

PATTERNS OF COPARENTING AND FATHER-CHILD INVOLVEMENT FOLLOWING SEPARATION AND ASSOCIATED FACTORS: MOTHER'S POINT OF VIEW

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ABSTRACT

Based on data from *Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development (QLSCD)*, the aim of this prospective study is to describe a typology of relational patterns in the period surrounding separation and to examine the associated factors. The sample was composed of 173 children aged between 4 and 8 years old at the time of separation. A person-centered latent class analysis on variables related to coparental subsystem and to the father-child subsystem resulted in four groups. Differences between groups were found regarding the presence of a court order for child custody and the length of parents' previous union.

BACKGROUND

- **Separation** = family transition that requires a reorganization of the family system.
- Two dimensions of the family dynamic are particularly changing during that transition:
 1. **Coparenting** = the degree to which parents are mutually supportive and cooperative in raising their child;
 2. **Paternal involvement**, characterized by many factors, including the amount of time that fathers spend with their children.
- The **systemic theory** focuses on the interaction between several indicators to illustrate the complexity and interdependence of relational subsystems of a family.
- Little attention has been given to the **period surrounding the separation**, often described as a turning point.

OBJECTIVE 1

- Describe the relational patterns in the period surrounding parental separation, based on indicators related to coparental and to father-child subsystems.

OBJECTIVE 2

- Examine factors associated with these relational patterns (child's and parent's individual characteristics, and family context particularities).

METHOD

A. Sample

- This study is based on a sub-sample of the *Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development (QLSCD; N = 2223)*.
- The data are representative of all children born in Québec (1997-98).
- In this study, the respondents are the mothers ($M = 33.46$, $SD = 5.26$) who experienced separation with the father of the target child ($M = 72.01$ months, $SD = 16.68$ months).

Inclusion criterias

Families have to be intact at the birth of the target child

At least 4 years of cohabitation of the parents with the child before separation

Conjugal and physical separation when the target child is aged between 4 and 8 years old

N = 183

METHOD (CONTINUED)

B. Measures

Obj. 1: Patterns of coparenting and father-child involvement

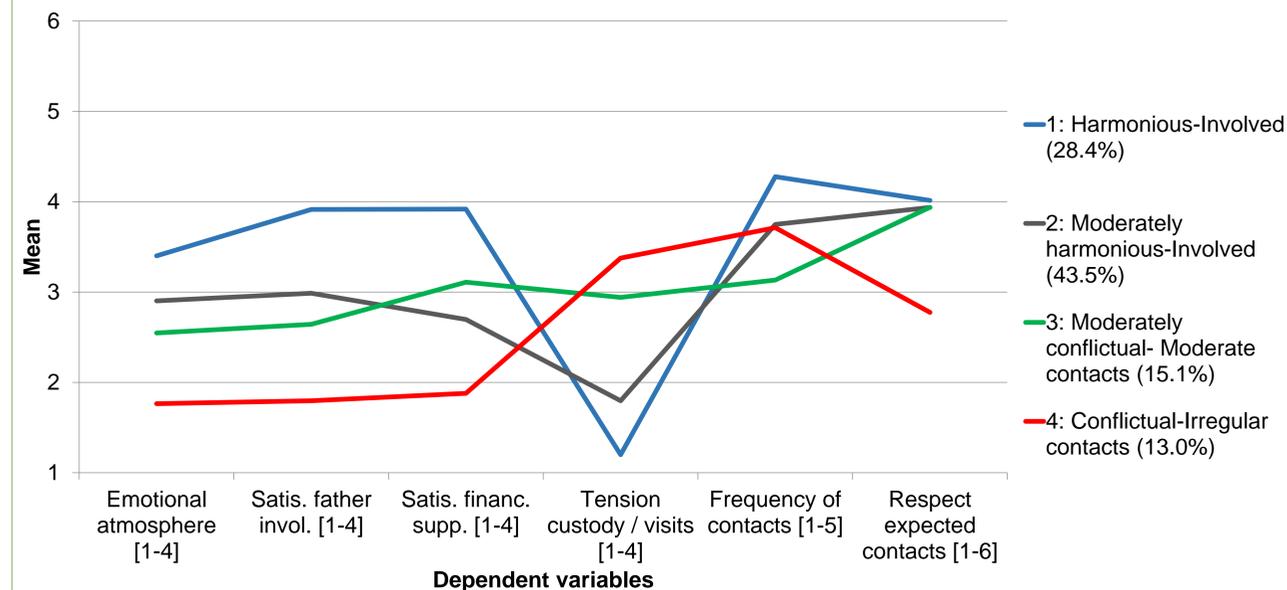
Family subsystem	Dependent variable	High score indicates:
Coparental	Emotional atmosphere between parents	Good atmosphere
	Mother satisfaction concerning father financial support	High satisfaction
	Mother satisfaction concerning father involvement	High satisfaction
	Tension regarding custody / visiting rights	High tension
Father-child	Frequency of contacts	High frequency
	Respect of expected frequency of contacts	Contact frequency more than expected

Obj. 2: Associated factors

- Sex of target child
- Mother's educational level
- Mother's annual income
- Length of parents' previous union
- Presence of a court order concerning child custody
- Pre-separation marital status
- Presence of a new partner for mother

RESULTS

Obj. 1: Patterns of coparenting and father-child involvement



Obj. 2: Associated factors

Length of parents' previous union:

- The length of parent's previous union was significantly longer in the *Moderately harmonious-Involved* group than the *Harmonious-Involved* group ($M = 109$ vs 136 months)

Presence of a court order concerning child custody:

- The *Conflictual-Irregular contacts* group had more often court order for child custody than the *Harmonious-Involved* and the *Moderately harmonious-Involved* groups.

No significant difference between groups on all other variables in the study.

DISCUSSION

Objective 1:

- The results highlight the heterogeneity of post-separation family dynamics.
- Despite the challenges associated with marital separation for family members, it is important to mention that most families do not appear to experience significant conflict or paternal disengagement.
- While several previous studies reported positive correlations between co-parenting and father involvement (Goldberg & Carlson, 2015; Sobolewski & King, 2005; Waller, 2012), this study suggests that the relationship between these two components varies from one group to another.

Objective 2:

- The length of parent's previous union was longer in the *Moderately harmonious-Involved* group than the *Harmonious-Involved* group. It would be interesting to examine the trajectory of these families over time: some authors have suggested that parents engaged in a long term marital relationship took longer to rebuild their individual identity outside the initial conjugal couple (Duran - Aydintug, 1995; Kitson, 1982).
- The *Conflictual-Irregular contacts* group includes families experiencing difficulties related to co-parenting and father involvement. Although these families had more often court order for child custody, it is the only group for which the frequency of contact is less than expected.

Study limitations:

- The analyses relied exclusively on mothers' reports; limited information is provided by the father after separation in QLSCD.
- No standardized measurement constructs of interest.

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