

Shared Parenting Agreements After Marital Separation: The Roles of Empathy and Narcissism

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The identification of psychological and interpersonal factors that predict cooperation and agreement between ex-spouses is important to understanding, and eventually promoting, healthy postdivorce adjustment of parents and their children. By drawing on object relations theory, the authors identified differences between 16 ex-couples who were able to negotiate and maintain a cooperative parenting plan after separation ("agreed ex-couples") and 16 ex-couples who disagree about parenting arrangements ("disagreed ex-couples") but were similar in age, educational background, age of their children, and time since separation. **As expected, disagreed ex-couples were more narcissistic, more interpersonally vulnerable, less able to take another's perspective, less concerned about the feelings and needs of others, more self-oriented, and less child-oriented and more self-important in their parenting attitudes than agreed ex-couples.** Our findings also supported a process mediational model of "child-centeredness" that attempts to elucidate the pathways through which these variables are interrelated. This model suggests that **ex-couples' empathy is associated directly with child-oriented but not self-important parenting attitudes, whereas self-orientation is associated directly with self-important but not child-oriented attitudes.** A self-serving orientation on the part of ex-couples does, however, relate to child-oriented parenting attitudes indirectly through self-important parenting attitudes.

Numerous studies have examined the implications of parental divorce for the well-being of children and their families (Hetherington, 1989; Wallerstein, 1991). A recent meta-analysis of this literature (Amato & Keith, 1991) indicates that **exposure to parental conflict before and during the separation best accounts for the negative effects of divorce on children.** Similarly, the results of a large-scale longitudinal study (Cherlin et al., 1991) suggest that the relationship between parents continues to be a critical factor in children's and parents' adjustment well beyond the termination of a marriage. The greater the degree of marital conflict, the greater the extent of parental distress and interparental conflict after separation, and the more likely children are to be drawn into such conflicts (Tschann, Johnston, Kline, & Wallerstein, 1989; Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989). Involvement in their parents' disputes is associated with children's reports of conflicting loyalties (Johnston, Campbell, & Mayes, 1985) and predicts the number and severity of children's behavior problems (Bray & Hetherington, 1993; Johnston, Gonzalez, & Campbell, 1987).

Conversely, **cooperation between separated parents appears**

to be a positive force both for the parents and their children. For the parents, cooperation offsets negative attachment to the former spouse (Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989) and enhances postdivorce adjustment and feelings of support in their roles as parents (Camara & Resnick, 1989). Their children show fewer behavior problems (Hess & Camara, 1979; Jacobsen, 1978; Kurdek & Berg, 1982; Luepnitz, 1986), have more harmonious sibling relationships (MacKinnon, 1989), and have fewer problems in dating during adolescence (Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984).

Although there is **considerable empirical evidence for the importance of interparental cooperation to both the parents and their children's well-being,** a fundamental question concerning this relationship remains: What are the circumstances and characteristics of parents who are able to negotiate and maintain a mutually agreeable shared parenting plan after their marriages are over? One possible circumstance is type of child custody and access arrangement, with some (e.g., Irving & Benjamin, 1991) arguing that joint custody is inherently more egalitarian than sole custody and promotes cooperation between divorced parents (e.g., Roman & Haddad, 1978). However, outcome studies have not supported this contention (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989). Cooperative parents engage in a full range of custody arrangements, with no one type proving superior in benefiting children's adjustment or in protecting children from interparental conflict (Glover & Steele, 1989; Kline, Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990; Wolchik, Braver, & Sandler, 1985). Thus, **type of custody arrangement does not appear to promote cooperation, nor do cooperative ex-spouses seem to self-select one type of arrangement over another.** Apparently other, perhaps more psychological and interpersonal

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We thank David Cox, Pam Duncan, Jan Johnston, and Martin Sherer Smith for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. Preparation of this article was in part funded by a Standard Research Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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factors, characterize parents who are able to cooperate after divorce. The purpose of the present study was to examine the hypothesis that parents who maintain a cooperative parenting plan after separation differ from those who do not in narcissism, interpersonal vulnerability, self- and other orientation, and parenting attitudes. Additionally, we test a mediational model relating narcissism and interpersonal vulnerability to child-oriented parenting through general empathic disposition, self-orientation, and self-important parenting. This research evolved out of recent clinical studies that have noted a connection among child-oriented parenting, empathic disposition, and cooperative shared parenting, and out of object relations theory, which suggests that parental empathy is itself related to narcissistic functioning.

Parental empathy has been advanced in the clinical and developmental literature as an important facet of positive parenting (see Feshbach, 1987). Current research suggests that empathic and child-oriented parenting styles are critical elements of the attachment relationship between parent and child and that they facilitate the development of empathy and adaptive behavior in children (Ainsworth, 1989; Egeland & Sroufe, 1981; Koestner, Franz, & Weinberger, 1990; Matas, Arend, & Sroufe, 1978; Pulkkinen, 1982). For divorcing parents, the challenge of putting aside feelings about the loss of the marital relationship to focus on the needs of the child and cooperate with their ex-spouses in parenting matters is likely to strain their empathic capacities. Nevertheless, the observations of several researchers are consistent with the idea that the development of a cooperative shared-parenting plan among ex-spouses depends on the ability to focus on their children's needs, which in turn, hinges on their ability to deal with the interpersonal vulnerability associated with divorce. Consistent with these observations, this study considers interpersonal vulnerability a prior or causal variable which, by limiting empathic disposition and heightening self-orientation, promotes self-interested rather than child-oriented parenting beliefs in divorcing couples.

On the basis of 10 years of contact with 60 divorced families, Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) noted that ex-spouses who have avoided custody disputes tend to attribute their shared parenting success to the ability to separate appraisals of their ex-spouses as partners from perceptions of them as parents. Jaffe and Cameron (1984) studied 40 couples presenting to a family court clinic and reported that parents who became involved in legal custody disputes were less "child-centered" than parents who resolve custody issues through mediation. Tschann, Johnston, Kline, and Wallerstein (1989) found that children's emotional adjustment was positively correlated with their divorced parents' capacity to empathize with them. In a study of 51 families, parents who were able to empathize with the child's wish to maintain a relationship with the other parent were most successful in carrying out provisions of joint custody agreements, whereas parents who were relatively less able to separate their own feelings and needs from those of the child had difficulty maintaining this custody arrangement (Steinman, Zimmelman, & Knoblauch, 1985).

Although few empirical studies have investigated personality features associated with dispositional empathy (see Feshbach, 1987; Raskin & Terry, 1988), object relations theorists have focused on the relationship between parental empathy and nar-

cissistic functioning (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975; Miller, 1981). According to these theorists, narcissistic parents, who themselves may have lacked empathic parenting during their childhood years, have difficulties taking another's perspective and may look to their children to fulfill their own unsatisfied needs for admiration and recognition (see Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). Empirical efforts to assess the diversity and range of narcissistic functioning in nonclinical (e.g., Emmons, 1984; Watson, McKinney, Hawkins, & Morris, 1988) and clinical samples (e.g., Gunderson, Ronningstam, & Smith, 1991; Prifitera & Ryan, 1984; Raskin & Novacek, 1989) suggest that narcissism is related to excessive self-centeredness and difficulties in empathic functioning and that these traits at their pathological extremes are key dimensions of narcissistic personality disorder, as defined in the most recent version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Consistent with these findings and object relations theory (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971), this study explores narcissism as a prior or causal variable that limits empathic capacity and other-orientedness. Interpersonal vulnerability is similarly explored as a prior or causal variable that is conceptually related to narcissism but involves an independent path to self-important versus child-oriented parenting attitudes. Narcissism and interpersonal vulnerability, considered together, are viewed as capturing the object relations notion of "narcissistic vulnerability" or "narcissistic functioning."

Kohut (1971) and other object relations theorists (Cashdan, 1988; Kernberg, 1975; Mahler et al., 1981) argue that individuals with narcissistic personality tendencies are particularly vulnerable to relational stresses, because they depend excessively on recognition and admiration by others. Clinicians note that individuals with narcissistic vulnerabilities often develop relationships with others who have similar narcissistic needs (Berkman, 1984; Lachkar, 1984), but are rapidly disillusioned with these relationships (Cashdan, 1988; Kernberg, 1975; Masterson, 1981). Under relational stress, narcissistic parents are likely to feel particularly needy of affirmation from others and, as this excessive dependency leaves them feeling lost without the admiration and support of the other parent, they may instead turn their energies toward competing with each other for the child's recognition and affirmation. Insofar as the reactions of narcissistic parents may depend more on their own needs and moods rather than on the needs of the child (Buchholz & Haynes, 1983), this tendency may be exacerbated under conditions of relational stress and perceived rejection by ex-spouses.

Research on dispositional empathy suggests that individuals who tend to be overwhelmed by feelings of distress in tense interpersonal situations have difficulty taking another's perspective, suffer from poor interpersonal skills, and tend to be more self-serving than other-oriented (Davis, 1983a; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). It appears that such individuals may protect themselves from becoming overwhelmed or "flooded" by their own reactions to the distress of others by maintaining a self-centered perspective in emotionally loaded interpersonal situations. As marital conflict increases, and especially during and after marital separation, parents may become overwhelmed with feelings of interpersonal vulnerability to the extent that

they have difficulty empathizing with their children's needs and lack a shared focus on which to base cooperative parenting efforts. **By promoting a self- rather than other-oriented perspective, the interpersonal vulnerability of divorcing couples may lead to overevaluating their importance to their children's lives, underevaluating the significance of the other parent for them, and generally lacking in their understanding of their children's point of view.**

On the basis of clinical interviews with 80 divorced couples who were entrenched in custody disputes up to 10 years after the marriage break-up, Johnston and her colleagues (Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Johnston et al., 1987) concluded that **the greater the narcissistic tendencies of the parents, the more likely they were to have experienced the divorce as a rejection of their entire person, and the more likely they were to draw their children into the conflict with their ex-spouses.** Johnston and Campbell (1988) hypothesized that **the initiation and continuation of custody disputes served as a psychological defense against the sense of failure, rejection, and humiliation engendered by the divorce.** Although empirical evidence suggests that most divorcing parents experience some degree of rejection, loss, and psychological distress (e.g., see Hetherington, 1989), **the extent of narcissism and interpersonal vulnerability may heighten this experience and compromise the ex-couples' capacity to consider their children's needs and coordinate their parenting efforts accordingly.**

The present study investigated **the perspective-taking abilities, narcissism, interpersonal vulnerability, empathic dispositions, and parenting attitudes** of 16 ex-couples who were able to negotiate and maintain a cooperative parenting plan after separation (agreed parents), compared with 16 ex-couples who disagree about parenting arrangements (disagreed parents). We expected that agreed parents would be (a) less narcissistic than disagreed parents, (b) more able to take another's perspective, (c) more able to deal with tense interpersonal situations, (d) less self-oriented, (e) more empathic, and, (f) more child-oriented rather than "self-important" in their parenting attitudes in that parenting decisions would be influenced more by concern for their children's than their own needs.

In addition to testing the hypothesized differences between agreed and disagreed ex-couples on these psychological characteristics, the present study also explored a mediational model of child-centered parenting that attempts to elucidate the pathways through which these variables are interrelated. In this object-relations-based model, **perspective taking is hypothesized to have a direct effect on narcissism, in that difficulties in understanding another's position may promote narcissistic personality features.** Narcissism along with (but independent of) **interpersonal vulnerability, together considered to reflect the object relations notion of narcissistic vulnerability, are hypothesized to have their primary impact on empathy (i.e., other-oriented feelings) and self-serving orientation.** Each of these aspects of self-other orientation, in turn, was hypothesized to have its primary impact on different parenting attitudes. **Specifically, the model holds that empathy is associated directly with child-oriented but not self-important parenting attitudes, whereas a self-serving orientation is associated directly with self-important but not child-oriented attitudes.** Self-orientation is thought, however, to relate to child-oriented parenting atti-

tudes indirectly through self-important parenting attitudes. The model is illustrated in Figure 1.

Method

Research Participants

Selection and group assignment. Separated and divorced parents were invited to participate through newspaper advertisements, and information letters distributed by family lawyers and psychologists. Thirty-two sets of separated or divorced parents ($N = 64$) volunteered. The 16 ex-couples assigned to the "agreed" group met the following criteria: (a) both parents indicated independently that they had negotiated a mutually agreeable shared or divided parenting plan at the time of their separation without intervention from family mediators or other mental health professionals; (b) both parents reported during the individual interviews that since their separation they have always been, and still were, in agreement with how they shared or divided the parenting of their children; and (c) both parents indicated individually that they continue to be in agreement with their shared or divided parenting arrangement 4 months after the initial interview. The "disagreed" group comprised 16 ex-couples who were in disagreement about how the parenting of their children should be shared in that (a) both parents indicated individually that they had not been successful in negotiating a mutually agreeable shared or divided parenting plan at the time of their separation or that they had never tried, (b) both parents reported that since the time of their separation they had been in general disagreement with how the parenting of their children is shared or divided, and (c) they were still in disagreement at the time of the follow-up interview 4 months later. Thus, consistent with methodologies recently used by leading divorce researchers (e.g., Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992), we assigned ex-couples to their groups on the basis of whether an agreement regarding parenting arrangements existed between them.

Demographic information and comparison between groups. Table 1 presents means and standard deviations on six demographic variables for the agreed and disagreed ex-couples. As reported in Table 1, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) indicated no statistically significant differences between groups on age of mother, age of father, education of mother, education of father, age of children, and time passed since the marital separation. However, statistically significant group differences were evident for length of the couples' relationships before separation.

Of all ex-couples participating in this study, 82% were legally divorced and most of the other separated ex-couples were waiting for their divorces to come into effect. It should be noted that ex-couples were generally clearer about when they stopped cohabiting than they were about the exact time frame of the divorce and related legal events. For this reason, and also because the need to organize parenting arrangements typically arises as soon as the parents stop living together, we chose the time passed since marital separation rather than the date of the divorce for our calculations (see Table 1). For the purposes of this study, only biological children of ex-couples and parenting arrangements that affected them were considered, comprising 95% of all the children identified by their parents. The majority of ex-couples (75%) had 1 or 2 biological children, whereas a minority had 3 (16%) or 4 (9%) children for whom parenting arrangements needed to be organized. Consistent with the demographic make-up of the Canadian jurisdictions in which these data were collected, 70.3% of the parents indicated that they did not identify with any particular ethnic or cultural group and 29.7% reported diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds including Asian, Italian, German, and Jewish Canadian.

Unit of Analysis

Although many marital researchers have recognized the importance of considering "couples" as the units of analysis (e.g., Baucom & Sher,

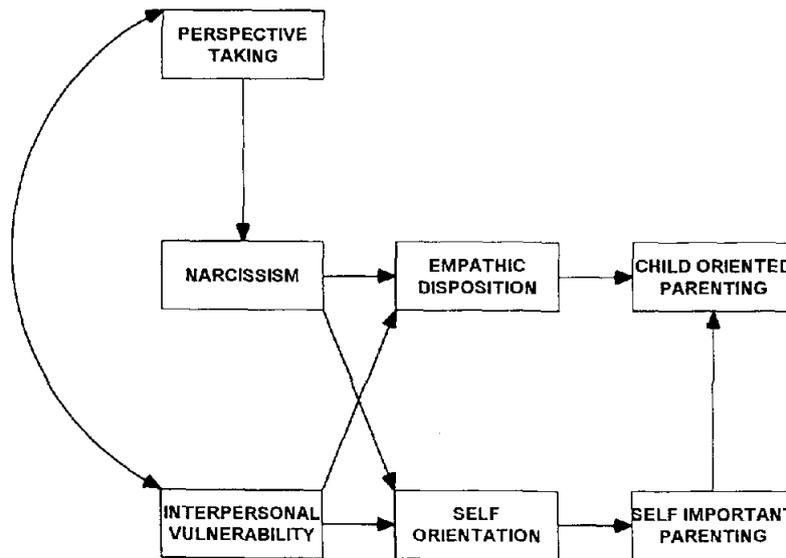


Figure 1. Hypothesized mediational model of child-oriented parenting.

1987; Thompson & Walker, 1982), such nonindividually based approaches are now being recommended as an important tool for understanding divorce and other family-based dynamics (Appelbaum, 1994). As it is now well recognized that children's adaptation to their parents' divorce depends importantly on their parents' ability to cooperate with each other, we considered the ex-couple as the unit of analysis for this study. In addition to empirical and practical considerations, this dyadic approach takes into account the natural link between mothers' and fathers' scores, which would otherwise raise concerns about statistical nonindependence (Kashy & Snyder, 1995). Preliminary agreed-disagreed by gender analyses revealed no significant differences between mothers' and fathers' scores on the dependent measures, and no Mother-Father \times Agreed-Disagreed interactions. These results lend further statistical support for considering the ex-couple as the unit of analysis for this study.

Measures

Because the unit of analysis for this study is the ex-couple, values for dependent variables are reported as ex-husbands' and ex-wives' averaged scores.

Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1979, 1981). The NPI is a 40-item forced-choice inventory developed to measure individual differences in narcissistic personality tendencies to produce total scores ranging from 0 to 40. Previous research demonstrates the use of the NPI as a reliable and valid measure of narcissism in both nonclinical and clinical populations (Auerbach, 1984; Biscardi & Schill, 1985; Emmons, 1984, 1987; Joubert, 1986; Prifitera & Ryan, 1984; Raskin, 1980; Raskin & Hall, 1981; Raskin & Novacek, 1989; Raskin & Shaw, 1988; Raskin & Terry, 1988; Watson, Hood, & Morris, 1984). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for parents' total scores was .83, indicating acceptable interitem reliability and consistency with results of other studies using the NPI (see Raskin & Terry, 1988).

Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983a). The IRI is a 28-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure individual differences in responsiveness to others. Three of the seven-item scales from the IRI were used in this study. The Perspective Taking (PT) and Empathic Concern (EC) scales were designed to measure specific aspects of dispositional empathy. The PT scale focuses on the cognitive foundation of empathy, in that it measures the respondent's tendency in everyday life to adopt the point of view of others. The EC scale was developed to capture the affective component of empathy by evaluating an individu-

Table 1
Demographic Variables on Agreed and Disagreed Ex-Couples

Variable	Agreed (n = 16)		Disagreed (n = 16)		Agreed vs. disagreed	
	M	SD	M	SD	F(1, 30)	p
Father's age (years)	40.3	5.4	35.9	9.7	2.60	<1.2
Mother's age (years)	36.9	5.8	32.3	9.0	3.01	<.09
Father's education ^a	4.2	1.2	4.3	1.3	1.52	<.15
Mother's education ^a	5.2	0.9	4.5	1.2	2.02	<.07
Length of relationship (years) ^b	14.2	5.7	8.3	7.7	5.93	<.02
Time since separation (years)	3.6	2.5	2.7	1.7	1.19	<.29
Mean age of children (years)	11.1	4.8	7.4	1.5	3.50	<.07

^a Based on 7-point Hollingshead (1975) educational scale; scores can range from 1 (less than seventh grade) to 7 (graduate degree). ^b From beginning of dating relationship to date of separation.

al's tendency to be concerned about the feelings and needs of others. The Personal Distress (PD) scale measures feelings of unease, distress, and discomfort in tense interpersonal settings. In contrast to the EC scale, which focuses on other-oriented feelings of sympathy and concern and is used as a measure of "empathic disposition" for the purposes of this study, the PD scale is concerned with self-oriented feelings of personal anxiety and unease when faced with difficult interpersonal situations. In this study, the combination of the PD scale and the NPI is designed to capture the object relations notion of "narcissistic vulnerability," with the NPI providing a measure of the extent of narcissistic personality features and the PD scale providing an assessment of interpersonal unease and vulnerability.

A total score on each of the PT, EC, and PD scales was calculated by summation of individual items scores, presented on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all like me*; 2 = *not really like me*; 3 = *sort of like me*; 4 = *pretty much like me*; 5 = *very much like me*), to produce a range extending from 7 to 35 for each of these three 7-item scales. Validation research demonstrates acceptable internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Davis, Hull, Young, & Warren, 1987); moderate and theory-consistent intercorrelations between IRI scales (Davis, 1983a); negative associations between dispositional empathy (as measured by the PT and EC scales of the IRI) and NPI scores (Watson & Morris, 1991); and positive relationships among IRI measures of dispositional empathy, accuracy in perceiving others (Bernstein & Davis, 1982), and prosocial behavior (Davis, 1983b). Cronbach's alpha for parents' total scores on the PT, EC, and PD scales of the IRI were .56, .54, and .69, respectively.

Selfism Scale (NS; Phares & Erskine, 1984). The NS is a 40-item scale designed to measure individual differences in self-orientation; the tendency to view a large number of situations from a self-serving as opposed to an other-oriented perspective. A person who scores high on the NS views a large number of situations in a self-serving fashion; at the opposite end of the scale are individuals who submerge their own needs and interests in favor of others. Individual scores on the NS were calculated by summing the individual item scores, each of which is presented on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *mildly disagree*, 3 = *agree and disagree equally*, 4 = *mildly agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*), to produce a range falling between 28 and 140. Psychometric evaluations of the NS indicate acceptable internal consistency, excellent test-retest reliability, and construct validity (see Corcoran & Fischer, 1987). Positive correlations with the NPI support the intent that the NS quantify a general problem-solving orientation or cognitive style associated with narcissistic personality functioning (Phares & Erskine, 1984; Rotter, Chance, & Phares, 1972). Cronbach's alpha for parents' total scores was .84.

Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI; Bavolek, 1984a). The AAPI is a 32-item self-report scale designed to assess empathy-related parenting and child-rearing attitudes. Three of the eight-item AAPI subscales were used in this study: (a) developmentally appropriate expectations of children; (b) empathy for children's needs; and (c) appro-

priateness of parent and child roles. Parents' responses to the items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *uncertain*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) are calculated and compared with normative parenting and child-rearing attitudes to obtain a standard score (ranging between 0 and 10) reflecting the degree of agreement with adaptive parenting beliefs. Research using the AAPI has demonstrated adequate stability (Corcoran & Fisher, 1987), internal consistency (Bavolek, 1989), and validity as a measure of adaptiveness of parenting attitudes and risk for abusive parenting behavior in samples of parents from diverse geographic regions, ethnic groups, socioeconomic status, educational backgrounds, and sex and age categories (Bavolek et al., 1979; 1984a.; 1984b.; 1989; Bavolek, Kline, MacLaughlin, & Publicover, 1979; Murphy, 1980; Price, 1980; Stone, 1980).

In this study, ex-couples' AAPI total scores were used as a measure of "child-oriented parenting attitudes," because ex-couples' general parenting orientation rather than specific parenting beliefs were of interest. Cronbach's alpha for parents' total scores was .85, supporting the use of these total scores as a measure of individual differences in child-oriented parenting attitudes.

Self-Important Parenting Beliefs (SIPB). Nine items designed specifically to measure self-oriented or self-important parenting beliefs were developed and included in the test battery (see Table 2). Respondents were instructed to indicate how much they identified with each individual item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all like me*; 2 = *not really like me*; 3 = *sort of like me*; 4 = *pretty much like me*; 5 = *very much like me*). The results of the correlational analysis indicate low to moderate positive correlations between most individual SIPB items and a high positive correlation between individual SIPB items and the SIPB total score. Cronbach's alpha was computed to assess the internal consistency of the SIPB items. The resulting reliability estimate ($\alpha = 0.85$) supported the use of ex-couples' total SIPB scores as a measure of individual differences in "self-important parenting beliefs." **Ex-couples' total SIPB scores were included in this study to assess the extent to which their parenting beliefs hinged on their own needs and moods rather than those of the child.**

Procedures

All procedures followed in this study were in compliance with the Ethical Standards and Guidelines of the Canadian and American Psychological Associations. Parents were interviewed individually to provide information on demographic variables and to complete the questionnaire measures, and were followed up 4 months after the individual interviews. To assure the independence of group assignment and data analysis, we immediately separated questionnaire responses from interview data, and they were scored and recorded by a trained assistant who was not made aware of the research hypotheses. Individuals' scores on the seven measures were not available to the principal investigator until after the initial and follow-up interviews had been completed and

Table 2
Self-Important Parenting Beliefs Items

Item no.	Item
1.	I believe I deserve my child's love and respect, because I am a good parent.
2.	It is impossible to imagine life without my child and I being together.
3.	I am the only one who can truly understand my child's thoughts and feelings.
4.	When my child misbehaves, I feel it reflects on me as a parent and as a person.
5.	Sometimes when I look at my child I can see myself as a child.
6.	There are times when it feels like I am the child and my child is the parent.
7.	I sometimes feel like asking my child if s/he really loves me.
8.	I can't imagine my child's life without me in it.
9.	It is easy for me to understand my child, because s/he is an extension of me.

Table 3
*Measures of Narcissism, Self- and Other Orientation, and Parenting Attitude
 for Agreed and Disagreed Groups*

Variable	Agreed (<i>n</i> = 16)		Disagreed (<i>n</i> = 16)		Agreed vs. disagreed	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> (1, 30)	<i>p</i>
Narcissism	12.50	3.62	16.56	5.29	6.44	<.02
Interpersonal vulnerability	17.44	2.32	20.19	2.32	11.25	<.002
Perspective taking	23.56	2.18	22.09	2.09	3.79	<.06
Empathic disposition	25.44	1.64	23.63	2.57	5.67	<.02
Self-orientation	72.28	9.74	81.59	9.70	7.34	<.01
Child-oriented parenting	7.37	1.08	6.17	1.41	7.27	<.01
Self-important parenting	26.82	4.57	30.22	7.13	2.59	<.12

until after all ex-couples had been assigned to the agreed or disagreed groups.

Results

The analyses were directed to two questions: (a) do ex-couples scores on perspective taking, narcissism, interpersonal vulnerability, empathic disposition, self-orientation, and parenting attitudes differentiate agreement and disagreement in shared or divided parenting; and (b) does the mediational model relating narcissism and interpersonal vulnerability to empathic or child-oriented parenting fit the data? Earlier, it was found that agreed and disagreed couples differed in length of relationship. Preliminary analyses based on scores from which length of couples' relationship was partialled yielded results that were virtually identical to those reported later. Therefore, length of couples' relationship is omitted from further consideration.

The means and standard deviations of all seven variables for agreed and disagreed couples are presented in Table 3. A one-way MANOVA produced a significant main effect of agreement (Wilks's $\lambda = .499$), $F(7, 24) = 3.44$, $p < .01$. As reported in Table 3, subsequent univariate analysis yielded significant effects for narcissism, interpersonal vulnerability, empathy, self-orientation, and child-oriented parenting. In all cases, mean differences were in the predicted direction, with agreed parents being less narcissistic than disagreed parents, more able to deal with tense interpersonal situations, less self-oriented, more empathic, and more child-oriented in their parenting attitudes. Contrary to prediction, agreed and disagreed parents did not differ in perspective taking (although there was a tendency for agreed parents to be better able to take another's perspective), nor did they differ in parental self-importance.

We performed a classification analysis to further characterize how well the seven measured variables differentiate agreed and disagreed couples. Jackknifed classification was used to protect against group assignment errors associated with using classification functions based in part on the case being assigned. In the end, this analysis emulates the results that would be obtained using a cross-validation sample. The results showed that 75% of the couples could be correctly classified as agreed or disagreed on the basis of their scores on the seven measured variables. As well, the loadings on the classification function indicate that all seven variables contributed to differences among agreed and

disagreed couples, although, again, perspective taking and parental self-importance appear less salient than the remaining variables. Finally, the results of an analysis of the intercorrelations among the seven variables raised no concerns about multicollinearity, in that these correlations ranged from $r(32) = .01$ to $r(32) = .66$, with an average magnitude of $r(32) = .32$.

We tested the hypothesized mediational model using path analysis.¹ A model comparison approach (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) was taken in which the hypothesized model (Figure 1) was compared with an independence model, a saturated model, and two reasonable alternative models, one slightly more complex and one slightly simpler. The more complex model allowed for direct effects of all prior variables to parental empathy. Significant direct paths would suggest that other mechanisms are needed to explain the effects of perspective taking, narcissism, interpersonal vulnerability, and self-orientation on child-oriented parenting. The simpler model excludes the direct effects of narcissism on self-orientation and of interpersonal vulnerability on empathy, indicating independent paths from narcissism and interpersonal vulnerability to child-oriented and self-important parenting attitudes, respectively.

Model fit information for the five models is presented in the upper portion of Table 4. Of particular interest is the AIC index (Akaike, 1987), which indicated that, of the five models tested, the hypothesized model represents the best combination of fit and parsimony. Shown in the lower portion of Table 4 are comparisons between the hypothesized model and each of the two alternative models. The first row indicates that the additional complexity afforded by adding several direct paths to child-oriented parenting was not statistically worthwhile, $\chi^2(4, N = 32) = 7.59$, $p > .10$. In contrast, further simplifying the hypothesized model by eliminating paths from narcissism to self-importance and from interpersonal vulnerability to empathy resulted in a significantly poorer model, $\chi^2(2, N = 32) = 9.91$, $p < .01$.

The standardized regression coefficients for the hypothesized model are presented on the appropriate paths in Figure 2, along

¹ The computer program AMOS (Analysis of Moment Structures, 1995) was used to conduct the path analysis. For a comparison of AMOS, EQS and LISREL, the reader is alerted to a recent review of these computer programs (Hox, 1995).

Table 4
Fit and Comparison Information for Five Models

Model fit and comparison	AIC	χ^2 (df)	<i>p</i>
Fit			
Hypothesized	58.46	12.46 (12)	<.41
Complex alternative	58.88	4.88 (8)	<.77
Simple alternative	64.38	24.38 (14)	<.04
Saturated	70.00	0.00 (0)	—
Independence	109.14	81.14 (21)	<.00
Comparison			
Hypothesized vs. complex		7.59 (4)	<.11
Hypothesized vs. simple		9.91 (2)	<.01

Note. AIC = area inside the curve.

with the proportion of total variance (R^2) in each endogenous variable that is accounted for by the sum of the hypothesized direct and indirect paths. All regression coefficients were reliably different from zero ($p < .05$) except for the direct effect of perspective taking on narcissism, which approached conventional levels of statistical significance ($p < .07$). Moreover, the proportions of variance accounted for by the hypothesized paths were relatively large for empathy (53%), self-orientation (44%), self-important parenting (27%), and child-oriented parenting (38%). Thus, the hypothesized model of child-centered parenting received substantial support.

In the aforementioned analyses, the model was evaluated on the entire sample. This reflects our belief that, although agreed and disagreed couples should show mean differences on the seven measures, relations among the measures should be the same for each group. Nevertheless, one might argue that narcissism and interpersonal vulnerability exert their impact on pa-

rental empathy more strongly in disagreed parents than in agreed parents. This possibility was examined by fitting the hypothesized model to both samples simultaneously and then constraining path coefficients to be equal for the two groups. Although we acknowledge that our sample size was far from adequate for such a complex analysis, we can report that the model appears to fit both samples simultaneously, $\chi^2(24, N = 32) = 23.4, p > .50$, and that constraining the regression weights to be equal for the two groups also produced a nonsignificant finding, $\chi^2(16, N = 32) = 19.87, p > .20$.

Discussion

The importance of interparental cooperation to the well-being of divorcing parents and their children persuaded us to attend to the psychological and interpersonal characteristics of ex-couples who are successful, or not, in maintaining mutually agreeable parenting arrangements. Drawing from the observations of other divorce researchers (e.g., Johnston & Campbell, 1988) and object relations theorists (see Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983), we identified differences between demographically similar agreed and disagreed ex-couples in narcissism, interpersonal vulnerability, self- and other orientations, and parenting attitudes. As expected, ex-couples who were able to negotiate and maintain mutually agreeable parenting arrangements for at least 4 months, and more typically for 3 to 4 years, since their marriages ended could be differentiated on this set of characteristics from ex-couples in ongoing disagreement about parenting arrangements. Compared with the disagreed parents, these agreed ex-couples were generally less narcissistic, less interpersonally vulnerable and, therefore, better prepared to deal with intensely emotional situations, more empathically inclined, less self-oriented, and more child-oriented rather than self-impor-

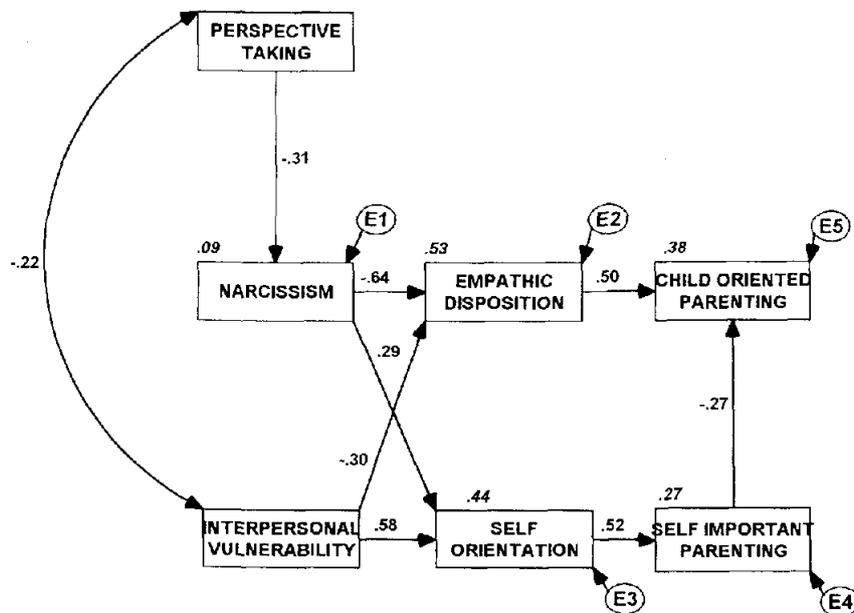


Figure 2. Mediation model of child-oriented parenting, $\chi^2(12, N = 32) = 12.46, p = .41$. Area inside the curve = 58.47.

tant in their parenting attitudes. Although agreed and disagreed ex-couples were similar in how long they had been separated, it is of interest to note that agreed ex-couples had reported longer relationships before the marital break-up. This finding is consistent with the object relations notion that narcissistic couples, perhaps because of their lack of other-oriented skills, have difficulties sustaining long-term relationships.

Beyond suggesting that agreed ex-couples can be distinguished from disagreed ex-couples on the basis of their scores on this set of theory-relevant measures, our findings also have implications for understanding the psychological dynamics of "child-centeredness" as a predictor of interparental agreement. Although our sample is small enough to maintain caution in interpreting the reliability of the hypothesized process mediational model (see Figure 2), it nevertheless suggests that ex-couples may approximate a more or a less child-centered approach to parenting matters along at least two psychological paths. One path, fundamentally rooted in parental narcissism, indicates that "child-centered" ex-couples are generally oriented toward the feelings and needs of others because they are relatively free of narcissistic personality constraints. On the basis of this generally empathic disposition, these "child-centered" ex-couples share a range of child-oriented parenting attitudes that may serve as a basis for negotiating and maintaining mutually agreeable postdivorce parenting arrangements. Consistent with object relations theory (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971; Miller, 1981), our findings suggest that narcissistic ex-couples lack in empathic disposition and are, therefore, limited in the extent to which their parenting attitudes can reflect their children's needs. These relatively less "child-centered" ex-couples may become entrenched in a pattern of disagreement about parenting matters, because they are more likely to base parenting decisions on their own reactions than on a shared understanding of their children's needs. Interestingly, comparisons among the hypothesized and alternate models suggest that it is not the lack of perspective-taking tendencies per se but the extent to which these tendencies may promote narcissistic personality features, which lead to deficiencies in child-oriented parenting attitudes.

The observation that divorcing couples may be so overwhelmed by their feelings about the marital break-up that this interferes with their ability to negotiate mutually agreeable and child-focused parenting decisions (e.g., Steinman et al., 1985) is elucidated in a second path, perhaps reflecting a more reactive and less personality-based dynamic than that rooted in parental narcissism. This dynamic involves ex-couples adopting a self-oriented stance because of, and perhaps to defend against, their interpersonal vulnerability. These ex-couples may protect themselves from being "flooded" by their reactions to the many tense interpersonal situations involved in parenting with an ex-partner, by avoiding emotional involvement in the needs of others and concentrating on themselves. A generally self-oriented stance may be an effective coping strategy from an immediate and individual perspective, but excessive self-orientation may be a liability for divorcing couples attempting to come to agreement about parenting matters. By promoting one's own importance to the child and underestimating the child's relationship with one's ex-partner, self-important parenting beliefs impede child-oriented parenting attitudes. An overly self-important parenting perspective may, in fact, create a basis for dis-

agreement and conflict between ex-spouses entangled in debates about who is best for the child rather than pulling together to determine what the child needs from both parents.

Drawing from our findings pertaining to the process mediational model, the psychological path rooted in interpersonal vulnerability can be interpreted as a more reactive form of "self-absorption," which impedes child-centeredness, whereas the alternative path anchored in narcissistic personality tendencies appears to be more personality based. However, our findings also suggest that these two dynamics are interconnected. Although excessive self-orientation on the part of ex-couples is largely rooted in interpersonal vulnerability, it is also partially determined by narcissism. This finding is consistent with the view that self-orientation, or "selfism," constitutes a general problem-solving orientation, or perhaps cognitive style, associated with narcissism as a personality trait (Phares & Erskine, 1984). Similarly, although our findings suggest that child-centered ex-couples' empathic dispositions are limited largely by narcissistic personality tendencies, their level of interpersonal vulnerability also constrains the degree to which they tend to be concerned about the feelings and needs of others. These findings taken together suggest to us that it may be the interconnectedness between the characteriological and reactive child-centeredness paths, rather than any direct relationship between narcissism and interpersonal vulnerability, which captures the object relations notion of "narcissistic vulnerability." From this perspective, "child-centeredness" as a predictor of interparental agreement can be viewed as an ex-couple's level of narcissistic vulnerability insofar as it influences their orientation to themselves and to others, which in turn, affects the extent to which their parenting attitudes are child oriented or self-important.

Although not a focus of this study, it is worth noting that ex-couples in both groups were involved in a wide range of legally defined custody and access arrangements. We were particularly impressed by the diverse and creative parenting arrangements generated by agreed ex-couples, which spanned what would be considered "shared," "divided," or "parallel" parenting in the divorce literature. Consistent with earlier findings (e.g., Pearson & Thoennes, 1990), agreed ex-couples participating in our study did not self-select any particular type of custody arrangement, nor did any particular type of custody arrangement promote disagreement between divorcing parents. These observations increased our confidence in the use of parents' agreement and disagreement about parenting arrangements as the basis for group assignment, rather than relying on legal categories of custody selected by parents or imposed on them by legal authorities.² The dichotomous measurement of agreement was intended as a first, and appropriately conservative, test of the child-centeredness hypothesis, but following the lead of researchers in related areas (e.g., Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991), more continuous and multidimensional assess-

² It should be noted that, on the basis of Canadian family law, no particular custody and access arrangement, family mediation, or family assessment is routinely imposed on divorcing families, although this may occur if parents initiate litigation pertaining to their parenting arrangements.

ments of interparental agreement are planned for subsequent studies.

This study involved a departure from traditional divorce research in its use of "ex-couples," and not individual parents, as the conceptual and statistical unit of analysis. Although the current findings are consistent with our view that the dynamics of interparental agreement in divorce may, in part, be understood in terms of the extent to which mothers and fathers as ex-couples are able to center on their children's needs as a joint focus of cooperation in parenting, we do not wish to minimize the role of economic and other divorce-related circumstances in promoting or discouraging interparental cooperation. Instead, we hope that the concept of child-centeredness may serve as theory-driven principle for understanding interparental agreement. Other mediating and contextual factors of potential relevance to the relationship between child-centeredness and interparental agreement may then be examined in subsequent investigations with more substantive samples, longitudinal orientations, and more detailed demographic information (e.g., income and changes in income related to family transitions). Although no differences between mothers' and fathers' scores on the child-centeredness variables were observed in this study, these subsequent investigations should consider the possible role of gender for any additional factors.

Although there is considerable empirical evidence to support our assumption that **couples who are able to cooperate about parenting matters after their marriages have ended will facilitate their children's adjustment to family transitions** (see Amato & Keith, 1991), longitudinal studies of divorce evaluating how child-centered parenting approaches affect children are needed to address this question with confidence. Longitudinal studies of divorcing parents may also assist in elucidating the possible developmental sequences related to the two psychological paths suggest by our model and their interrelationships. The sole reliance on self-report measures is a limitation for the current findings, in that we are able to draw conclusions only about the perceptions of the parents who participated in this study, and not about their actual behavior. However, these findings may be considered as a foundation for future studies by providing the preliminary evidence needed to warrant expanding the methodologies used in this study beyond interviews and self-report questionnaires, to include the development of more expensive and time-consuming observational measures of object-relations-based concepts in relations to postseparation parenting agreement or disagreement. Similarly, subsequent studies may afford opportunities to further refine the self-report measures used in this study, particularly the measures of perspective taking and empathic disposition that were psychometrically acceptable but less internally consistent than the other measures. Finally, although research has supported the view that interparental cooperation is generally health enhancing for everyone involved, it must be acknowledged that, in some instances, particularly those involving ongoing family violence, agreement between parents about child-rearing decisions is not a viable or likely outcome.

Within its limitations, our study may offer a perspective on the psychological dynamics of interparental agreement and disagreement after divorce. Although object relations theory has long offered a rich source of ideas about relational phenomena,

only recently have these notions been translated into empirical questions to address current clinical issues (e.g., Alexander, 1992). Similarly, clinicians working with divorcing families, and those evaluating their effectiveness, are currently articulating a need for more theory-based approaches to interventions (e.g., Lee, Picard, & Blain, 1994), for which we hope this and subsequent works may have some application.

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Received June 1, 1994

Revision received October 11, 1995

Accepted October 16, 1995 ■