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Mother–Grandmother Coparenting Relationships in Families with Incarcerated Mothers: A Pilot Investigation

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Abstract

Using new methods designed to assess coparenting between incarcerated mothers of preschool-aged children and the maternal grandmothers caring for the children during their absence, we examined relationships between coparenting quality during the mother's jail stay and both concurrent child behavior problems and later coparenting interactions following mothers' release and community reentry. Forty mother–grandmother dyads participated in joint coparenting discussions during the incarceration, with a smaller subset completing a parallel activity at home 1 month postrelease. Both women also participated in individual coparenting interviews during the incarceration, and reported on child behavior problems. Mother–grandmother coparenting interactions exhibited an overall structure similar to that documented in nuclear families, with population-specific dynamics also evident. The observational system demonstrated good interrater and internal reliability, and showed associations with maternal (but not grandmother) reports and descriptions of the coparenting relationship via interview. Greater coparenting relationship quality during incarceration was associated with fewer concurrent child externalizing behavior problems, and predicted more positive coparenting interactions postrelease. Findings suggest that the coparenting assessments were useful for understanding mother–grandmother coparenting relationships in these families and that importantly, these relationships were tied to children's functioning. Avenues for future research and considerations for intervention efforts are discussed.

Keywords

Coparenting; Incarcerated Mothers; Grandmothers; Intergenerational Relations; Child Behavior Problems; Family Dynamics

Over 30 years ago, Salvador Minuchin articulated his structural framework emphasizing the hierarchical nature of healthy family relationship systems and the central role of supportive relationships between adult caregiving figures in the “parental holon” (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981) or “executive subsystem” (Minuchin, 1974). Although it took almost two decades, developmentally oriented family researchers ultimately caught on to the

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significance of these centrally important tenets, and so began expansion of a once myopic focus on parent–child and marital dyads to a study of *coparenting* dynamics within families. Such studies have examined the manner with which adults work together (or fail to work together) in the parenting role, and validated Minuchin’s stance that coparenting processes are central to understanding how family dynamics affect children’s development—in nonreferred community families as well as clinical samples (see McHale, 2007a, 2007b; McHale & Sullivan, 2008, for recent comprehensive reviews).

Large-scale empirical efforts substantiate that effective coparenting relationships manifest cooperation and support between caregivers, clear lines of parental authority, and the absence of detrimental conflict, undermining, and/or inappropriate alliance formation (Lindahl, 1998; Lindahl & Malik, 1999; McConnell & Kerig, 2002; McHale, 2007a, 2007b; McHale & Cowan, 1996; McHale, Johnson, & Sinclair, 1999; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998; Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, & Frosch, 2001). Such relationships convey to children solidarity and support between parenting figures, consistent, predictable rules and standards, and safety and security of the home base (McHale, Lauretti, Talbot, & Pouquette, 2002). Greater coparental solidarity has been positively linked to children’s ability to self-regulate, their competence with peers, their comfort with discussing emotional themes, and greater empathy and understanding of emotion, while poor coparental functioning has shown associations with child aggression, anxiety, and insecure attachment (see McHale, 2007a, 2007b, for reviews of this literature).

While studies verify that coparenting and marital relationships are interrelated, the two are also clearly differentiated on both theoretical and empirical grounds (Cohen & Weissman, 1984; Feinberg, 2003; Gable, Belsky, & Crnic, 1992; Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001; McHale, 1995; McHale et al., 2002; McHale & Sullivan, 2008; Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004). Coparenting relationships are most markedly distinct from marital functioning in that coparenting relationships can and do function in the absence of a marital relationship. However, with the important exception of a voluminous literature on coparenting in postdivorce family systems, virtually all empirical research on families’ coparenting dynamics has enrolled midsocioeconomic status families headed by married couples. While this work has assisted efforts to prevent coparenting difficulties and enhance coparenting relationships in such families (Feinberg & Kan, 2008), understanding and supporting coparenting in diverse, higher risk families remains a critical task for coparenting researchers (Cecil, McHale, Stozier, & Pietsch, 2008; McHale, 2009; McHale et al., 2002).

Among high-risk families with young children, systemic study of family processes is most keenly needed in families where children’s mothers have been incarcerated (Imber-Black, 2008). Baunach (1985) found that a stunning 70% of young children with incarcerated mothers exhibit significant emotional or psychological problems, including aggression and substance abuse. Subsequently, such children are at significantly heightened risk for future criminal activity and incarceration themselves (Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, & Kennon, 1999).

In 2000, estimates were that over 250,000 children in the United States had a mother who was incarcerated, and 70% of incarcerated women had at least one child (Mumola, 2000). Moreover, approximately three-quarters of children of incarcerated mothers also have fathers involved in criminal activity (Phillips, Erkanli, Keeler, Costello, & Angold, 2006), leading to heavy reliance upon extended family for care of children during maternal incarceration. Kinship care is the most optimal arrangement for a great many children with incarcerated mothers, affording safety, affection, and greater ease retaining connection with

mothers during the separation (Grant, Gordon, & Cohen, 1997; Hairston, 1999; Mackintosh, Myers, & Kennon, 2006).

Over half of all children with incarcerated mothers live with grandparents (Bureau of Justice, 2000; Greenfield & Minor-Harper, 1991), who undertake caregiving roles to keep their grandchild out of foster care, insure the child's safety, and provide aid to their daughters (Jendrek, 1994; Minkler & Roe, 1993). This arrangement comes at substantial cost, however, frequently triggering clinically significant stress levels as difficulties of caring for children outweigh rewards (Daly & Glenwick, 2000; Mackintosh et al., 2006). Indeed, *most* caregiving grandparents—not just those precipitously thrust into an emergency coparenting role—assume these roles with some ambivalence (Brooks-Gunn & Chase-Lansdale, 1995; Burton & Bengtson, 1985; Caldwell et al., 1998; Chase-Lansdale, Brooks-Gunn, & Zamsky, 1994; Daly & Glenwick, 2000; East & Felice, 1996; Goodman & Silverstein, 2002;) and face significant health-related costs (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2000; Goodman & Silverstein, 2002).

Given these realities, it is understandable that studies of grandparental care would err in the same manner as did earlier studies of nuclear families, viewing such families through dyadic (grandparent–child) lenses (Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005) and relegating mothers to a source of strain or resource (as fathers were once conceptualized). While this frame has its own merit, studies of mother–grandmother *coparenting* in extended kin systems—with or without incarcerated mothers—have been rare. This is significant, as the absence of a positive mother–grandmother coparental relationship in multigenerational family systems does appear detrimental to children (Brody, Flor, & Neubaum, 1998; Jones, Zalot, Foster, Sterrett, & Chester, 2007). For example, Apfel and Seitz (1991), Seitz and Apfel (1999) found that for high-risk innercity teen mothers, both the absence of any caregiving involvement by grandmothers *and* the complete commandeering of infant children (and supplanting of mothers) by maternal grandmothers predicted the likelihood of the mothers no longer being responsible for the index child's care on that child's 12th birthday, and the mothers giving birth to a second child in rapid succession. Balanced grandparental cocaregiving support and involvement harkened better adjustment in these high-risk families.

Given the relative inattention to parent–grandparent coparenting relationships in the empirical literature, it is not surprising that few data exist on the relationships between incarcerated mothers and coparenting grandmothers (Cecil et al., 2008). Yet overwhelmingly, mothers do anticipate reunification with their children upon release (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Hairston, 1991; Hagan & Coleman, 2001; Koban, 1983), and their relationships with their children are a central emotional focus while they are incarcerated (Boudin, 1998). Arditti and Few (2008) report that incarcerated women harbor concerns about nonmaternal care, along with feelings of jealousy intermingled with gratitude (see also Smith, Krisman, Strozier, & Marley, 2004).

Practically, incarcerated parents rely almost entirely on caregivers for contact with their children (Nurse, 2001; Poehlmann, 2003) and the degree to which caregivers foster such contact depends on the quality of the mother–caregiver relationship (Enos, 2001; Poehlmann, 2005). A sound understanding of the nature of mother–grandmother coparenting relationships during and after mothers' incarceration is hence crucial for informed interventions geared to help children and families (Cecil et al., 2008); Engstrom (2008) underscores the crucial need for family-based intervention programs involving custodial grandmothers, identifying coparenting as a key area of attention. Unfortunately, not only are there few empirical data available to help establish how best to help mothers maintain

family ties while incarcerated, but there is disagreement on the wisdom of even doing so among corrections personnel (Teather, Evans, & Sims, 1997).

Most useful in informing and evaluating interventions for improving mother–grandmother coparenting relationships will be data that specifically target coparenting collaboration and enable detection of treatment-related change. At present, there are no methods specifically designed to understand and to characterize these unique coparenting relationships—their structure, their cross-time stability, or their significance to children. Existing coparenting frameworks, while useful heuristics, are of only partial help because mothers of young children in intergenerational mother–grandmother coparenting relationships possess less parenting expertise than their “partners”—not more, as mothers typically do in two-parent heterosexual nuclear families. Moreover, the disconnection mothers experience when incarcerated further distinguishes intergenerational family power dynamics from those of lower-risk nuclear families; indeed, Wakschlag, Chase-Lansdale, and Brooks-Gunn (1996) found links between grandmaternal directiveness and more problematic parenting by mothers in families where mothers were *not* incarcerated. In the Wakschlag study, adolescent African-American mothers whose own mothers behaved in a more assertive, clear, and demanding way with them during (noncoparenting) conflict-resolution discussions exhibited a tendency toward more problematic parenting of their pre-school-aged children. However, the authors acknowledged that this power assertion might also have reflected grandmothers’ responses to poor maternal parenting.

Taking this conceptual background as a starting point, we developed and examined a multimethod approach to measuring coparenting relationships between mothers and custodial grandmothers during maternal incarceration. Observations of coparenting discussions between mothers and grandmothers were evaluated alongside the two women’s perspectives on their coparenting relationships, and a composite index based on these data was created. Relations were then examined between this composite reflecting quality of coparental functioning during mother’s jail sentence, and observational ratings of later coparenting discussions following the community reentry of a subset of these women—a transition that marked a key challenge for families in terms of renegotiating their family patterns and roles (Engstrom, 2008; Minuchin, Colapinto, & Minuchin, 2007). Finally, the importance of the coparenting data was evaluated by investigating relations between mother–grandmother coparenting during maternal incarceration, and children’s concurrent externalizing behavior problems. We predicted that all coparenting measures would cohere, that information about the coparenting relationship obtained during incarceration would predict coparenting after mothers’ reentry, and that better mother–grandmother coparenting relationships would be associated with fewer child behavior problems.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 40 mothers serving sentences of <12 months in a central Florida county jail, and the maternal grandmothers caring for their children during their incarceration. Target children were all between the ages of 2 1/2 and 7 1/2, with a mean age of 3.43 years ($SD = 1.17$). Average age for mothers was 26.41 years ($SD = 5.48$), and for grandmothers 52.32 years ($SD = 9.04$). Racial breakdown for mothers/grandmothers was: 41/38% African American, 41/41% Caucasian, 10/16% Latina, 5/6% Native American, and 3/0% “other.” Thirty-one percent of mothers did not complete high school, 37% graduated high school or obtained high-school equivalence only (13% high school, 24% GED), 8% graduated from a technical school, and 18% attended some college (none were college graduates). Twenty seven percent of grandmothers did not complete high school, 36% completed high school or equivalence only, 6% graduated from college and had no further education, and 12%

attended some postgraduate school (6% graduated). Marital status for mothers/grandmothers was as follows: 80/9% single, 5/46% married, 8/9% separated, 8/27% divorced, and 0/9% widowed. Average annual income before detainment for mothers fell in the US\$10,000–US\$15,000 range, with 46% reporting income <US\$5,000 per year. Average annual income for grandmothers was US\$35,000–US\$40,000, with 39% reporting income US\$20,000 and 18% reporting income over US\$70,000. For mothers, income was not associated with any of the main variables of interest. Grandmothers' income was related to self-reported coparenting quality, $r = -.56$, $p < .01$, but not to any other variable of interest. Mothers had an average of 2.5 children ($SD = 1.39$), including the target child.

Mean jail sentence length for mothers was 3.30 months ($SD = 2.29$ months). Three mothers were incarcerated for less than a month, and five for over 6 months. Most were charged with substance-related crimes, petty thefts, and/or significant driving offenses. Length of sentence was not associated with any variable of interest from observations or interviews.

Procedures

Eligible participants were identified as follows: First, a project liaison located at the jail made announcements at regular meetings attended by the incarcerated women to advertise the study of mothers of young children being cared for by a grandmother while the mother was in jail. Women who self-identified as eligible and interested were subsequently visited by one of three on-site treatment counselors who (a) answered questions about the study, explained child maltreatment reporting laws, and obtained informed consent from the mother; and (b) obtained both the mother's permission to contact the maternal grandmother, and contact information for the grandmother. Mothers alerted grandmothers that they would be contacted by a research team member, first by letter and then follow-up phone call. During the call, grandmothers were invited to ask questions in deciding whether to participate. When both mother and grandmother agreed to participate, consent was obtained from mothers before a study visit involving themselves and grandmothers at the jail; grandmother consent was obtained at that visit.

Sixty percent of grandmothers whose daughters initially indicated interest agreed to participate; the remainder declined or were not reachable. Among those who declined, reasons included lack of time, transportation issues, feared involvement by the child welfare system, or the child living with someone else.

Coparenting discussions in the jail (Time 1)—An initial mother–grandmother assessment was completed at the jail during the mothers' incarceration. Mothers had, on average, completed approximately two thirds of their total time (64.6%, $SD = 24\%$) by the time of that visit.¹ In a designated room within the facility, on-site treatment counselors trained in the study protocol explained procedures, answered questions, obtained grandmothers' consent, and led the women through the activity. The consent process included permission to be video- and audio-taped. The coparenting discussions included two 5-minute discussions between the women about the target child: one addressed a recent child accomplishment and/or area of pride; the second, a recent area of child difficulty. Both were chosen in advance by the grandmother. After the women indicated that they understood the task, the counselor began videotaping and left the room. While left alone, the women were visually monitored through an observational window. After 5 minutes, the counselor

¹To determine whether the proportion of the sentence that mother had completed before the research study visit had any bearing on the study variables of interest, we examined bivariate correlations with all key study variables. No significant correlations were found. There was, however, a significant correlation between the *absolute* amount of time that had elapsed since the mother's first day of incarceration and one study variable of interest. Longer periods of time served before the study visit commenced were associated with more negative ratings of the coparenting relationship as provided by mother during her interview assessment, $r = -.40$, $p < .05$.

returned to the room, gave instructions for part two, and left again. After another 5 minutes, the counselor returned and concluded the visit.

Individual coparenting interviews—Within 2 weeks of these discussions, mothers and grandmothers were interviewed separately to find out how they felt about the shared coparenting relationship. An on-site jail treatment counselor conducted interviews with mothers in a jail interview room; grandmothers were interviewed by university-based team members at home or occasionally by phone if problems were encountered coordinating a home visit. Each interview took 30–45 minutes to complete, and covered topics relevant to the coparenting relationship the women shared for the target child. Interview content is described below.

Coparenting discussions in the home (Time 2)—A few weeks after the mothers' release, 22 families completed follow-up coparenting discussions in the family residence. Among the 18 families for whom follow-ups were not obtained, there were numerous mitigating issues: moving directly from jail to prison ($n = 2$) or residential drug treatment ($n = 3$); remaining in jail at the conclusion of the study ($n = 2$); lost contact with the mother ($n = 2$) or with all family members ($n = 3$) postrelease; reincarceration of the mother ($n = 1$) or grandmother ($n = 1$) too rapidly postrelease; safety threats ($n = 1$); chronic inability to schedule home visit despite exhaustive attempts ($n = 1$); and significant changes in family structure undermined the central purpose of the study (e.g., child-care having shifted to a third family member out of state; $n = 2$). Such attrition rates are expectable in follow-up studies involving incarcerated mothers (e.g., Arditti & Few, 2008). Formal attrition analyses revealed, surprisingly, that the 18 relationships with no follow-up data had actually been rated *higher* on Time 1 Coparenting quality than the 22 seen at follow-up, $t(38) = 2.21$, $p < .05$.

For follow-up visits, the mother and grandmother undertook a discussion structurally similar to the Time 1 assessment, with one important difference: rather than grandmother choosing one area of pride and one of difficulty (as at Time 1 when grandmother possessed the most current information about the child), both grandmother and mother identified one particular area of child difficulty concerning them to discuss. Grandmothers' concerns were discussed during the first 5 minutes and mothers' during the second 5 minutes. Interactions were videotaped and researchers left the room during the discussions.

Measures

Ratings of coparenting dynamics based on coparenting discussions—Mother–grandmother discussions at both time-points were evaluated using an *Intergenerational Coparenting Incarceration Rating System (ICIRS)*, created for the present study. Although the intent of this system was to assess elements of coparenting collaboration and conflict broadly consistent with processes documented in research with nuclear families (such as cooperative engagement, competition, and disparagement; see McHale, 2007a), we endeavored to design the new system from the “bottom up.” Our process was as follows: a team comprised of both European- and African-American researchers, all with prior experience in evaluating coparenting dynamics in families, independently watched five mother–grandmother interactions selected on the basis of high, moderate, and low self-reported psychosocial risk scores, and recorded notes on all behaviors of interest they observed during interactions (e.g., empathic statements, disengaged body postures, eye rolls, smiles). The team then met to discuss their notes, and from these generated several key themes that they believed organized the behaviors they had recorded. These themes were given short-hand “construct” names and then used as a tentative set of codes for evaluating the dynamics of a new and separate set of four mother–grandmother dyads, so as to provide

an initial test of the utility of the codes for understanding the interactions of other families. The initial set of codes translated well to the second set of cases and hence was adopted, with formalized definitions of each construct drafted, without further adjustments. Two primary coders then independently recoded the initial set of families using the formal system, achieving adequate reliability.

In all, 13 constructs were defined in the process of developing the coding system (see Table 1). The first nine are generally consistent with cooperative and conflictual or problematic couple and coparenting relationship themes identified in nuclear families (for reviews, see Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham & Lamke, 2004; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; McHale & Sullivan, 2008). The other four are more specifically germane to intergenerational dyads with an incarcerated mother. Of the nine constructs consistent with general couple relationship themes, four are relevant to coparenting cooperation, and five to problematic, noncollaborative coparenting.

General codes relevant to coparenting cooperation—In the extant coparenting literature, coparenting solidarity is typically defined in terms of cohesive, cooperative, and supportive relationships between the coparenting adults around parenting and child-related issues. The interactions of the women in this study revealed a variety of different means by which such support and solidarity was expressed. A *warmth/empathy* construct captured behaviors of the two women that conveyed sensitivity, positive regard, and caring for the other in the context of discussing the child. Such behaviors included facial expressions, body postures, eye contact, verbal and nonverbal signs of affection and sensitivity, and empathic statements (e.g., “I know you’re trying”). *Listening* behaviors included turn-taking in the conversation, nonverbal signs of listening, acknowledging what was said, and showing understanding of the partner’s input. Partners exhibiting *validation* behaviors respected one another’s input about the child and conveyed that the other’s opinions were appreciated. Validation included both nonverbal (e.g., nodding, appearing thoughtful about the partner’s input) and verbal behaviors (e.g., explicitly stating that the partner had a good idea, building upon the partner’s input, showing consideration for the opinion of the partner). Finally, *agreement or accommodation* was coded both for outright agreement and when initial disagreements eventuated in consensus or compromise. For example, the women in one dyad initially disagreed about whether the child should be tested for a psychological disorder. However, they were able to talk things through constructively and eventually came to a consensus that was likely more beneficial to the child than either of the original stances. Conceptually, these four codes capture coparenting cooperation in ways akin to that identified in studies of two-parent, nuclear families; evidence of their statistical interrelationship is presented below.

General codes relevant to coparenting conflict—The remaining five general codes captured behavior disruptive to collaborative coparenting. First, *dismissing* was rated when someone conveyed that the other’s opinion about the child or about parenting was devoid of merit or credibility. Although occasionally stated directly, dismissals conveyed via brusque “brush-offs” (e.g., “Yeah, I’ve already tried that; so anyways ...”) or ignoring the other’s input altogether were more common. For example, when a mother aptly suggested purchasing activity-learning books so the child might improve schoolwork, the grandmother replied, “She already has coloring books,” and returned to continue outlining her own perspective on the child concerns. *Disparagement* was coded when women belittled or dismissed one another’s child-related ideas or parenting strategies. *Competition* was scored when women bickered over who was best attuned to and the true “expert” on the child’s needs. *Defensiveness* measured prioritization of self-protection (e.g., guarding their own parenting image or value) over attending to child needs or concerns during the discussion; such behavior typically surfaced in response to a criticism about parenting practices or ideas.

Finally, *interfering negative affect* measured negativity (hostility, bleakness, indifference) that interfered with constructive teamwork in the child's best interest.

Ratings took into account both frequency and intensity of behavior and were measured on scales ranging from 1 (*absent or very low*) to 5 (*very high*). Behaviors of both members were considered when a code was assigned, so that a relationship could receive an elevated score owing principally to extreme behavior by one of the two coparents. The logic behind assigning a single score to reflect both women's contributions is consistent with a tenet from coparenting theory maintaining that effective relationships require that both partners work together. This said, the system was designed in such a way that highest scores (5) were assigned to relationships in which both members exhibited behaviors exemplary of the construct being assessed, while midrange scores (3) went to dyads where only one member exhibited the behavior.

Population-specific codes relevant to coparenting—Besides the nine general codes, analysis of the women's coparenting interactions also suggested four population-specific themes (also rated along 1–5 scales) not previously integrated into observational coding systems for nuclear families. First, certain grandmothers expressed concern over troubles being able to parent the child (*grandmother difficulty*) and/or sustaining their coparenting role (*grandmother hesitant*). In some cases, such grandmothers struck researchers as “passing the buck” back to the mother (e.g., suggesting during the in-jail interaction that dealing with current child problems in a forthright manner could be deferred until mother returned home). Besides these two dynamics, we saw several families in which the grandmother did *not* acknowledge the mother's role as parent, sometimes addressing her as she might a much younger child or sibling of the grandchild. Typically in such cases (which we chose to label *maternal disenfranchisement*), grandmothers monopolized discussions. They lectured the largely silent mother about proper parenting and/or informed mothers what was being done for the child in a tone conveying that maternal input was neither welcome nor necessary. This rating bears some similarities to Wakschlag et al.'s (1996) notion of grandmaternal directiveness, but unlike the Wakschlag code relates to the mothers' role as a parent specifically. Although less common, a few of these grandmothers explicitly told mothers that the mothers' behavior had cost them the right to maintain an active parental role.

Finally, a smaller subset of mothers in the sample, either in accordance with or, just as often, independently of the grandmothers' stance, exhibited behaviors suggesting that they *themselves* had relinquished most (and sometimes virtually all) of the active parenting role to the grandmothers. We gave such indicators a separate code, which we termed *mother relinquish*. In families receiving scores above 1 on this scale, mothers appeared, to varying degrees, to have given up playing an active role. They did so for a variety of different reasons: a lack of commitment; a self-perceived lack of parenting competence; and/or appreciation for or deference to a grandmother who appeared to herself desire such a circumstance.

Following the initial interrater reliability establishment process described above, reliability was again assessed for these 13 codes with a second new set of seven additional families. Reliability was adequate to move forward with coding, and interrater reliability continued to be monitored in an ongoing manner throughout the study. Twenty five percent of all tapes were jointly evaluated; intraclass correlations (ICCs) for each construct are reported in Table 1, together with means and standard deviations for all codes. Raters did not achieve adequate reliability for *grandmother difficulty* (overall ICC = .52) and *grandmother hesitant* (ICC = .27) codes, owing to lower base rates than anticipated based on dynamics of the initial cases. These codes were not used in further analyses. Data concerning internal

consistency of the first nine codes, their relations to the two retained population specific-codes, test–retest reliability, criterion validity with coparenting interviews, and associations with child behavior problems are presented in the Results section.

Positive and negative depictions of coparenting derived from individual coparenting interviews—The coparenting interview conducted individually with mothers and grandmothers provided a second set of coparenting data for analysis. Open-ended questions asked about: the degree to which power was shared regarding coparenting; teamwork; agreement regarding parenting styles and discipline; communication; feelings related to self and other’s views of coparenting; and perceptions of the child’s perspectives about the coparenting relationship. Items ranged from general and global (“I’d like you to tell me a little about how much you and your mother/daughter see eye to eye on things when it comes to your (grand)child”) to focused explicitly on agreement and cooperation in specific areas such as teaching the child about emotions and use of discipline strategies. Respondents were also asked to provide exemplars of actual incidents that illustrated and supported their evaluations. Near the end of the interview, women were asked to provide an overall rating of their coparenting relationship, on a scale from 1 (*a problematic, low-quality relationship*) to 10 (*a collaborative, high-quality relationship*). Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for coding.

We measured individual perspectives on the coparenting relationship in two ways (1) using the self-reported numerical rating of coparenting quality given in response to the direct question and (2) by tabulating the number of positive and negative references pertinent to the coparenting relationship made during the interview. Interviews were transcribed, and two trained coders (one graduate and one undergraduate student, both blind to ICIRS ratings) combed the mother and grandmother interviews for all evidence of positive and negative references to either (a) the parenting of their coparenting partners, or (b) the quality of their coparenting cooperation (e.g., “teamwork.”). These two dimensions were not differentiated, resulting in a single score for positive coparenting references and a single score of negative coparenting references for each interviewee. Interrater reliability between the two coders, as assessed by single-measures ICC, was extremely high: .95 for positive and .96 for negative references. The number of negative references was subtracted from the number of positive references to create a single score for each interviewee reflecting interview-based coparenting quality (interrater reliability for total score = .97). The total word count of the responses from each interview was also calculated to control for potential influence of individual response style (e.g., a higher number of positive references for a particularly loquacious woman).² Mothers’ own direct ratings of their coparenting were significantly correlated with researchers’ ratings of coparenting quality derived from interview content, $r = .43, p < .05$. This was also true for grandmothers, $r = .51, p < .01$. Scores for each individual were therefore combined into a single Interview score. Mothers’ and grandmothers’ Interview scores were moderately correlated, $r = .49, p < .01$.

Child externalizing behavior problems were measured by the Externalizing Problems scale of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000). The CBCL is one of the most widely used parent-report measures of child socioemotional and behavioral functioning and has sound reliability and validity. The CBCL contains a list of behaviors, which are rated by each parent on a 3-point scale from 0 (*not true*) to 2 (*very true or often true*) for their child. The Externalizing scale measures problematic behaviors related to attention, hyperactivity, defiance, and aggression. The standardized *t*-scores of mothers’ and

²Relations between Interview content codes and other constructs of interest did not differ meaningfully when number of words used by respondent was controlled.

grandmothers' reports were highly correlated within families, $r = .63$, $p < .001$, and were therefore combined into a single composite score.

RESULTS

Results are presented in five main sections. We first present data summarizing the internal structure and content validity of the first nine (general) scales of the ICIRS, as well as associations between these scales and the ICIRS constructs specific to the particular population under study. We then discuss relations between the interview and observed coparenting data and explain the process of data reduction in the creation of the final Time 1 Coparenting composite. We sought to minimize Type 1 error by basing our hypotheses on theory and by reducing the number of analyses performed through the creation of composites. These methods were chosen over formal correction methods (e.g., Bonferroni), given the small size of our unique sample. We then investigate the stability of the coparenting construct, and present data linking coparenting to children's externalizing behavior problems.

Internal Structure and Content Validity of the General Scales of the ICIRS

Internal consistency and content validity for the first nine ICIRS scales were examined through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of Time 1 data. We used only these *general scales* as they were fully consistent with cooperation and conflict constructs as identified in extant couples and coparenting theory and research. CFA was performed using Amos, version 6 (Arbuckle, 2005), and included the nine general codes organized by the two latent factors: cooperation and conflict. The resultant model fit the data extremely well. The chi-square was nonsignificant, $\chi^2(26) = 27.72$, $p = .37$, and the χ^2/df was between 1 and 2, as is optimal. The CFI, which measures how well the model fits as compared with a null model and should be as close to 1.0 as possible, was 0.99, indicating excellent fit. The RMSEA is another commonly reported global fit measure and should be $< .06$. RMSEA for the present model was .04. As can be seen in Table 1, all item loadings onto the latent factors were highly significant. In short, the CFA revealed that the internal consistency of the general ICIRS was excellent and that the general two-factor (cooperation and conflict) structure was similar to that found in coparenting studies involving two-parent nuclear families. Scales were constructed based upon the findings from this CFA and each exhibited good internal consistency (cooperation $\alpha = .83$, conflict $\alpha = .81$). These scales were inversely correlated, $r = -.50$, $p < .001$, and hence were combined (with conflict reversed) to form a single score representing total observed coparenting quality.

Relations between Population-Specific Items and the General Scales

Next, the two scales considered unique to this population were examined in relation to the overall score obtained from the general scales of the ICIRS so as to better understand the role of these factors in the coparenting relationship. One of the two codes—grandmothers disallowing mothers an active parental role (disenfranchisement)—was negatively correlated with observed coparenting ratings, $r = -.56$, $p < .001$. Mothers' tendency to themselves relinquish their parental role to grandmothers was *not* similarly associated with the coparenting ratings.

Creation of the Final Time 1 Coparenting Construct

Ratings of observed coparenting quality during jail discussions (ICIRS scores) were associated with scores from the coparenting interviews for mothers, $r = .44$, $p < .01$, but not for grandmothers, $r = -.01$, *ns*. Thus, only mother interview data were combined with the observed coparenting ratings in order to create the final Coparenting Time 1 composite.

Stability of Coparenting across Maternal Return

Internal consistencies of cooperation and conflict scales for Time 2 ($n = 22$) in-home discussions were even higher than those found for the jail discussions, $\alpha = .94$, and $\alpha = .96$, respectively. Cooperation and conflict were inversely correlated at Time 2, $r = -.76$, $p < .001$, and were combined into a single home observed score. Time 1 Coparenting composite scores were significantly correlated with Time 2 Coparenting ratings, $r = .63$, $p < .001$, indicating moderately high stability of the mother–grandmother coparenting relationship in this sub-sample over time and across mothers' transition from jail.

Associations with Children's Behavior Problems

Coparenting scores at Time 1 were also significantly and negatively associated with concurrent child externalizing behavior problems, $r = -.33$, $p < .05$, suggesting that in families with better functioning dyads, children had fewer problems related to attention, hyperactivity, defiance, and aggression. We also found it of note that coparenting scores that had been derived from grandmaternal interview data—scores which were not included in the Time 1 Coparenting composite because of their lack of association with the rest of the coparenting measures—also did not relate to child externalizing problems, $r = -.15$, *ns*.

DISCUSSION

There is great potential value in systematic studies pursuing the possibility that coparenting relationships characterized by signature levels of cooperation and dissonance exist in three-generational family systems just as they do in family systems where married or unmarried mothers and fathers are the child's primary coparents. There is perhaps no more worthwhile place to begin such inquiry than in families where grandmothers assume duties, by choice or by necessity, as parenting figures for their grandchildren when their daughters are separated from their young children during an incarceration. We began this study with the premise that it would be possible to describe facets of coparenting relationships in such families paralleling those seen in mother–father coparenting systems, though we anticipated that the structural features of mother–grandmother coparenting relationships might also differ from mother–father coparenting relationships in certain important respects. Our data indicated that dimensions akin to those identified in studies of two-parent families (coparenting cooperation and conflict) are discernible from observations of child-related discussions between mothers and grandmothers while mothers are in jail; that assessments of coparenting quality based on analysis of these child-related discussions related to measures of coparenting quality drawn from interviews with mothers; and that the degree of adaptive functioning glimpsed during these in-jail coparenting assessments predicted aspects of later coparental functioning following mothers' release. Finally, consistent with the wealth of literature and theory suggesting that coparenting cooperation in low-risk families has beneficial effects on children's development, we found that better coparenting relationship quality was related to fewer child behavior problems in our high-risk families as well. In short, this investigation provides preliminary data in support of the notion that it is feasible to validly assess coparenting quality in this unique population, and that the quality of the mother– grandmother coparenting relationship is of consequence.

Beyond these intriguing new findings about coparenting relationships in multiply stressed families, we were taught several other valuable lessons by this investigation. First, it is feasible to get mothers and grandmothers together to talk about coparenting during a mother's incarceration. Navigating the logistics involved certainly took time and effort, and evolved from a positive, collaborative partnership with forward-thinking corrections administrators. The yield was worth the effort, however, as the discussions between the two women were rich, poignant, and revealing. We hope that researchers will consider use of

observationally based methods in future efforts geared toward better understanding incarcerated parents and their families, and encourage interventionists to find ways to bring together mothers and grandmothers to discuss child-related concerns (cf. Cecil et al., 2008).

Second, discussions confirmed that central dynamics of coparenting relationships documented in two-parent nuclear families have parallels in the interactional processes of mother–grandmother coparenting relationships. Aspects of cooperation and conflict were each clearly present, and in statistical analyses, indicators of these processes hung together in ways similar to that documented in prior coparenting research. At the same time, discussions also revealed ways in which the women’s relationships departed from those of two-parent families. Most notably, the tendency for certain grandmothers to disallow their daughters’ active contribution to the parent role has no direct parallel in mother–father nuclear structures, related only tangentially to the concept of maternal gatekeeping (beliefs and behaviors by mothers thought to inhibit collaborative effort between men and women in housework and child-care; see Allen & Hawkins, 1999). In the current study, this manner of grandmother over-directiveness related to poorer observed coparenting interaction, which, when combined with maternal interview data, was associated with children’s behavior problems. However, as was the case for Wakschlag et al. (1996), we are not in a position to determine whether grandmothers’ behavior was in response to problematic family factors, a contributor to them, or (as is likely) both.

Perhaps most significantly, data suggest that the coparenting assessments are not only useful scientifically, but may also be of use clinically. Analyses revealed that coparenting relationship quality was significantly related to concurrent child externalizing behavior problems, with poorer coparenting quality linked to more problematic child adjustment. Although causality in these data cannot be established, it is nonetheless of interest that more positive mother–grandmother coparenting relationships are associated with fewer child problems related to attention, defiance, and aggression. While it is plausible that children’s externalizing problems may have been provoking poorer coparenting, from a transactional perspective (Sameroff, 2009) intervening with the coparenting dyad might be expected to positively alter child developmental trajectories. These findings are also consistent with results from longitudinal studies with lower-risk families, in which prospective relationships between early coparenting problems and later child adjustment hint at causal role for coparenting (e.g., McHale & Rasmussen, 1998). A second finding of significant clinical interest is that the in-jail assessments predicted the quality of adjustment in the women’s coparenting relationship following mothers’ release and transition home—suggesting important potential avenues for reentry interventions.

Our data also raise a number of equally interesting questions and conundrums about the distinctiveness of three-generational coparenting relationships in families with an incarcerated mother. First, the finding that interview-based measures of the coparenting relationship from grandmothers showed poor coherence with the other coparenting measures suggests that this manner of assessing grandmothers’ perspectives may be less useful than other approaches we used to evaluate the dynamics of the coparenting relationship. Moreover, the disconnection of these interview-based indicators not just from other measures of coparenting quality but also from measures of child adjustment raises questions about the level of insight into the coparenting experiences of grandmothers that can be gained from the conduct and analyses of semistructured interviews with these women during the time the mother is incarcerated.

Second, coparenting theory makes explicit that coparenting is by definition a triadic or polyadic, and not a dyadic construct (McHale, 2007a, 2007b; Talbot & McHale, 2003), as the particular relationship dynamics that form are always specific to a particular child (or

children). While the assessments used in this project were child-specific in the sense that they brought the women together around the concerns related to a specific target child, the ratings reflect only one important subdomain of coparenting—decision making and communication within the “executive subsystem.” Left unclear is the extent to which processes of conflict and cooperation would translate into the women’s coparenting behavior during triangular interactions involving the child. Prior studies of nuclear families document coherence between dyadic coparenting discussions and triadic interactions (McHale & Rotman, 2007; Talbot, Baker, & McHale, 2009); determining whether this same coherence characterizes mother–grandmother coparenting systems is an important next direction.

Relatedly, we want to reiterate that the methods developed and presented in this article were designed to pinpoint and assess the family circumstances of mother– grandmother coparenting relationships in the population of families where mothers have been incarcerated. They are not presented as assessments that will sensitively capture intergenerational coparenting relationships in all families where grandmothers are members of the family’s coparenting relationship. Nor are they adequate for capturing the coparenting circumstances of families where the child’s father and members of his family are as or more actively involved in the child’s life as the maternal grandmother before, during, or after the mother’s incarceration. In this study, fathers by definition did not play active parenting roles in the lives of their children, but in such families where they do, additional considerations besides those outlined in this report will unquestionably be very important. Even among families of incarcerated mothers where grandmothers are the ostensible coparent, replication with a larger sample and a lower attrition rate would be beneficial. We recognize that the evidence we have been able to provide for the construct validity of our novel methods (e.g., relations with other novel assessments; association with a well-established measure of child functioning) was necessarily constricted by virtue of this having been one of the lone studies in which methods specific to coparenting in this particular population have ever been available.

We also caution that assessments of coparenting during mothers’ incarceration are undoubtedly affected by demand characteristics and other factors (such as mothers being on their best behavior, mothers taking greater responsibility for family ills than might otherwise be the case as a function of the intensive jail rehabilitation focus on personal responsibility, and mothers’ indebtedness to grandmothers, the lifelines to their children while they are away). These and other factors likely had a significant effect on reactivity, truncating, and positively skewing the jail assessments when compared with the parallel home-based evaluations. This said, the value of assessing the relationship during the incarceration is borne out by the data indicating that these evaluations did still predict postrelease coparental functioning and showed associations with concurrent child behavior problems.

Beyond big-picture dimensions of conflict and cooperation, and the interesting new data on disenfranchisement and maternal relinquishment as features of the coparental relationship, the observational system we devised was not sufficiently sensitive to assure reliable coding of grandmaternal difficulty and hesitancy, which occurred at a lower base rate. Although these dimensions are less clearly coparental domains and may be more closely attributable to the grandmother’s personal resources and/or the child’s demandingness than to the dynamics of the executive subsystem, they are nevertheless important to understand in subsequent research. We also note that attrition was noteworthy for this data set, though it is in line with attrition rates reported in other studies of this same population. Analyses we were able to conduct did not indicate a differential drop-out rate for families showing more problematic coparenting relationships. In general, the size of our sample was sufficiently adequate to allow the analyses reported in this study, though replications with larger samples will be beneficial.

Finally, though we took pains to work with data in a fashion that maximized cultural sensitivity, coparenting at present is far less well understood in lower socioeconomic populations than it is in working and middle-class families. Most coparenting studies have also enrolled European-American families, though there is a growing literature involving African-American and Hispanic families. And no prior study had focused explicitly on coparenting in families where mothers have been incarcerated (Cecil et al., 2008). An increasing evidentiary base with all of these populations will help to insure the creation of maximally useful evaluation and intervention systems for future work.

Implications for Clinical Work

For professionals who have license and opportunity to intervene with mothers who have been separated from their young children through incarceration, this work is of interest for several reasons. First, under the proper circumstances, getting mothers and grandmothers to talk together in a focused and meaningful way about the mother's young child during jail visitations is feasible, assuming the right collaborative relationship can be established with key correctional system collaborators. Our sense is that front-line professionals (such as the treatment counselors in this project who already worked clinically with the women and who led our visits) conversant in the protocol for such coparenting assessments could be trained to remain with women during their coparenting conversations to facilitate discussions that became side-tracked or stuck. We would propose that basic principles of therapeutic coparenting interventions with couples would also be appropriate when intervening in these relationships, respecting the power differential inherent in the current arrangement where mothers have little active voice or power. Although data provided evidence that what transpired during these coparenting discussions related to later family outcome after mothers' reentry to the community, unknown is whether facilitating more positive coparenting communications during an incarceration might have a positive impact on altering relationship trajectories.

Although the recommendation to intervene with the mother and grandmother as a coparenting unit and to help give each voice and enable productive conversations about the child's well-being may seem obvious to family practitioners, it would actually be a quite revolutionary concept in the corrections context. Because many mothers do not immediately resume living together with children upon release and reassume responsibility only gradually after regaining some financial and emotional stability (O'Brien, 2001), the focus of jail-based efforts is almost always on individual parenting, not on family-level dynamics. Consequently, even when mothers derive benefit from such classes and move immediately back in with family to rejoin their children, neither they nor their family members are prepared for the coparenting challenges that await. In this study, the forthcoming challenges were sometimes presaged by grandmothers dismissing their daughters' parenting input even when the input was appropriately guided by what the daughters had been learning in their parenting classes. Giving more attention to coparenting issues in parenting curricula during mothers' incarcerations and purposely involving grandmothers or other family cocaregivers in coparenting interventions with mothers during the mothers' jail sentence would seem a worthwhile effort toward enhancing postrelease coparenting outcomes. We offer this suggestion with guarded optimism, as numerous mothers and grandmothers who we worked with expressed gratitude for having had the opportunity to engage in dedicated discussions about the child.

In closing, we echo a point made recently by Cecil et al. (2008): incarcerated mothers are highly motivated to do the right thing for their children. Planned efforts to promote communication and strengthen relations between the incarcerated mother and her child's caregiver are a new frontier for professionals working with incarcerated women, and much remains to be learned about the obstacles to intervening effectively to strengthen coparental

relations. The work of this report provides a beginning paradigm for gathering pertinent data from families along with initial evidence speaking to the importance of these unique coparenting relationships to children's well being. We believe that fresh new efforts geared toward enabling women's family connections through coparenting interventions would be a productive and generative new enterprise for both family researchers and clinicians.

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Table 1
Descriptive Data, Intraclass Correlations (ICC), and Factor Loadings for Observation Ratings

Rating	Mean	SD	ICC	Cooperation β	Conflict β
<i>General codes</i>					
Warmth and empathy	3.43	1.17	.85	.74***	
Listening	3.70	0.82	.75	.62***	
Validation	3.63	0.95	.84	.94***	
Agreement or accommodation	3.80	1.04	.88	.72***	
Dismissing	1.80	0.88	.79		.78***
Disparagement	2.15	1.05	.90		.78***
Competition	1.55	0.90	.94		.58***
Defensiveness	1.70	0.79	.84		.57***
Interfering negative affect	1.68	0.97	.86		.69***
<i>Population-specific codes</i>					
Maternal disenfranchisement	1.60	1.11	.82		
Mother relinquish	1.93	1.02	.93		

 $p < .001$.