bornstein (Ed.) *Handbook of parenting* (pp.75-107) (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). New Jersey: Erlbaum.
- Mertens, D.M. (2010). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

- Meyer, S. (2011). 'Acting in the children's best interest?' Examining victims' responses to intimate partner violence. *J. Child Fam. Stud*, 20, 436-443. doi: 10.1007/s10826-010-9410-7
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Minuchin, S. (1974). *Families and family therapy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mitcham-Smith, M., & Henry, W. J. (2007). High-conflict divorce solutions: Parenting coordination as an innovative co-parenting intervention. *The Family Journal*, 15, 368-373. doi: 10.1177/1066480707303751
- Moore, R. O., Ordway, A., & Francis, J. (2013). The tug of war child: Counseling children involved in high conflict divorces. In *Ideas and research you can use: VISTAS Summer 2013*. Retrieved from <http://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/vistas/vistas-2013/>
- Neff, R., & Cooper, K. (2004). Progress and parent education: Parental conflict resolution. *Family Court Review*, 42, 1-16. doi: 10.1111/j.174-1617.2004.tb00636.x
- Ordway, A. (2011). Consideration of the Impact of Domestic Violence on Children by the New Jersey Courts. *New Jersey Psychologist*, 6(1/3), 31-34.
- Pate, D. Jr. (2008). Child support enforcement and father involvement among victims of intimate partner violence. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, & Trauma*, 17(1), 42-58. doi: 10.1080/10926770802250785

- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Pruett, M.K. (2009, November). *Plenary keynote speech*. Presented at the AFCC Regional Training Conference: Interventions for family conflicts: Stacking the odds in favor of children, Reno, Nevada.
- Rich, P. (2012). Inside the black box: Revealing the process in applying grounded theory analysis. *The Qualitative Report, 17*, 1-23.
- Shear, L. E. (2008). In search of statutory authority for parenting coordinator orders in California: Using grass-roots, hybrid model without an enabling statute. *Journal of Child Custody, 5*(1/2), 88-99. doi: 10.1080/15379410802070419
- Shenton, A.K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information, 22*, 63-75.
- Silverman, J. G., Meth, C. M., Cuthbert, C. V., Slote, K., & Bancroft, L. (2004). Child custody determinations in cases involving intimate partner violence: A human rights analysis. *American Journal of Public Health, 94*, 951-957. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.94.6.951
- Stark, E. (2007). *Coercive control: How men entrap women in personal life*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Stark, E. (2009). Rethinking custody evaluation in cases involving domestic violence. *Journal of Child Custody, 6*, 287-321. doi: 10.1080/15379410903084707
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basic of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (Eds.). (1997). *Grounded theory in practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Sullivan, M. J. (2004). Ethical, legal, and professional practice issues involved in acting as a psychologist parent coordinator in child custody cases. *Family Court Review*, 42(3), 576-582. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-1617.2004.tb00670x
- Sullivan, M. J. (2008). Introduction to the special issue on parenting coordination. *Journal of Child Custody*, 5(1/2), 1-3. doi: 15379410802070344
- Sullivan, M.J. (2008). Coparenting and the parenting coordination process. *Journal of Child Custody*, 5(1-2), 4-24. doi: 10.1080/15379410802070351
- Sullivan, M. J., Ward, P. A., & Deutsch, R. M. (2010). Overcoming Barriers Family Camp: A program for high-conflict families where a child is resisting contact with a parent. *Family Court Review*, 48(1), 116-135. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-1617.2009.01293.x
- Taylor, R., & Andrews, B. (2009). Parental depression in the context of divorce and the impact on children. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 50, 472-480. doi: 10.1080/10502550902970579
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2007).
- U.S. Census Bureau (2005).

- Vangelisti, A. (2006). Hurtful interactions and the dissolution of intimacy. In M. Fine & J. Harvey (Eds.), *Handbook of divorce and relationship dissolution* (pp. 575-602). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Warshak, R. A. (2010a). *Divorce Poison: Protecting the Parent-Child Bond From a Vindictive Ex*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishing, Inc.
- Warshak, R. A. (2010b). Family Bridges: Using insights from social science to reconnect parents and alienated children. *Family Court Review*, 48(1), 48-80. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-1617.2009.01288.x
- Whiting, J.B., Oka, M., Fife, S.T. (2012). Appraisal distortions and intimate partner violence: Gender, power, and interaction. *Journal of Marriage and Family Therapy*, 38, 133-149. doi: 10.1111/j.1752-0606.2011.00285.x
- Whiting, J.B., Smith, D.B., Oka, M., & Karahurt, G. (2012). Safety in intimate partnerships: The roles of appraisals and threat. *Journal of Family Violence*, 27, 313-320. doi: 10.1007/s10896-012-9423-7
- Wolcott, H.F. (1994). *Transforming qualitative data: Description, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Zorza, J. (2009). On navigating custody & visitation evaluations in cases with domestic violence: A judge's guide. *Journal of Child Custody*, 6, 258-286. doi: 10.1080/15379410903084699



## Appendix I Interview Protocol

1. What should the role be of parenting coordinators in cases with domestic violence?
2. What decisions have you made regarding your role in such cases?
3. Please share with me some examples of cases you have had where the parents have had domestic violence experiences.
4. What, if any, modifications do you put in place to accommodate work with this unique population?
5. If you do make modifications to the process, why?
6. How is work in cases with domestic violence different from traditional parenting coordination?
7. Please bring to mind some ways in which there might be improvement in the interactions between the high conflict parents with IPV after engaging in this process.
8. What improvements you have experienced?
9. In what ways have the dynamics between the couple with whom you have worked remained unchanged?
10. To what do you attribute the identified improvement or lack thereof?
11. If you could change anything about how the parenting coordination process is implemented with this population based upon your experiences in working with them thus far, what would you recommend changing and how?