

A Meta-analysis of Parental Satisfaction, Adjustment, and Conflict in Joint Custody and Sole Custody Following Divorce

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The literature on parental satisfaction, adjustment, and relitigation in joint custody (JC) versus sole custody (SC) following divorce is reviewed. Findings are summarized for custody differences in parental demographics; time spent with father; the father–child relationship; parental satisfaction with custody; parental adjustment, including self-esteem and parenting stress or burden; conflict between ex-spouses; and relitigation. JC was associated with equivalent or better outcomes than SC in the father–child relationship, parenting stress, parental conflict and relitigation, and overall adjustment. Satisfaction with custody is greatest for both mothers and fathers when they have SC, less in JC, and least for noncustodial parents. Future researchers need larger, more representative samples followed over time.

KEYWORDS divorce, joint custody, parental adjustment, parental satisfaction

Advocates and critics of joint custody (JC) following divorce have contested the likely advantages and disadvantages of the JC arrangement. Advocates have argued that JC maintains father involvement and is beneficial to children's development (e.g., Bender, 1994); critics have argued that it is disruptive to the child's life, exposes children to ongoing conflict, and is disadvantageous to the mother (e.g., Kuehl, 1989), and that sole custody (SC) is preferable. A robust literature on father absence indicates that children who grow up without regular father contact due to divorce, separation, or never-married parents (but not death of the father) show poorer adjustment

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on a variety of measures than their counterparts from intact families (e.g., Barber & Eccles, 1992; East, Jackson, & O'Brien, 2006). Somewhat paradoxically, some researchers report that adjustment in mother-custody children is not associated with the frequency of father contact (Furstenburg et al., 1987). However, existing research indicates that children and adolescents with divorced parents might be better adjusted on a wide variety of behavioral and psychological measures when they are in either joint legal (JL) or joint physical (JP) custody, rather than SC (Bauserman, 2002). There are important drawbacks of this literature, however, such as the small sample size of many studies (Bauserman, 2002). An even more critical problem is the impossibility of demonstrating causality with observational data, even when likely moderator or mediator variables are statistically controlled.

Parental adjustment following divorce has also received research attention, but mostly in the context of the typical custodial mother–noncustodial father setting. Divorce has long been recognized as a severe psychological stressor (e.g., Holmes & Rahe, 1967), and divorced parents in general are somewhat more likely than married ones to experience maladjustment in a variety of areas (Braver, Shapiro, & Goodman, 2005). In perhaps the most comprehensive effort to formulate a theoretical model of adjustment to divorce, Amato (2000) presented a divorce-stress-adjustment model in which the path between divorce and psychological adjustment is mediated by multiple stressors, including sole parenting responsibility, loss of emotional support, continuing conflict with the ex-spouse, and economic decline. However, protective factors, such as greater individual and interpersonal resources or better functioning in new family and work roles (e.g., Madden-Derdich & Arditto, 1999), also affect adjustment outcomes. Braver et al. (2005) argued that women tend to show better adjustment and recovery following divorce than do men, for several reasons. These include better adjustment to role change (in maternal custody, the mother retains an active daily role as parent, but the father can experience confusion and frustration in the unfamiliar and undesirable new role of noncustodial parent) and greater reported satisfaction with multiple dimensions of the divorce settlement (including child custody).

Notably, the type of custody arrangement enacted after divorce is relevant to a number of the factors cited by Amato (2000) and Braver et al. (2005), and consequently seems likely to relate to parental adjustment. Regarding interpersonal resources, family roles, and role confusion, JC advocates have suggested that parents in JC rather than noncustodial (NC) arrangements might benefit from a better ongoing relationship with the child(ren) and greater satisfaction with that relationship, which could act as a form of interpersonal resource and reduce confusion over how to continue fulfilling a parental role. This would usually apply to the father, because of the predominance of maternal custody (MC) over paternal custody (PC) arrangements (among divorced, single-parent households,

mothers outnumber fathers by a ratio of almost 4 to 1; Fields, 2003). Regarding sole parenting responsibility, the division of time in JC would bring relief from the day-to-day stresses and problems of childrearing that a SC parent would find more difficult to achieve; this would usually apply to the mother, again because of the greater frequency of MC. Regarding interparental conflict, SC could promote adversarial relations in divorce by creating a perception that one parent must “win” and the other “lose” custody. If JC helps alleviate this view of custody, then it might be reflected in lower interparental conflict and greater custody satisfaction.

The purpose of this study was to integrate research literature on the role of JC versus SC in parental adjustment following divorce, including (a) the father’s involvement and relationship with the child(ren); (b) parental satisfaction with custody; (c) psychological adjustment on a variety of measures (including parenting burden); (d) the relationship between ex-spouses, particularly conflict; and (e) relitigation (a possible indicator of parental conflict, and a social burden as well). Because the most common type of child custody arrangement continues to be MC, the focus of this study was comparisons between JC and NC fathers, and JC and MC mothers. JC can be either JL custody, in which legal custody is shared but one parent has primary physical custody, or joint physical (JP) custody, in which the child spends extended time living with each parent. This is potentially an important distinction for some outcomes, so results for these two types of JC are contrasted wherever possible. Some studies did present data on PC fathers and NC mothers; these findings are not part of the meta-analysis, but are addressed in the Discussion section when relevant to interpreting results.

METHODS

A series of meta-analyses were conducted. Consistent with the theoretical factors specified by Amato (2000) and Braver et al. (2005), and in view of the benefits claimed by JC advocates, it was hypothesized that for JC as compared to NC fathers, JC fathers would report (a) greater involvement with their children, (b) greater satisfaction with custody, (c) better psychological adjustment, and (d) lower conflict with the ex-spouse (including relitigation). For mothers, it was hypothesized that JC mothers (compared to those with SC) would report (a) better psychological adjustment (especially less parenting burden and stress), (b) greater custody satisfaction, and (c) lower conflict. The choice of outcomes is constrained by the variables used in the primary research included in the meta-analyses; however, these variables do reflect the hypothesized benefits of ongoing greater father–child involvement in JC as opposed to MC, and the factors relevant to divorce adjustment proposed by Amato (2000) and Braver et al. (2005). However, because research on custody and adjustment is inherently observational, differences

found in parent–child involvement, parental adjustment, or interparental relationships cannot be definitively attributed to JC, and possible alternative explanations must be noted.

Study Identification

Three electronic databases (PsycINFO, Sociofile, and Dissertation Abstracts International) were searched with the key words *joint* and *custody* in combination for the period from January 1979 to December 2009 (1979 was used as the start date because this was the date of the earliest comparison of JC and SC parents found in initial literature searches). Abstracts of published journal articles, books and book chapters, and dissertations were reviewed for potential relevance, and copies of full studies judged relevant were obtained through library facilities. Additional studies described and referenced in these sources were then located and read if they appeared relevant. Inclusion criteria were that studies (a) had been conducted in the United States or Canada, (b) had been conducted within the specified time frame, (c) specifically compared mothers and fathers in different custody arrangements on some measure of psychological adjustment, and (d) used only parental reports of adjustment, rather than reports by any other family member or other third party. Studies were excluded if they did not have a separate group of JC parents or did not provide any information on comparisons between JC parents and those with sole or no custody.

These criteria excluded much recent research literature on parental adjustment and parent–child relations after divorce, when the specific study did not provide data allowing comparison of reports between parents with differing custody arrangements. For example, some research focused exclusively (or nearly so) on samples of JC fathers, disallowing any comparison between different custody arrangements (e.g., Douglas, 2004). Other researchers specifically excluded parents with JC arrangements (e.g., Stone, 2001). Reports by children, including adult children, of parent–child relationships (e.g., Fabricius & Luecken, 2007) also had to be excluded, due to the final criteria. Finally, some research that established groups based on time spent by children with each parent (e.g., > 50% of the time with the father) had to be excluded, because both JC and PC fathers were combined in the same group and there was no way to separate results (e.g., Bokker, Farley, & Bailey, 2006; Shapiro & Lambert, 1999). As forms of sole custody, both MC and PC might be expected to have different implications than JC for various aspects of maternal adjustment, paternal adjustment, or both.

Coding of Study Characteristics

Studies were coded for multiple characteristics potentially relevant to custody comparisons. These included date of publication (when there was more than one publication based on a single sample, such as a dissertation and

a journal article, the earliest date was used); publication format (coded as journal article or as “other”; if any report on the sample was published in a journal, it was coded as such, even if some of the data used for that sample were found in other formats); definition of joint custody (JP, JL, or undefined); sample type (coded as “court” if obtained from sampling of court cases, or as “convenience” if obtained in any other way); and sex of first author (based on first name of the author).

Coding of Measures

Effect sizes were calculated for all JC and SC comparisons relevant to the hypotheses. These included measures specific to the father–child relationship (e.g., involvement with the child or satisfaction with parental influence); satisfaction with the custody arrangement; any aspect of psychological adjustment or well-being (e.g., emotional adjustment or self-esteem); parenting burden, defined as the extent to which a parent feels solely responsible for day-to-day care of the child(ren) or the extent to which they feel burdened by such care (e.g., ratings of parenting stress); the relationship between parents; and relitigation rates. In addition, actual time spent with the father in different custody arrangements was coded. When results from the same sample were reported in more than one format (e.g., a dissertation and a follow-up journal article), all reports were examined for codable data.

For each outcome, any available statistics were recorded. When a study included more than one measure of an outcome, effect sizes were calculated for all the measures and averaged to get a single effect size. For example, results from a conflict scale and a scale of hostile feelings toward the other parent would both produce effect sizes that would be averaged to obtain a single effect for the interparental relationship.

Statistical Methods

Composite mean weighted effect sizes were calculated using the DSTAT program (Johnson, 1989). This program is based on Hedges and Olkin's (1985) meta-analytic techniques for overall effect sizes and categorical moderator analyses. However, it uses Rosenthal's (1984) techniques for modeling of continuous moderators (e.g., date). This difference is reflected in the reported statistics.

Results are reported as the overall effect size estimate for each type of outcome (with the 95% confidence interval), the p value of the effect size, and the Q statistic and p value for homogeneity of effect sizes (a significant Q statistic indicates that individual effect sizes differ significantly). All analyses weighted effect sizes on the basis of sample size. However, results were not weighted on the basis of study quality (a practice that is still an area of some controversy). Moderator analyses of overall effect sizes were

conducted regardless of homogeneity, following Rosenthal's (1995) suggestion that such contrasts be computed regardless of heterogeneity because they might still provide useful information.

For demographic characteristics, JC and MC parents were compared for age, education, income, and socioeconomic status (SES). For adjustment measures, overall effect size was analyzed in relation to each study quality (date of publication, publication type, sample type, joint custody definition, and sex of first author). However, in the case of categorical moderator variables (all except date), results are only reported if at least two study-level effects contributed to each level of the moderator. For example, if six convenience samples and only one court-based sample contributed to an effect size, no moderator analysis for sample type is reported.

Finally, if the effects that contributed to an effect size were significantly heterogeneous, outliers were removed one at a time, beginning with the effect size identified as the most extreme outlier at each iteration, until homogeneity was achieved. The homogeneous overall effect is then reported, without follow-up moderator analysis.

Study Characteristics

A total of 50 relevant research reports were identified, published between 1979 and 2007, based on 32 separate samples (see Table 1). In one case, a series of reports presented combined results from three different samples (Pearson & Thoennes, 1985, 1986, 1988, 1990, 1991); this was counted as a single sample. One dissertation dated prior to 1979 (Greif, 1977) was included because it was the basis of a 1979 study published in a journal (Greif, 1979).

The 50 reports included 30 journal articles, 14 dissertations, and 6 book chapters and books. By sample, 22 had some or all data published in journals, and 10 only in other formats. Fifteen samples were obtained from court records and 16 from various convenience methods (e.g., advertisements and mediation service clients); one was a representative national sample (Seltzer, 1998). JC was defined as JL custody in 18 samples, JP in 11, and was undefined in 3 (coded as missing data in moderator analyses).

Where possible, studies were coded for demographic characteristics of JC and SC groups (age, education, income, or SES). Race and religion were not examined because nearly all samples were overwhelmingly Caucasian and almost none had information on religious affiliation and religiosity.

RESULTS

Demographics and Child Custody

Table 2 summarizes the number of effect sizes, overall effect sizes, statistical significance, and moderator analyses for demographics. JC fathers were not

TABLE 1 Characteristics of Samples ($N = 32$) Included in Meta-analysis

Sample	Sample size	Date	Type	Format	First author sex	Definition
Arditti	35 JC mothers, 41 JC fathers; 176 MC mothers, 171 JC fathers	1992	Court	J	F	JL
Bailey	26 JC mothers, 22 JC fathers; 27 MC mothers	1991	Conv	O	F	JP
Berger	20 JC families, 606 MC families	1998	Court	J	M	JL
Bowman/Ahrons	28 JC families, 54 MC families	1985	Court	J	F	JL
Cohen	128 JC families, 183 MC families	1988	Court	J	F	JL
Coysh	51 JC families, 98 MC families	1989	Conv	J	M	JP
D'Andrea	24 JC fathers, 22 MC fathers	1981	Conv	J	F	JP
Dimidjian	22 JC fathers, 21 MC fathers	1983	Conv	O	M	JL
Dudley	116 JC fathers, 105 MC fathers	1991	Conv	J	M	JL
Fader	11 JC parents, 30 SC parents, 9 NC parents	1982	Conv	O	F	U
Fishel	15 JC mothers, 36 MC mothers	1990	Conv	J	F	U
Greif	8 JC fathers, 32 MC fathers	1977	Conv	J	M	U
Gunnoe	26 JC families, 52 MC families	2001	Court	J	F	JL
Ilfeld	138 JC families, 276 MC families	1982	Court	J	M	JP
Irving	201 JC parents, 194 MC parents	1991	Conv	O	M	JL
Koe/Shiller	199 JC families, 441 MC families	1988	Court	J	F	JL
Lakin	30 JC mothers, 10 JC fathers, 36 MC mothers	1994	Court	O	M	JP
Little, M. A.	183 mothers, 158 fathers (exact numbers for JC/MC not provided)	1992	Court	J	F	JL
Little, M. J.	35 JC families, 494 MC families	1980	Court	O	F	JL
Luepnitz	11 JC families, 16 MC families	1986	Conv	J	F	JL
Maccoby	170 JC families, 420 MC families	1990	Court	J	F	JP
Markham	139 JC mothers, 57 MC mothers	2007	Court	J	F	JL
Melli	222 JC families, 1611 MC families	1997	Court	J	F	JP
Nelson	34 JC families, 87 MC families	1988	Conv	J	F	JP

Pearson/Fields-Ford	127 JC mothers, 26 JC fathers, 211 MC mothers	1985	Conv	J	F	JL
Rocklin	45 JC mothers, 18 MC mothers	1984	Conv	O	F	JL
Rockwell-Evans	11 JC mothers, 10 JC fathers, 13 MC mothers, 8 MC fathers	1991	Conv	O	F	JP
Rosenthal	29 JC fathers, 49 MC fathers	1981	Conv	O	F	JP
Ruffin	42 JC fathers, 208 MC fathers	1991	Court	O	F	JP
Seltzer	79 JC families, 82 MC families	1998	National	J	F	JL
Shrier	18 JC mothers, 17 JC fathers, 55 MC mothers, 15 MC fathers	1991	Court	J	F	JL
Stone	32 JC fathers, 69 MC fathers	1998	Conv	J	M	JL

Note. When *ns* are listed separately for “mothers” and “fathers,” all participants in the sample were recruited separately and do not represent pairs of ex-spouses; when *ns* are listed for “parents,” the author(s) did not provide a breakdown by sex; when *ns* are listed for “families,” pairs of ex-spouses were recruited together for the sample. JC = joint custody; MC = maternal custody; Date = earliest date of any publication based on the sample (if data were coded from more than one source); Court includes any sample drawn from court records; conv = convenience sample (all other recruitment methods); J = any journal publication based on the sample; O = other publication formats only (dissertation, book, or book chapter); F = female first author; M = male first author; JP = joint physical (definition based on actual time spent with father); JL = joint legal (definition based on joint legal custody); the sample might or might not include joint physical custody cases).

TABLE 2 Demographics in Relation to Custody Status

Characteristics	Group	Number of effects	Effect size [95% CI]	Moderator effects (significant at $p < .05$)
Age	Fathers	10	$d = .04$ [-.12, .20], $p = .47$	None
	Mothers	8	$d = .23$ [.07, .38], $p < .0001$ JC mothers older	None
Education	Fathers	11	$d = .24$ [.13, .35], $p < .0001$ JC fathers better educated	None
	Mothers	8	$d = .24$ [.12, .36], $p < .0001$ JC mothers better educated	None
Income	Fathers	11	$d = .28$ [.21, .36], $p < .0001$ JC fathers earned more	Effect larger for court samples, QB(1) = 6.11, $p = .013$ Effect larger in journal format, QB(1) = 6.51, $p = .011$ Effect decreased by year, $Z = 2.16$, $p = .031$
	Mothers	7	$d = .12$ [.04, .19], $p = .0002$ JC mothers earned more	None
SES	Fathers	5	$d = .30$ [.16, .43], $p < .0001$ JC fathers have higher SES	Effect larger for JL samples, QB(1) = 5.77, $p = .016$ Effect larger in journal format, QB(1) = 13.4, $p = .0003$ Effect decreased by year, $Z = 2.97$, $p = .003$
	Mothers	4	$d = .26$ [.12, .40], $p < .0001$	Effect decreased by year, $Z = 5.69$, $p < .0001$

Note. JC = joint custody; SES = socioeconomic status.

older than NC fathers. However, JC mothers were older than MC mothers. Effect sizes for age were homogeneous, but age differences were marginally greater between JP and MC mothers than between JL and MC mothers. No other moderators approached significance.

Significant differences emerged for both mothers and fathers for education, income, and SES. JC fathers were better educated than NC fathers and JC mothers were also better educated than their MC counterparts. Differences were homogeneous and no moderators were significant.

JC fathers earned more income than NC fathers, and effects were homogeneous. However, effects decreased by year; differences were larger in court-based than in convenience samples; and they were larger in journal publications than in other formats. Similarly, JC mothers earned more than MC mothers. Effects were homogeneous and no moderator effects were significant.

Finally, the few studies that reported a measure of SES (e.g., a combination of occupation and income; e.g., Lakin, 1994), rather than income alone, found that JC fathers and mothers had higher SES than their counterparts in MC. In both cases effects were heterogeneous but became homogeneous after removal of a single outlier; the overall effect size remained significant for both fathers, $d = 0.18$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.33], $p = .003$, and mothers, $d = 0.13$, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.28], $p = .045$. Effect sizes decreased with year for both sexes. In addition, for fathers, effects were smaller for journal than for other formats, and for JL than for JP groups. Other moderator effects for mothers were nonsignificant.

Time Spent With Father

Table 3 reports details of overall effect sizes for time spent with father and for the adjustment-related outcomes. To compare time actually spent with the father, studies were excluded if (a) they included only JP fathers, or (b) if they defined JC on the basis of actual hours with the father rather than the legal award. By definition, these groups would have more time with the child. Ten studies remained that provided comparisons of the father's time with the child. In every study, fathers with JL custody spent more time with their child(ren) than NC fathers. The overall effect size was large, $d = .64$, 95% CI [.53, .75], and significant ($p < .0001$).

Effects were negatively associated with year, indicating that the difference between JL and NC fathers decreased over time; were larger in court-based than in convenience samples; were larger when the first author was male; and were larger when published in nonjournal rather than journal format. The effect sizes were heterogeneous, $Q(9) = 41.82$, $p < .0001$, but removal of three outliers made the remaining seven effect sizes homogeneous and increased the overall effect size to $d = 0.82$, 95% CI [0.68, 0.97], $p < .0001$.

TABLE 3 Summary of Outcomes in Relation to Custody Status

Outcome	Parent	Number of effects	Effect size (95% CI)	Moderator effects
Time with father	Fathers	10	$d = .64$ [.53, .75], $p < .0001$ JL fathers more time than MC	Effect decreased by year, $Z = -3.03$, $p = .002$ Effect larger in court samples, $QB(1) = 5.98$, $p = .014$ Effect larger in nonjournal format, $QB(1) = 4.64$, $p = .031$ Effect larger when first author is male, $QB(1) = 5.83$, $p = .016$
Father-child relationship	Fathers	10	$d = .46$ [.33, .58], $p < .0001$ JC fathers more involved	Effect decreased by year, $Z = -2.43$, $p = .015$
Parental satisfaction with custody	Fathers	7	$d = .37$ [.23, .51], $p < .0001$ JC fathers more satisfied	Effect decreased by year, $Z = -4.49$, $p < .0001$ Effect larger in convenience samples, $QB(1) = 25.47$, $p < .0001$ Male authors reported greater differences, $QB(1) = 18.88$, $p < .0001$ Effect greater in JL than in JP samples, $QB(1) = 4.52$, $p = .034$
Self-esteem	Mothers	5	$d = -.35$ [-.50, -.21], $p < .0001$ MC mothers more satisfied	NA (comparisons not possible)
	Fathers	4	$d = .04$ [-.21, .29], $p = .72$	
Overall adjustment	Fathers	5	$d = .08$ [-.14, .31], $p = .44$	Effect decreased by year, $Z = -3.30$, $p = .0009$ Effect larger in convenience samples, $QB(1) = 5.79$, $p = .016$
	Mothers	4	$d = -.04$ [-.27, .19], $p = .70$	Effect greater in JP samples, $QB(1) = 8.14$, $p = .004$
Parenting stress or burden	Mothers	6	$d = .82$ [.69, .94], $p < .0001$ JC mothers report less burden or stress	Effect decreased by year, $Z = -2.12$, $p = .034$ None Effect decreased by year, $Z = -2.08$, $p = .038$

Parental conflict/ relationship	Fathers	8	$d = .23$ [.08, .38], $p = .0006$ JC fathers report better relationship	Effect larger in nonjournal format, $QB(1) = 9.44$, $p = .002$
	Mothers	8	$d = .39$ [.26, .52], $p < .0001$ JC mothers report better relationship	None
	Parents	8	$d = .25$ [.14, .36], $p < .0001$ JC parents report better relationship	Effect larger in convenience samples, $QB(1) = 8.93$, $p = .003$ Effect larger in nonjournal format, $QB(1) = 11.2$, $p = .0008$ Effect larger in JL than in JP samples, $QB(1) = 25.1$, $p < .0001$
Relitigation	NA	9	$d = -.17$ [-.24, -.09], $p < .0001$ Less relitigation in JC	Effect increased by year, $Z = 4.25$, $p < .001$

Note. Detailed information on the specific studies and statistics that contributed to each effect size calculation is available on request from the author. JL = joint legal; MC = maternal custody; JC = joint custody; JP = joint physical.

Father–Child Relationships

Every study that examined this variable found that JC fathers reported greater involvement in their children's lives than NC fathers. Effect sizes were negatively associated with year, indicating that differences narrowed over time; other moderators were nonsignificant. Effect sizes were heterogeneous; removal of one outlier made the effect sizes homogeneous and slightly decreased the overall effect to $d = 0.408$, 95% CI [0.28, 0.53], $p < .0001$.

Parental Satisfaction With Custody or Living Arrangement

Nine studies assessed parents' satisfaction with custody arrangements. Seven of these studies compared father's satisfaction in JC and in MC, and five compared mother's satisfaction in JC and MC. For fathers, six of seven studies reported a difference in the direction of greater satisfaction for JC fathers, with a highly significant overall effect. Effect sizes were highly heterogeneous; three outliers had to be removed before the remaining four effects were homogeneous, but this resulted in a larger effect size, $d = 0.762$, 95% CI [0.50, 1.03], $p < .0001$.

All study qualities were significantly related to father's satisfaction. Year was negatively associated with differences in satisfaction, indicating that differences decreased over time; differences were greater in convenience than in court samples; male authors reported greater differences than female authors; and differences were greater in JL than in JP samples.

For MC versus JC mothers, five studies compared satisfaction. In all studies, there was a difference in the direction of greater satisfaction for MC mothers, and effects were homogeneous. Study qualities could not be examined because of a lack of variation for at least one level of each possible comparison.

Parental Adjustment

SELF-ESTEEM

Four studies reported comparisons of self-esteem in JC and NC fathers. This was examined separately from other measures of adjustment because it represented the largest number of studies addressing a single dimension of general psychological adjustment. The overall effect size was nonsignificant, but effect sizes were heterogeneous. Removal of one outlier made the remaining three effect sizes homogeneous and resulted in a significant effect size, $d = 0.515$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.89], $p = .007$, indicating that fathers in JC had higher self-esteem.

Year, sample type, and definition of JC were significant moderators. Year was negatively associated with effect size, indicating that differences decreased over time; convenience samples had larger differences than court

samples; and differences were larger when JC was defined as JP rather than JL.

OVERALL ADJUSTMENT

Nine studies had measures of emotional or behavioral adjustment other than self-esteem. For fathers, the overall effect size was nonsignificant, indicating no difference in overall adjustment between JC and NC fathers; effect sizes were homogeneous. Year was negatively associated with adjustment differences; no other study qualities were significant moderators. For mothers, the overall effect size was also nonsignificant, indicating no difference in overall adjustment between JC and MC mothers. Effect sizes for mothers were also homogeneous, and there were no significant moderators.

PARENTING STRESS AND BURDEN

Six studies included measures relevant to parenting stress and burden of responsibility for parenting. In all six, JC mothers felt less parenting stress and burden than MC mothers, reported more coparental sharing of responsibility for the children's needs, and felt the ex-spouse was more supportive; the overall effect size was large. Year of publication was negatively related to effect size; no other moderators were significant. However, effect sizes were heterogeneous. Removal of one outlier resulted in homogeneity and increased the overall effect size to $d = 0.89$, 95% CI [0.75, 1.02], $p < .0001$.

Conflict and Relationship Between Ex-Spouses

Most of the studies examined some measure of the relationship between ex-spouses, such as conflict or the general quality of the coparental relationship. Eight studies reported on fathers; JC fathers reported a better relationship with the mother than did NC fathers. Differences were larger for nonjournal than for journal publications; no other moderators were significant. Effects were heterogeneous; removal of one outlier made remaining effects homogeneous and left the overall effect size significant, $d = .17$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.33], $p = .014$.

Eight studies reported on mothers; JC mothers reported a better relationship with the father than did MC mothers, $d = .39$, 95% CI [.26, .52], $p < .0001$. Effect sizes were heterogeneous, but removal of a single outlier made the effects homogeneous and increased the overall effect size to $d = 0.46$, 95% CI [0.32, 0.60], $p < .0001$. No study moderators were significant.

Finally, eight studies reported on differences between JC and MC parents, not separating results for fathers and mothers (for measures of conflict, reports based on "parents" rather than separate identification of mothers and fathers were included, because interparental conflict involves both spouses

by definition; presumably, any genuine association with custody type should be in the same direction, whether reported by the mother or the father). Again, JC parents reported a better interparental relationship. Convenience samples had larger effects than court-based samples; effects were greater for nonjournal than journal publications; and samples defined as JL had larger effects than those defined as JP. Effect sizes were again heterogeneous; removal of a single outlier made effects homogeneous but nonsignificant, $d = .043$, 95% CI [-0.09, 0.17], $p = .41$.

RELITIGATION

In nine studies examining relitigation, overall rates of return to court were either lower in JC or did not differ from SC. The overall effect size was significant and indicated less relitigation in JC, $d = -.17$, 95% CI [-.24, -.09], $p < .0001$. Differences were positively associated with year, indicating that they became larger over time. Other moderators were nonsignificant. Effects were heterogeneous; removal of two outliers made effect sizes homogeneous and the overall effect slightly larger, $d = -0.30$, CI [-0.42, -0.19], $p < .0001$.

Comparison of the causes of relitigation by custody type was less common. Cohen (1998) found that JC and SC relitigated at the same rate only for custody modifications. Koel, Clark, Straus, Whitney, and Hauser (1994) found that JC parents relitigated more about custody and visitation, but SC parents relitigated more about child support. Ilfeld, Ilfeld, and Alexander (1982) found that for a subsample of 18 sets of parents with court-ordered JC, the relitigation rate was 33%, identical to the SC rate of 32%. Pearson and Thoennes (1988, 1990) found no differences in relitigation to modify support (5% or less in all custody types), but MC cases were twice as likely as JC cases to return to court for motions related to child support. They also found that litigation for custody modification was highest in PC cases and lowest in MC, with JL and JP custody intermediate. However, in JC cases changes were usually from one form of JC to another, rather than from JC to SC.

DISCUSSION

The results are consistent with some of the initial hypotheses about JC versus SC, but not others. In almost all areas of comparison, JC is associated with equivalent or better adjustment than MC. As hypothesized, JC fathers are more involved with their children and more satisfied with their relationship with the children, by both fathers' and mothers' reports; JC fathers are more satisfied with the child custody arrangement; JC mothers experience less parenting burden and stress; both JC mothers and JC fathers report less conflict with their ex-spouse, and more emotional support and positive

feelings in the relationship. Frequency of relitigation is also less in cases of JC (especially for specific types of actions, such as child support modification). In contrast, JC parents and their MC counterparts did not significantly differ on measures of overall psychological adjustment or of self-esteem, and JC mothers were less satisfied with the custody arrangement than were MC mothers.

These findings seem consistent with theoretical ideas of the factors that affect postdivorce adjustment in adults (Amato, 2000; Braver et al., 2005). Factors such as sole parenting responsibility, interparental conflict, emotional support, and frustration and confusion over the noncustodial parent role have all been suggested to affect adjustment after divorce. For some of these factors, such as the extent to which a parent feels solely responsible for child care following divorce, there seems to be a clear causal connection to the child custody arrangement. For most of the findings, however, the observational nature of research on the relationship of custody to adjustment means that the observed differences cannot be clearly attributed to a causal effect of JC. The possibility of self-selection into JC is suggested by the demographic differences found here. Both mothers and fathers in JC are better educated and have higher incomes and higher SES than their MC counterparts; in addition, JC mothers are older. These effects (except for SES) were generally consistent over time, across sample types and publication formats, and for both JL and JP custody, and are consistent with self-selection of better educated and more financially well-off parents into JC arrangements. Other causal pathways are also possible; for example, lower conflict and greater satisfaction among JC parents might be due to greater personal and social resources associated with higher education and income.

Aside from the important question of causality, the results reported here, along with other relevant research, help illuminate a number of important questions related to child custody arrangements. These issues are discussed in more detail later.

One question concerns the extent to which JC arrangements actually lead to greater time spent with fathers in comparison to MC arrangements. If JC itself is beneficial, presumably by mitigating negative effects of father absence through increased contact, then it must be shown that JC (and JL custody in particular) is associated with a meaningful increase in time spent with the father. Although JP custody by definition involves substantial amounts of time living with each parent, the meta-analysis found that fathers with JL custody also spend significantly greater amounts of time with their children than do NC fathers. This difference is not trivial; typically, JC fathers spent about twice as much time with their children each month. For example, Dimidjian (1983) found that JC fathers spent an average of 14 days per month (3.2 per week) with their child, compared to 7 (1.6 per week) for noncustodial fathers.

Some studies included fathers with JP custody as part of a larger group of fathers with JL custody, possibly inflating the magnitude of the association. However, in studies that included both, JP cases were invariably far outnumbered by JL cases. More important, differences occurred even when JP fathers were specifically excluded (e.g., Gunnoe & Braver, 2001). Finally, differences also exist in studies that specifically compared JP and JL arrangements. For example, Rocklin (1984) compared time spent with the father in JP, JL, and MC arrangements and found that although JP fathers had more than twice as much time with their children as did JL fathers (10.1 vs. 4.5 days per month), the JL fathers in turn spent more than three times as much time with their children as did MC fathers (4.5 vs. 1.3 days per month).

In short, joint custody does not have to involve joint *physical* custody to be associated with significantly greater contact with fathers. Fathers with JL custody appear better able, or motivated, or both, to maintain or increase contact over time. Four of the studies in this review (Coysh, Johnston, Tshcann, Wallerstein, & Kline, 1989; D'Andrea, 1983; Dimidjian, 1983; Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin 1990) also examined change in contact over time (typically, amount of time spent with the child now vs. amount of time at time of separation or divorce). In every case, JC fathers were more likely to maintain or increase contact than NC fathers, who were more likely to decrease or even cease contact. Importantly, the differences in time spent with the child might reflect a higher preexisting level of commitment to one's children, which could lead fathers both to seek JC and to maintain higher levels of contact over time. However, greater access to the child seems a prerequisite to maintaining a high level of positive ongoing involvement. JL and JP custody provide a stronger legal basis for maintaining such contact. Closely related to contact with children, but not identical, is the issue of involvement in the child's life. As defined here, measures of involvement focused on qualitative aspects of the relationship and not on time (e.g., ratings of closeness to the child or knowledge of the child). The finding that JC fathers report greater involvement with the child than NC fathers was consistent across studies, for both JL and JP custody, and was supported by both mothers' and fathers' reports (e.g., Arditti & Keith, 1993). It appears that JC (whether legal or physical) can facilitate ongoing, positive interaction between fathers and children, but the effect of preexisting commitment to the role of father needs to be disentangled from the effect of custody.

Regarding custody satisfaction, MC mothers are more satisfied, and NC fathers less, than their counterparts with JC. Studies of PC arrangements indicate parallel findings; PC fathers are more satisfied than NC fathers, and equally or more satisfied than JC fathers (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990), and NC mothers are the least satisfied of any group of mothers (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990). Some research comparing JC and SC "parents," without differentiating

mothers and fathers, also finds that SC parents are most satisfied and NC parents the least (e.g., M. A. Little, 1992). Interestingly, JC mothers report less satisfaction than those with MC even though they report less parenting stress, and some studies indicate they might receive more consistent and complete child support payments (e.g., Irving & Benjamin, 1991; Pearson & Thoennes, 1988, 1991).

This pattern of results suggests that SC might be especially psychologically satisfying for either parent following divorce—despite the extra burdens it might involve. This could come from a sense of having control over the child, a sense of having “won” in competition with the other parent, or both. SC awards represent a zero-sum game because an award to one parent of necessity means a loss of legal status for the other parent. An alternative possibility again exists, however; SC might be more satisfying for mothers because it facilitates escape from spousal conflict when highly negative or conflicted relationships exist. JC necessarily entails more contact, and therefore more discussion, negotiation, and compromise, which might be stressful. However, the consistent finding of less conflict in JC arrangements renders this explanation less likely.

In all studies that measured parenting burden or stress, JC mothers experienced less than MC mothers. Notably, studies that compare PC and JC fathers show the same pattern (Bowman & Ahrons, 1985; Luepnitz, 1982; Maccoby et al., 1990). This finding is unsurprising because of its direct relation to living arrangements. When the child spends substantial time with both parents (as found for JL as well as JP custody), sole responsibility for day-to-day attention to the child’s needs is not placed on either the mother or the father. More than perhaps any other area of adjustment, a direct causal effect of JC appears the most likely interpretation for this finding. Clearly, time spent with one parent must reduce by an equal amount the time that the other parent is responsible for direct oversight or day-to-day care of the children, reducing time pressures and obligations. Notably, two studies that reported on general stress levels (Bailey, 1991; Lakin, 1994) did not find a significant difference. This suggests that the benefits of JC for stress reduction are specific to parenting stress.

Conflict between ex-spouses—and in turn, the level of conflict to which children are exposed—is an important concern in divorce. Notably, whether effects were based on fathers’ reports, mothers’ reports, or both, the overall effect size indicated that JC parents reported less conflict, more support, and more positive feelings regarding the other parent than did mother and fathers in MC arrangements. Several studies that compared fathers in JC and PC arrangements have also found that JC fathers had significantly better relationships with their ex-spouse than did PC fathers (Bailey, 1991; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990; Rosenthal & Keshet, 1981). Such findings are clearly consistent with the claim that lower conflict parents might self-select into JC arrangements. Such parents seem likely to have a greater willingness to

consider this arrangement at the time of the divorce, and would be less motivated to minimize ongoing contact with their ex-spouse. However, as JC awards become more frequent, the possibility that JC itself might contribute to less conflict in some cases should be considered, because JC itself requires parents to negotiate and compromise with each other. In addition, research on child adjustment shows that children in JC are better adjusted than those in SC on a wide variety of measures (Bauserman, 2002). To the extent that exposure to interparental conflict harms child adjustment, this finding is consistent with less such exposure among children in JC, despite the greater amount of contact between parents.

Relitigation might represent an extreme form of conflict following divorce, and simultaneously reflects additional burdens on the court system. However, it can also occur if both parties agree to return to court to seek mutually agreed legal modifications. Overall, relitigation was lower in JC cases; those studies that examined causes of relitigation found that JC reduced it in some areas (e.g., child support), but matched or exceeded SC in custody modification. The issue of custody modification raises the question of the stability of JC arrangements over time, which was not considered as an outcome in this review. However, longitudinal studies in both the United States (L. M. Berger, Brown, Joung, Melli, & Wimer, 2008; Koel et al., 1994; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990) and Canada (Austin & Jaffe, 1994; Cloutier & Jacques, 1997) have consistently found that JC arrangements (especially JP) are less stable over time than SC arrangements. For example, Koel et al. (1994) found that 57% of JP, 31% of JL, and only 13% of SC arrangements changed in the period they examined. This might seem inconsistent with lower conflict in JC, if custody change is assumed to reflect parental disagreement. However, such an assumption might be incorrect. For example, Koel et al. (1994) reported that in 86% of cases, changes in JC were from one form of JC to another rather than a switch to SC, and Pearson and Thoennes (1988, 1990, 1991) also reported that relitigation often involved a change from one form of JC to another, rather than an attempt by one parent to gain SC.

There are several possible reasons why JC might be associated with less relitigation. First, the lower levels of hostility and conflict reported in JC might facilitate parents working out disagreements without a return to court. Second, because JC fathers report higher levels of custody satisfaction, they could have less motivation to return to court. Third, as noted earlier, there is some evidence that JC is associated with more complete and consistent payment of child support; this might reduce one incentive for mothers to return to court. Stability of custody over time, and its association with conflict, should be examined as an outcome in future research.

Regarding psychological adjustment in general, the lack of significant differences suggests that custody status might not play a large role in broader measures of parental adjustment. However, adjustment issues more

specifically related to parenting could be strongly affected by custody; the effect size for differences in parenting stress and burden is one of the largest found in this review. In addition, removal of a single outlier resulted in a significant effect size for differences in fathers' self-esteem that favored JC. Additional research with larger sample sizes is necessary to resolve the question of how custody arrangements relate to self-esteem and other dimensions of adjustment. Broad measures (e.g., anxiety or depression scales) might be too general to reflect potential advantages of JC over SC, if JC benefits are largely restricted to divorce-specific areas. In this review, such divorce-specific areas included custody satisfaction and parenting stress or burden. It might be more valuable for researchers to narrow their focus onto adjustment issues more specific to divorce.

An additional concern about JC, not addressed in the measures of adjustment examined here, is the argument that it might economically disadvantage women; JC fathers might have more legal leverage with the mothers and use this to justify reducing or skipping support payments. Although some evidence suggests that JC is associated with more consistent and complete support payments, it might also be associated with reduced likelihood of actually receiving a support award (Pearson & Thoennes, 1991; Rockwell-Evans, 1991), although this might be the case primarily for JP custody and not for JL (e.g., Maccoby & Mnookin., 1992). The latter distinction is critical, because in JP custody the mother does not bear the sole cost of day-to-day living expenses of the children (and also tends to have more income than MC mothers). In addition, JC fathers might be more likely than NC fathers to make additional payments beyond support obligations for their child(ren)'s needs (e.g., Fields-Ford, 1987). In the largest and most nationally representative samples used to examine support awards (the Current Population Surveys of the U.S. Census Bureau), JC has been associated with a greater likelihood of receiving support (e.g., Grall, 2007). Although reassuring, there needs to be more research that compares income levels between parents after divorce in relation to custody type, while controlling for such additional factors as taxation and visitation or expense payments (other than child support) paid by the father (Braver et al., 2005).

Despite the millions of parents and children affected by divorce and child custody in the United States, the research on parental adjustment in relation to custody arrangement is surprisingly sparse. In this review, we located only 32 distinct samples from a nearly 25-year period. Furthermore, the association between JC and fathers' time and involvement with children carries important implications for child adjustment. Behavioral science research has documented that father absence is associated with a wide variety of negative outcomes for adolescents and children. Policies that might promote ongoing, positive father involvement following divorce are of concern to parents, policymakers, and mental health personnel.

The research reviewed here indicates that JC following divorce, whether physical or legal, might work to promote such ongoing father involvement, reduce parenting burden on women, and reduce the burden of relitigation on the legal system. Other data suggest parallel advantages for JC in comparison to PC. JC is clearly not a viable option in some situations, such as child or spousal abuse by one of the parents. The results reported here represent average differences between custody groups; individual cases might reflect all, some, or none of these potential advantages. There is now substantial evidence that the JC option is not only viable, but often advantageous, for parents and children undergoing the experience of divorce.

However, updated, longitudinal research with larger and more representative samples of divorcing couples (including nonwhite families) is urgently needed. Only longitudinal research that controls for preexisting characteristics of divorcing families can help determine likely causal relationships between custody type and the outcomes studied. Such research could follow the approach of Gunnoe and Braver (2001) and of Maccoby and colleagues (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992) who recruited families at or near the time of separation and then followed them over time. This approach would allow examination of self-selection bias and its relationship to demographics and interparental conflict. It would also allow assessment of fathers' involvement with children at the time of separation, so that effects of custody type could be explored while controlling for level of preexisting commitment. In general, such designs could allow more robust conclusions about likely causal relations between custody type and adjustment. Both longitudinal and cross-sectional designs would also benefit from more sophisticated multivariate analyses, to control or test for the effects of various background and relationship variables.

Additional needs include further study of relitigation in different custody arrangements and the reasons for return to court; the stability of both JC and SC arrangements over time, and what sorts of changes typically take place; and the relationship of custody type to the presence of, and compliance with, child support awards. Given the magnitude of divorce in modern society, and the numbers of children affected by it, the lack of more extensive research on these issues is a major shortcoming of the behavioral science literature.

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