

An Exploration Into Parallel Stories of Co-Parenting

Anitta M¹, Dr. Ramshida A P²

¹Post Graduate, Department of Psychology, University of Calicut

²Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Calicut

Abstract

This research aims to gain insight into how divorced couples prolonged conflict influences co-parenting process and to identify the factors influencing the effectiveness of co-parenting arrangements and to identify challenges experienced during co-parenting. In-depth individual interviews were conducted with six couples practicing co-parenting in Kerala, each with at least one child. Interview followed a dyadic interview model and analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis identified 4 key themes The four themes are; 1) Roles etched in stone (sub-themes; custodial arrangements, mother as a primary care taker, father as a breadwinner, divorce as a social problem). 2) Balancing the seesaw of co-parenting dimensions (sub-themes; co-parental communication, parenting practice, conflict resolution). 3) Riding the stormy sea (sub-themes; emotional rollercoaster, communication can be real challenge, troublesome other & I, parental alienation) 4) Finding solace in life's storm (sub-themes; social buffers, professional assistance, spiritual fortitude). The research findings underscore the impact of traditional gender roles and societal expectations on post-divorce co-parenting, often relegating mothers to primary caregiving and fathers to financial roles, which limits fathers' emotional involvement and exacerbates mental well-being challenges for mothers. Effective communication is crucial for managing co-parenting complexities and minimizing conflicts arising from inconsistent practices and financial disparities. The study advocates for a parallel co-parenting approach that promotes autonomy for each parent, clear communication, and conflict resolution strategies, particularly benefiting high-conflict situations. By fostering flexible and resilient co-parenting dynamics, parallel parenting approach aims to improve emotional involvement from fathers, reduce societal stigma towards mothers, and ensure the stability and well-being of divorced families. The findings can help us understand the intricate challenges of co-parenting after divorce in Kerala.

Keywords: Co-Parenting, Parenting, Parenting After Divorce

Introduction

Parenting, rooted in the Latin verb '*parere*,' encompasses the active processes of nurturing, educating, and developing children (Masud Hoghughi, 2004), extending beyond biological ties to include various caregivers. While parenthood denotes biological parentage, parenting involves a broader scope of relationships and responsibilities. Contemporary perspectives emphasize collaborative parenting efforts towards fostering children's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development. Attachment theory underscores the significance of early relationships in shaping individuals, while ecological theories highlight the transactional influences between children, parents, and their environments (Bowlby, 1978). In India, parenting practices are shaped by cultural norms, family structures, and societal changes, with

evolving roles for both mothers and fathers. Despite historical gender inequalities, there's a trend towards more democratic and authoritative parenting styles, reflecting global influences and changing societal expectations. Post-divorce parenting presents significant challenges due to the emotional and materialistic upheaval associated with marital discord. The stress of divorce can negatively impact parents' psychological well-being, hindering their ability to care for their children optimally. Successful adjustment to post-divorce parenting requires access to resources such as income, education, and social support (Paul R Amato, 2014). Although post-divorce, co-parenting emerges as a focus, emphasizing children's well-being and the importance of maintaining supportive environments. However, post-divorce parenting practices, such as co-parenting, can vary based on the level of engagement and conflict between parents. Co-parenting after divorce involves ongoing communication and coordination between divorced parents regarding their children's care, activities, and needs (Joan B Kelly et al., 2003; Melinda Stafford Markham et al., 2007; Julina M Sobolewski et al., 2005). While co-parenting is often idealized as a collaborative and harmonious approach, the reality for many divorced couples is far from it, with low-quality co-parenting characterized by conflict, criticism, and manipulation (Carl Knickerbocker, 2021). Research suggests that successful co-parenting involves frequent communication, cooperation, and minimal conflict between parents, prioritizing the well-being of the children over personal differences. Different typologies of co-parenting, including cooperative, parallel, and conflicted co-parenting, reflect varying levels of parental engagement and conflict resolution. Thus, recognizing the importance of autonomous parenting in separate households can support a healthier post-divorce environment for children as well as parents. Further research is needed to understand the nuances of co-parenting, particularly within the cultural context of India, and to explore the effectiveness of different co-parenting approach in promoting children's adjustment and divorced parents as well as children's well-being post-divorce.

In India, where parenting is highly valued, examining the impact of post-divorce conflict on co-parenting is essential. Despite the prevalence of parallel parenting in India, there is a lack of research on its significance and impact. Parallel parenting, often chosen in high-conflict situations, presents various challenges for divorced parents, affecting their psychological well-being. Thus, understanding these challenges is essential for developing interventions and policies to support post-divorce families.

Therefore, this study objective is to explore how prolonged conflict among divorced couples influences the co-parenting process and to identify the factors influencing the effectiveness of co-parenting arrangements and the challenges experienced during co-parenting as well.

Method

The study used an exploratory, qualitative approach to explore the impact of parental conflict on the co-parenting process and to identify the factors that influence the effectiveness of co-parenting arrangements. Additionally, the study aimed to uncover the challenges encountered during the co-parenting journey. The study used an in-depth semi-structured interviews individually with six couples practicing co-parenting in Kerala. The interviews were conducted individually, adhering to ethical guidelines, and followed a dyadic interview model. On average, each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Virginia Braun & Victoria Clark's (2012), thematic analysis was employed to analyse the collected data, focusing on identifying and exploring themes within the data, enriching the depth of understanding of post-divorce co-parenting experiences. The use of peer debriefing further enhanced the credibility and rigor of the findings as well.

Participants

This study used a purposive sampling method for selecting participants with intended characteristics. According to Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggests guidelines for selecting informants purposively, these include focusing on subjects who are knowledgeable about the cultural arena or situation or experiences being studied, willing to talk, and are able to cover a range of points of view. Twelve parents from six parent couples were interviewed. A dyadic analytical design was used, where parent's stories were analyzed in parallel with their co-parent. The study's inclusion criteria involved; selected couple should have at least one child in their legal custody. The children should fall within the age range of 0-12 years old based on APA 7th Ed. style of age (APA, 2024).

Procedure

Participants were selected with a focus on divorced individuals actively engaged in co-parenting. They were briefed about the nature and purpose of the study, and those selected were later contacted to determine their interest in participating in the interviews. Time was provided for them to consider their involvement, and they were encouraged to reach out with any questions regarding the study. However, many upon approaching to participate had shown disinterest in participating the study especially, it was fathers who have raised disapproval. Decisions not to participate were respected. Those who expressed willingness to participate was sent an online consent form which was expected to be filled and returned. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their data and their rights concerning participation in the study. Additionally, they were asked for permission to record the interview. The interviews were scheduled at times convenient for the participants. Initially, rapport was established by asking questions like "How are you doing?" or "Are you comfortable discussing your experiences?" to ensure they felt at ease. During these interactions, necessary socio-demographic details were collected. The interviewer then proceeded with questions from a prepared interview schedule, which included 11 core questions and additional probes to elicit more detailed responses. Each interview lasted a maximum of 45 minutes. After the interview, the interviewer expressed gratitude to the participants for their involvement. The collected interview data were subsequently transcribed.

The obtained interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clark's (2006) six-phase guide will be used to interpret the gathered data. The following are the phases of; Familiarising yourself with your data, involving transcription, immersion and noting down initial ideas. Generating initial codes from the data that identify a feature of the data, semantic content or latent, that appears interesting. Searching for themes by collating codes into potential themes. Reviewing themes, and checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set. Defining and naming themes, and refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells. Finally, writing up the presentation of the found theme and fine-tuning the overall story.

Analysis and Interpretations

The data analysis identified four major themes, each with a varied number of sub-themes as illustrated in Table 1. These themes were related to the participants experiences regarding the impact on intensity of prolonged conflict while co-parenting as well as factors and challenges influencing the co-parenting arrangements and engagements.

Table 1: Codes, subthemes and themes from interview

Codes	Subthemes	Themes
1.1.1 Based on traditional gender-role. 1.1.2 Age of the child 1.1.3 Gender of the child 1.1.4 Court mandated residence with the mother. 1.1.5 Visiting father 1.1.6 Designated visitation hours. 1.2.1 Mother; 1.2.2 academic performances & evaluation 1.2.3 health care measures 1.2.4 providing home 1.2.5 emotional support 1.2.6 supervising extracurricular activities. 1.3.1 Father; 1.3.2 financial support 1.3.3 materialistic support 1.3.4 assistance during school selection 1.3.5 supported by covering medical expenses while child is unwell. 1.4.1 Intrusive first circle relatives 1.4.2 Unwanted sympathy towards child from neighbours 1.4.3 Blame game towards mother 1.4.4 Disrespectful treatment from relatives	1.1 Custodial arrangements 1.2 Mother as a primary caretaker 1.3 Father as a breadwinner 1.4 Divorce as a social problem	1. Roles etched in stone

1.4.5	Unwanted judgement on post-divorce parenting towards mothers.		
2.1.1	Communication via mediators	2.1	2. Balancing the seesaw of co-parenting dimensions
2.1.2	online platforms		
2.1.3	Minimal communication on child-related matters.		
2.2.1	Discrepancies between households in adherence to routines	2.2	
2.2.2	Physical hygiene		
2.2.3	Relevant educational practices discrepancies		
2.2.4	Differences in cultural & familial values between parental households		
2.2.5	Financial disparity in child investment		
2.2.6	Unequal emotional investment in child.	2.3	
2.3.1	Fostering an amicable parenting relationship via mediators		
2.3.2	Using online platform for communication & decision-making compromise on “what is best for child”		
2.3.3	staying flexible.		
3.1.1	Hurt/anger due to divorce	3.1	3. Riding the stormy sea rollercoaster
3.1.2	Feeling guilty of parenting time constraints		
3.1.3	Balancing work-parent life		
3.1.4	Identity crisis after second marriage		

<p>3.1.5 Pain of not being able to see the child</p> <p>3.1.6 Unwanted & hurtful questions from first circle relatives.</p> <p>3.2.1 Honest and deceptive communication from mediators.</p> <p>3.2.2 Ignored communication due to hatred</p> <p>3.2.3 Hurtful words</p> <p>3.2.4 Child refuses to communicate.</p> <p>3.3.1 Disagreements on parenting approaches</p> <p>3.3.2 Coordinating visitation schedules and timing</p> <p>3.3.3 Difference in daily routines & preferences</p> <p>3.3.4 Third party involvement eg; ex-mother in-law</p> <p>3.3.5 Differences in value system</p> <p>3.3.6 Disunity in decision making regarding child.</p> <p>3.4.1 Badmouthing and defaming mother</p> <p>3.4.2 Ex-in law's tarnishing the image of mother & her family in child's mind.</p> <p>3.4.3 Storyline of who is bad.</p>	<p>3.2 Communication can be real challenge</p> <p>3.3 troublesome other & I</p> <p>3.4 Parental alienation</p>	
<p>4.1.1 Parents, friend's endorsement during divorce & post-divorce.</p> <p>4.1.2 Siblings support during & after divorce</p> <p>4.1.3 Current partner</p> <p>4.1.4 Colleagues at work.</p>	<p>4.1 Social buffers</p>	<p>4. Finding solace in life's storm</p>

4.2.1 Seeking professionals help for emotion regulation and guidance	4.2 Professional assistance	
4.2.2 Attending counselling.		
4.3.1 Embracing spiritual beliefs	4.3 Spiritual fortitude	
4.3.2 Finding solace & resilience through spiritual/religious practices		
4.3.3 Being optimistic		
4.3.4 Believing in positivity Channelling energy into altruism.		

Paul R Amato (2000) highlights the crucial role of parental involvement in children's well-being and development, especially after divorce, where family structures often become more complex with children potentially living in multiple households. Feinberg's concept of co-parenting emphasizes the importance of the relational dynamics between parents in their shared childcare responsibilities, distinguishing it from individual parenting interactions. A cooperative co-parenting relationship, marked by shared responsibilities and mutual support, is essential for the academic and psychosocial well-being of children from divorced or separated families. Post-divorce, joint custody arrangements often mandate shared childcare, but the intensity of pre-divorce conflict can significantly affect co-parenting dynamics. Past conflicts may lead to blame and disrespect, posing challenges that mediation can help address by fostering better communication and conflict resolution. Additionally, societal norms, particularly in collectivist societies like Kerala, also play a significant role in shaping co-parenting dynamics.

Hence the study identified four main themes explaining post-divorce co-parenting patterns: 1. Roles etched in stone, including custodial arrangements and societal views on parental roles; 2. Balancing the seesaw of co-parenting dimensions, involving communication, parenting practices, and conflict resolution; 3. Riding the stormy sea, addressing emotional challenges and interpersonal conflicts; and 4. Finding solace in life's storm, highlighting the importance of social support, professional assistance, and spiritual resilience.

1. Roles etched in stone

Co-parenting after divorce necessitates collaboration from both parents, with their roles and responsibilities shaped by custodial arrangements and societal norms. The complexity arises from families being divided across multiple households, with children primarily residing with one parent (sole residence) or alternating between both parents (shared residence or joint physical custody) (Paul R Amato, 2000). In Kerala, a collectivistic state, children often reside primarily with one parent, usually the mother, while the father is granted visitation rights.

“.. the court decided to grant the guardianship to the mother”

(F6, Personal communication; 30th April, 2024)

This arrangement reflects traditional gender roles, where mothers are seen as primary caregivers responsible for daily child-rearing tasks such as academic guidance, healthcare, and emotional support, while fathers are viewed primarily as financial providers.

".. I am taking care of the child's primary schooling, academic matters, attending PTA meetings, and providing emotional support as well as offering home and care"

(M4, Personal communication; 29th April, 2024)

and,

"I primarily provide financial assistance, serving as the material provider, as the ex-partner takes care of the other aspects of the child's needs."

(F2, Personal communication; April, 2024)

These roles are primarily reinforced by cultural expectations and family relatives' involvement. Mothers, fulfilling the primary caregiver role, may experience both a sense of identity and feelings of overwhelm due to societal pressure and lack of support. Fathers, on the other hand, may struggle with detachment from daily caregiving, impacting their relationship with the child and their parental identity as well. This indicating the potential lack of emotional engagement in other aspects of the child's life as well.

".. everyone said that children should be raised primarily by their mothers. It's not just mothers who desire custody; fathers also express a strong desire to have their children with them."

(F5, Personal communication; 30th April, 2024)

Societal interference and stigma, pose additional concerns in co-parenting and custodial arrangements particularly against divorced mothers. This can manifest as intrusive behavior from extended family members, unwanted sympathy or judgment from neighbors, and even blame directed towards the mother for perceived parenting failures can exacerbate stress and negatively affect their mental well-being and parenting efficacy, creating a challenging environment for effective co-parenting. Additionally, the constant pressure to conform to societal norms and expectations may leave mothers feeling overwhelmed and isolated, further exacerbating their struggles.

"...it is the arrogance that comes from being overly educated."

(M4, Personal communication; 29th April, 2024)

Ultimately, these societal pressures create a challenging environment for mothers as well as fathers, impacting their confidence and ability to effectively co-parent with their ex-partner.

2. Balancing the seesaw of co-parenting dimensions

Although custodial arrangements and societal norms initially dictate roles and responsibilities, effective co-parenting requires ongoing communication, flexibility, and cooperation between ex-partners. Communication is essential for exchanging information about childrearing (Paul Schrodts et., 2015), and addressing conflicts, which can improve co-parenting quality by promoting forgiveness and reducing tension (Kathryn Bonach et., 2002). Ex-partners must set aside differences and prioritize the child's welfare, which often necessitates using various communication methods, including direct interaction, digital platforms, and mediators.

"I communicate with my ex-partner via phone and WhatsApp chat to discuss matters concerning our child and visitation schedules."

(M6, Personal communication; 30th April, 2024)

These tools help manage schedules, make decisions, and ensure the child's needs are met despite busy lives and separate households. Differences in parenting practices, influenced by family values and past

experiences, can create challenges in maintaining consistency across households, leading to potential conflicts.

"We have differing family values; for instance, my family maintains structured routines from morning until bedtime, whereas my ex-partner's household lacks established routines."

(F3, Personal communication; 29th April, 2024)

Financial disparities may exacerbate feelings of inequality, and contrasting rules between households can confuse the child. Although this situation can make one parent inferior in parenting arrangements and it can negatively impact their parenting well-being or effectiveness. Effective conflict resolution is crucial for maintaining a supportive co-parenting environment. Utilizing third-party mediation and online platforms can help ex-partners manage disagreements constructively.

"I know communicating each other makes more quarrels between us, so I choose to contact via sister's mediation."

(M1, Personal communication; 10th March, 2024)

In conclusion, post-divorce co-parenting is a complex process that depends on open communication, collaboration, and the ability to resolve conflicts to prioritize the well-being of both the child and the mental health of the parents.

3. Riding the stormy sea

Co-parenting after divorce presents significant psychological challenges as individuals navigate the complexities of maintaining functional relationships with their ex-partners for their children's well-being. Emotional difficulties such as grief, anger, resentment, and struggles with trust and communication are common (Diago Lamela et al., 2016). Co-parents must also adjust to new roles, manage conflicting parenting practices, and coordinate schedules, contributing to heightened stress, anxiety, and depression, impacting both parents and children (Wade Silverman, 2024). In the intricate shades of co-parenting post-divorce, individuals embark on parallel journeys that are often fraught with emotional upheaval, communication challenges, conflicts, and the distressing phenomenon like parental alienation. Participants frequently cited emotional turmoil, such as guilt over limited parenting time and distress from intrusive questions by relatives.

"I experienced feelings of guilt due to my inability to spend time with my child."

(M4, Personal communication; 29th April, 2024)

Similarly, the next significant challenge is that an effective communication is often hampered by barriers like ignored communication and hurtful words. In addition, conflicts arising from differences in parenting styles, visitation schedules, and third-party interference further complicate co-parenting dynamics, making it difficult to maintain cooperation and trust.

"...when mediators deceive and engage in inappropriate communication."

(M3, Personal communication; 29th April, 2024)

Furthermore, co-parenting ex-partners were mentioned instances of ignored communication, hurtful words, or even the distressing scenario of a child refusing to engage further exacerbate the communication dilemma, impeding collaborative efforts and fostering a sense of estrangement.

The third major subtheme were the conflicts as the trouble some other and I, that most parents positioning their co-parent as 'the troublesome other', and 'the I positions'. Therefore, conflict is an inevitable facet of co-parenting, manifest as troublesome adversaries, pitting individuals against each other and undermining cooperative efforts. This, troublesome conflicts often stemming from differences in parenting styles, values, and communication patterns. Being, disempowered as an unequal, feeling disrespected, and

being unable to reposition oneself could fuel anger and resentment that ignite conflict dynamics (Elizebath, 2019). In other words, these conflicts can arise due to unresolved emotions from the past relationship, such as anger, hurt, and resentment. This research demonstrates that the primary source of conflict that poses challenges for ex-partners in co-parenting is...

"Coordinating visitation schedules, child routines, disciplining with my ex-partner."

(M2, Personal communication; 20th April, 2024)

Moreover, the intrusion of third parties, such as ex-mother in-laws, other in-laws or relatives, further exacerbate discord and complicate decision-making processes concerning the child's welfare. Such intrusions of other can introduce complexities and potential conflicts, disrupting trust and established boundaries between co-parents. These conflicts not only strain the co-parenting relationship but also impact the child, disrupting stability and fostering a sense of insecurity as well.

Beyond all the challenges regarding co-parenting the partners expressed. Parental alienation, where one parent manipulates the child against the other (Gardner, 2002), adds another layer of complexity, harming the child's emotional well-being.

"ex-partner and his family place blame on us in front of the child by attributing psychological issues to me and my family."

(M4, Personal communication; 29th April, 2024)

Through engaging in parental alienation, it can entangle the co-parent in a harmful cycle of criticism and defamation, damaging each other's reputations in the child's eyes and creating a harmful narrative of 'good' versus 'bad' connotations. This undermines the child's sense of security and distorts their understanding of family relationships, potentially causing lasting negative effects on their emotional well-being and development. While such situations lead to conflicts, they may also result in avoidance of the ex-partner to reduce confrontation, which hinders effective communication and neglects important discussions about parenting decisions.

Understanding these challenges highlights the need for empathy, resilience, and collaborative efforts to prioritize the child's welfare and foster healthy co-parenting relationships.

4. Finding solace in life's storm

In the complex terrain of co-parenting post-divorce, individuals navigate emotional turmoil and interpersonal challenges, seeking comfort and support from various sources. Research indicates that children are better when their parents receive substantial social support, highlighting the importance of effective coping mechanisms (Paul R Amato, 1994). Emotional support from close relationships, such as family, friends, and current partners, plays a crucial role in reducing stress, depression, and anxiety, enhancing satisfaction with the co-parenting dynamic (Paul R Amato, 2000; David H Demo et., 2010). Participants noted receiving significant support from these relationships, such as:

"My parents, siblings, and current partner have provided me with support as I handle co-parenting with my ex-partner."

(M3, Personal communication; 29th April, 2024).

For any individual a significant source of comfort can be found in the support of close relationships, such as family, friends, siblings, and even colleagues. This, encouragements help's validate emotions, offers a listening ear, and provide practical assistance. Although, having a current partner might enhance feelings of companionship and emotional security, fostering a sense of belonging during tough times. This emotional and practical support is instrumental in helping individuals navigate the complexities of co-parenting post-divorce.

Professional assistance emerges as another source of comfort for individuals. Professional services including counselling, offers practical strategies for managing co-parenting challenges and emotional regulation. Ultimately facilitating a sense of empowerment in their co-parenting journey and also it promotes positive outcomes for both parents and children to cope with the turmoil.

"I reached out for professional or counselling support..."

(M4, Personal communication; 29th April, 2024)

For some, spiritual fortitude serves as a profound source of comfort and resilience amidst the trials of co-parenting after divorce. That is,

"Embracing to spiritual or religious beliefs brings me comfort."

(F3, Personal communication; 29th April, 2024)

Therefore, engaging in religious practices and spiritual beliefs provides solace and hope during adversity. By drawing strength from spiritual beliefs, individuals can cultivate inner peace, or optimism, or positivity or a sense of connection to something greater than themselves, providing a source of comfort and fostering a sense of purpose beyond personal struggles.

These varied sources of comfort underscore the importance of social support in enhancing well-being and stability in co-parenting after divorce (Szlachta, 2009).

Conclusion

The aim of this study is to explore how prolonged conflict among divorced couples influences the co-parenting process and to identify the factors influencing the effectiveness of co-parenting arrangements and the challenges experienced during co-parenting as well. Thus, this qualitative research underscores the deep-seated influence of traditional gender roles and societal expectations on the dynamics of post-divorce co-parenting. Mothers are often burdened with primary caregiving responsibilities, while fathers are predominantly viewed as financial providers, limiting their emotional involvement with their children. The study sheds light on the psychological toll experienced by single mothers due to societal stigma, highlighting the importance of effective support systems in mitigating the detrimental effects on mental well-being. Moreover, effective communication emerges as a cornerstone for successful co-parenting, facilitating cooperation and minimizing conflicts that may arise from differences in parenting practices and financial disparities. The study advocates for a parallel co-parenting approach that prioritizes autonomy for each parent while fostering clear communication and conflict resolution strategies, ultimately promoting healthier co-parenting relationships and ensuring the overall well-being of divorced families.

In adopting a parallel co-parenting approach, the study suggests a departure from traditional roles and norms, allowing for more flexible and resilient co-parenting dynamics. That is, the study advocates for an alternative cooperative co-parenthood that is conflict managed and resilience oriented parallel co-parenting model that recognizes the co-existence of two self-governed and autonomous household (Paul R Amato et al., 2011). This approach acknowledges the co-existence of two independent and autonomous households, with each parent taking responsibility for their own parenting practices and their relationship with the child without extensive involvement from the other parent. Successful parallel parenting requires clear, detailed parenting agreements that are regularly updated and evaluated. This approach is particularly beneficial in cases of high conflict and parental alienation behaviors, where traditional co-parenting methods may exacerbate conflicts or be detrimental to the child's well-being. By fostering effective communication, conflict resolution, and comprehensive support systems, parallel co-parenting encourages

a paradigm shift towards more flexible co-parenting approaches. By reassessing traditional parental roles, promoting greater emotional involvement from fathers, and reducing societal stigma towards mothers, healthier co-parenting relationships can be cultivated, ensuring the stability and well-being of divorced families as well.

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