

Co-parenting Conversation Process: A Qualitative Study of Singaporean Parents

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved parents, Edward Sim and Mary Low. My caring sister, Elizabeth Sim, F.d.cc., and brothers, Louis Sim and Johnson Goo, and their respective families.

## **Abstract**

Although co-parenting in two-parent families has been an increasingly important area of research, little is known about the co-parenting conversation as a crucial aspect of co-parenting. This study used grounded theory methodology to explore how Chinese Singaporean parents perceive their co-parenting conversations in light of the influence of their families-of-origin. Interviews were conducted with mothers and fathers in sixteen families. Findings revealed a central category, Conversations along the Co-parenting Journey, and two main categories, conversations that connect and collaborate in co-parenting, and conversations on family heritage and practices. A substantive theory of co-parenting conversation process was generated from the synthesis of the findings. This study serves as the foundation for future research in co-parenting conversation, and its implications for clinicians and researchers are presented and discussed.

*Keywords:* co-parenting conversation, grounded theory, Southeast Asian parents

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**“It is one thing to know, another to love, one thing to understand, another to will.”**

Francesco Petrarch  
14<sup>th</sup> Century Scholar and Poet

Researchers have been paying increasing attention to co-parenting in two-parent, non-divorced families. A growing body of studies has found that co-parenting has an important independent influence on the developmental growth of a child apart from parent-child dyadic relationships and the couple relationship (Caldera & Lindsey, 2006; Feinberg & Kan, 2008; Karreman, Van Tuijl, Van Aken, & Dekovic, 2008; Leary & Katz, 2004; Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, & Frosch, 2001; Stright & Neitzel, 2003). How parents go about their co-parenting in the family has significant implications for the children as well as the parents themselves.

Co-parenting in this context is defined by McHale (1995) as “the extent in which partners share leadership and support one another in their mutual roles as architects and heads of the family” (p. 985). Effective co-parenting involves agreement about how the child should be raised, cooperation in carrying out these agreements, and mutual support and commitment to raising a child together (McHale & Fivaz-Depeursinge, 2010).

Most studies in co-parenting have focused on levels of cooperation and conflict, but not on co-parenting conversations, which Doherty and Beaton (2004) have emphasized is a crucial aspect of co-parenting. Furthermore, most studies of co-parenting in two parent families have used quantitative self-reports and observational measures of co-parenting, with little attention to how parents perceive their co-parenting relationship. The current study fills these gaps by focusing on the co-parenting conversation and by using qualitative methods, which according to McHale and Fivaz-Depeursinge (2010) can be indispensable in assessing co-parenting by providing “succinct, relevant information about how the adults function, and reveal concerns harbored by parents not always accessible from observational data” (p.365).

Singapore, the context for this study, is an island city state of about 5.5 million people with three major ethnic communities: Chinese (74.2%), Malays (13.3%), and Indians (9.1%) (Statistics Singapore, 2014). English is the language of instruction and communication in schools, business and community. There is an increasing concern in Singapore regarding how

parents raise their children in today's complex society. At the Singapore Parenting Congress 2014, there was a call for parents to address their family communication and life together because preoccupation with electronic devices is leading to a lack of interaction among family members (Low, 2014). It is clear that how parents communicate with each other regarding parenting issues is of relevance to citizens and policy makers in Singapore. Singapore also presents a unique opportunity to study family-of-origin influences on co-parenting within an ethnically and culturally diverse society.

This study has two goals: to describe the co-parenting conversation process within the Singaporean context, and to understand how family-of-origin experiences influence co-parenting conversations.

### **Background**

This section contains additional information on the Singapore context, a conceptualization of co-parenting, and literature reviews on family-of-origin influences, cultural practices in Asian parenting, and negotiation in couple conversation.

#### **Singapore Context**

In Singapore, both genders have equal access to education, and women are as well educated as their male counterparts, with employment opportunities for highly skilled managerial, professional, and technical jobs. Thus women are likely to remain in the labor force long after marriage and childbirth. In 2005, 44% of married women were in the work force, and the trend was expected to increase over the years (Leow, 2006). They also contributed between 39%-46% of the combined household income (Quek, Knudson-Martin, Orpen, & Victor, 2011), where the median annual household income in Singapore is around \$60,000 (Statistics Singapore, 2014). The increase in dual-income households over the years has been accompanied by a decline in birth rates, with household sizes averaging 4.2 persons in 1990 and 3.5 in 2010 (Statistics Singapore, 2014). Having both parents at work meant less time to supervise the children and be with them. A survey on fatherhood perception showed "work responsibilities" as the key challenge for most fathers who wished to spend more time with their children (MCDYS, 2009). Hence grandparents are encouraged to play a greater

role in caring of the grandchildren. And the government has designed special public housing policies to enable grandparents to live near their adult children. In Singapore, due to the scarcity of land, 82% of the population reside in public units built by the government. And they are expected to purchase these units. As a result, 80% own their units and only 2% rent an apartment unit from the government (Statistics Singapore, 2014). These housing policies have benefited Singaporean parents who wish to live close to their own parents for child care and other practical reasons.

### **Conceptualization of Co-parenting**

According to McHale, Lauretti, Tablot, and Pouquette (2002) the academic subject of co-parenting could be traced to the writings of clinical psychologists from over 50 years ago. Research on intact families was limited until 1990's, where it "took off" with the studies of Belsky, Crnic, and Gable (1995) and James McHale (1995) on co-parenting within the realm of intact families. In a study done by McHale (1995) based on observation of the interaction patterns of 47 intact couples at play with infant sons and daughters, he found that martially distressed parents of boys would commonly display hostile-competitive co-parenting behavior in the triad interactions; whereas distressed parents of girls were more likely to manifest discrepant levels of parenting involvement. This seminal work by McHale on co-parenting indicated the importance of conceptualizing co-parenting as a family-level construct distinct from the marital relationship; although marital and co-parental relationships are interrelated, they are not interchangeable.

McHale and Lindahl's (2011) described how their co-parenting framework traces its roots directly to Salvador Minuchin's (1974) structural family theory, which emphasizes supportive leader by the parents. Co-parenting is categorized as either supportive or unsupportive. Supportive co-parenting occurs when parents assist each other in parenting efforts characterized by cooperation and co-parental warmth. Unsupportive co-parenting occurs when parents undermine each another's parenting efforts through hostile-competitive behavior, or verbal sparring (Gable, Belsky & Crnic, 1995; McHale, 1995). Margolin, Gordis, and John (2001) offered a three-part conceptualization of co-parenting behaviors:

cooperation, conflict, and triangulation. Here, they postulated, cooperation reflects supportive interactions between parents, conflict pertains to disagreement about parenting decisions, and triangulation refers to one parent forming an alliance with the child against the other parent because of a marital conflict.

In developing a multi-domain conceptual framework of co-parenting, Feinberg (2003) proposed four overlapping domains: childrearing agreement, co-parental support/undermining, division of labor and joint management of family relations. Childrearing agreement refers to whether parents have the same views on childrearing issues, including behavioral discipline and expectations, as well as moral values and child's emotional needs. Co-parental support includes affirming parenting competency, respecting the other parent's contributions, clear authority and decisions on parenting. Co-parenting undermining refers to criticism and blame from the other parent. The division of labor is how co-parents perceive their childrearing responsibilities in everyday routine, and whether parents feel supported in their parental role. Joint management of family relations involves parents establishing standards for interactions among family members, which can either be explicit or implicit (Feinberg, Brown, & Kan, 2012).

Most studies derived from these conceptualizations of co-parenting have used observational measures of couple and family interactions, and self-report questionnaires by parents. In observational measures, mother-child-father interactions during triadic play sessions is video-recorded and later coded by researchers (e.g., Karreman et al., 2008). Most of the children in these studies have been 2-8 years old (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). No studies could be located that examined parents' in-depth perceptions of their co-parenting relationship and their conversations, and culture and family-of-origin influences have been totally absent from this line of research.

### **Family-of-Origin Influences**

Although family-of-origin influences on co-parenting have not been explored directly, there have been studies in the area of parenting. Floyd and Morman (2000) examined two ways that parents' own experience of being parented affects them. The

*modeling hypothesis* predicts that “positive behavior patterns exhibited by parents will be replicated in their children's own parenting,” The *compensation hypothesis* “predicts that negative parenting behaviors are compensated for in children's parenting of their own children” (p.347). In their study involving a sample of 506 men and their adolescent sons, the researchers found that fathers who were either highly affectionate (*modeling hypothesis*) or highly unaffectionate (*compensation hypothesis*) were most affectionate towards their sons. They proposed a curvilinear relationship between the affection fathers gave to their sons and the affection fathers themselves received from their own fathers. This curvilinear relationship was also found in study by Beaton, Doherty, & Rueter (2003), who reported that expectant fathers had more positive attitudes about father involvement if they were either very close or very distant from their own parents when young. Extrapolated to the co-parenting relationship, there may be reason to expect both modeling and the compensation influences of family-of-origin experiences on the co-parenting process and the co-parenting conversation.

On a larger level, the family-of-origin is the most important social group in human psycho-emotional development (Harvey & Bray, 1991). These childhood experiences continue to shape and influence a person’s attitudes and behaviors in interpersonal relationships (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 1994). From a multigenerational perspective, a person’s family-of-origin influences the trajectory of both individual and family development throughout the lifespan (Allison & Sabatelli, 1988; Bowen, 1978; Harvey & Bray, 1991), including the transmission of family values, assumptions, beliefs, relational patterns of interaction and adjustment across generations (Boszormeny-Nagy & Ulrich, 1981; Bowen, 1978; Framo, 1981; Williamson, 1982). Therefore, there is good reason to believe that family-of-origin experiences are important shapers of the co-parenting relationship.

### **Cultural Practices in Asian Parenting**

A clear conceptualization of culture proves to be challenging in today’s multi-cultural and multi-racial world. Kluckhohn (1954) posited that “culture is to society what memory is to individuals” (Triandis, 2002, p.3). We can expect parents to interpret and transmit their own cultural/social ways of thinking and behaving to their children to help them make sense

of the social relationships and structures around them (McGillicuddy-De Lisi & Sigel, 1995; Ogbu, 1988; Super & Harkness, 2002). Furthermore, the norms and expectations of the culture are often transmitted through the parents' own belief systems and practices. And these serve as the main channels for prioritizing the cultural systems (Kagitcibasi, 1996; Keller, 2003).

According to Harwood, Miller and Irizarry (1995), the content of family beliefs and practices vary widely across cultures, even though the transmission is universal from parents to children. Based on the observation of Fontes (2002), "Childrearing is highly influenced by ethnic culture. What children need to learn and the methods considered best for teaching them are passed down from one generation to another as cultural knowledge" (p. 33). In addition, cultural values as part of this knowledge inform parents' childrearing beliefs and practices (Chao, 2000; Kim & Wong, 2002).

The foundation for parenting and parent-child relationships in most East Asian cultures has its origin in Confucian doctrine, whereby filial piety in children are taught from a young age to respect and obey their elders in the family including deferring to the wishes of their parents (Ho, 1986). Therefore parents are responsible for governing, teaching and disciplining their children. According to Chao (1994), parental responsibility is to teach their children appropriate behaviors that require high level of parental involvement and concern. Parents' involvement includes setting clear expectations, close monitoring of the child's behavior, prioritizing caretaking, and education of the child (Chao, 2000). This form of training has been positively associated with relationship harmony (Stewart, Bond, Zaman, McBride-Chang, Rao, Ho, & Fielding, 1999), health and life satisfaction (Stewart, Rao, Bond, McBride-Chang, Fielding, & Kennard, 1998), including academic achievement (Chao, 2000). What is lacking in these studies is the parents' perceptions regarding why and how some of these family (cultural) beliefs, practices and values get transmitted from their family-of-origin into their present co-parenting conversation and practices.

## **Negotiation in Couple Conversation**

In the course of co-parenting, parents have to negotiate differences and make decisions regarding childrearing issues. Hence it is useful to review models of dyadic negotiation. Negotiation has been conceptualized by Johansson (1997) as a special form of interaction which is always explicit and initiated by specific needs and events. Johansson offered three criteria to help define this kind of negotiation. First, there must be a perceived disagreement or tension between persons' interests or goals. In the area of co-parenting, the tension comes out of differences in interests, goals, or conflicting opinions about areas such as a child's behavior, discipline, and division of labor in the home or financial management. Second, there must be more than one possible option or outcome in order for negotiation to be possible; this is often the case on co-parenting decision making. Third, persons must have mixed interests in negotiation since their interests partly conflict and partly coincide, given their differing interests and goals. However, these persons share common interests and are mutually dependent so they have more to gain by coming to an agreement (Evertsson & Nyman, 2009). Co-parenting clearly fits this criterion because of parents' personal and shared interests and goals for their children.

Although there have been no studies of negotiation in co-parenting, Syltevik (2000) found that negotiation was necessary and more frequent in certain phases of couple relationships. These negotiations were common among couples with higher level of education and an egalitarian relationship. On the other hand, Evertsson and Nyman (2009) found that negotiation was not common among couples, and that they only negotiate in the "out-of-the-ordinary situation where normal routine and rituals were inadequate" (p.75). In a follow-up study to unpack the concept of negotiation in couple relationships, they concluded that negotiation was "characterized by ambiguity and a lack of clarity" (Evertsson & Nyman, 2011, p.70). So they called for a clearer definition to differentiate couple negotiation from other forms of interaction that take place within couples.

In another study that focused on a relational perspective on negotiation in couples and couple therapy, Pizer and Pizer (2006) posited that the prerequisite to negotiation is an

understanding or recognition between two opposing parties that despite their differences, they shares underlying interests or goals. This understanding is not the same as agreement. Other researchers consider negotiation as the discussion between parties with the goal of coming to an agreement in time. Hence, negotiation involves an attempt to find a resolution to contradictory desires by means of discussion and satisfying outcomes (Pruitt, 1981; Rubin & Brown, 1975).

In co-parenting, parents have to negotiate decisions as well as handle challenging co-parenting issues. Therefore, understanding how parents perceive negotiation within the co-parenting relationship, and in conversation, will enable us to better support them in their co-parenting efforts.

### **Goals of this Study**

The long-term goals of this study are to develop research-based co-parenting programs that will provide effective conversation skills for parents, and to generate new knowledge about co-parenting within the Singaporean context. Thus the research seeks to address this main question, “How do Chinese Singaporean parents perceive their co-parenting conversation in light of the influence of family-of-origin?”

Using grounded theory methodology, the study will identify the presenting co-parenting issues, map the patterns of the co-parenting conversation, and generate categories to describe and explain the co-parenting conversation process. This study will provide an in-depth description of how parents perceive their co-parenting conversation including the complexities and subtleties of it. The study will also explore how family-of-origin parenting experience influences the co-parenting conversation.

### **Method**

To study co-parenting conversation and the influence of family-of-origin on the conversation process, I used grounded theory methodology following the procedure as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This approach allows flexibility in methodology, while maintaining the focus on parents’ perspective of co-parenting conversation experience (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The open-ended nature of qualitative interviewing facilitates the

flow of thoughts, description of interactions, and insights on their co-parenting conversation experiences. It also allows new and unanticipated data to emerge, which formed the basis for further inquiry. Following this methodology, an in-depth description of co-parenting conversation will develop, based on the recording of patterns and categories along with inductively derived insights from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The goal was to first understand the parent participants, and then to develop a higher level of conceptualization that would explain their lived experience (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A semi-structured interview was employed, with its research questions to guide and stimulate thinking on co-parenting conversation. The qualitative data was analyzed using a constant comparative method as mentioned in Glaser and Strauss (1967).

### **Design of the Study**

The two goals of the study were achieved in two phases. First, the questions for the semi-structured interview were validated using a sample of three pairs of parent participants in Singapore. Then the validated interview questions were administered to another sample of 13 pairs of parent participants. Constant comparative analysis was used to analyze the data from all the 16 pairs of parent participants who were interviewed in the two phases. The data collected from the first three pairs of parent participants were included in the analysis because they were based on the same main questions that were used in subsequent interviews.

### **Description of Participants and Selection Process**

The study involved 16 interviews with heterosexual married couples with Chinese Singaporean background, a sample size appropriate for grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, Creswell, 2005). Many studies involving this methodology have reached theoretical saturation between 8-15 interviews (Clark, 2009; Sheridan, Peterson, & Rosen, 2010; Quek et al., 2011; Ward & Wampler, 2010). The sample size estimate for the present study was also guided by a study by Guest, Bunce, & Johnson (2006) titled, "How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability." They found that data saturation for most part occurred by the time they had analyzed 12 interviews. In this study, I administered the semi-structured interview questions to 16 pairs of parent

participants (32 individual parents) until it reached theoretical saturation. Parent participants spoke English and had at least one child between the ages of 2-10.

Among the 16 couples interviewed, 15 fathers (94%) and 14 mothers (88%) were college graduates, having four or more years of college education, while a father and two mothers had some college education. The parent participants ranged in age from 30 to 50 years old, only two fathers were beyond 50 years old. They were married on an average of 10 years with 2.9 children per couple, and the average age of the children was 6.4 years old. At the time of the interview, 40 out of 46 children were 10 years or below. The parent participants were working professionals, with six mothers (38%) being full-time homemakers. Their household income before taxes, recorded as one family earning less than \$76,000, while fifteen families earned more than \$ 90,000.

### **Recruitment Procedure**

Purposeful and snowball sampling (Nelson & Allred, 2005) was used for the recruitment of parent participants. Recruitment began through the recommendation of friends in the local community. In addition to this strategy, participants were asked to suggest other potential participants for the study. Potential participants was contacted either by phone, e-mail, or both and provided with an introductory letter explaining the purpose of the study with the inclusion criteria. Once initial interest was shown for participation, a letter of recruitment was sent to the parent participants. Those who were interested were invited to go through the purpose and procedure of the study, ask any questions regarding the potential risks from participating in the study, and ask any further questions they might have before they agree to participate.

### **Interview Questions and Procedure**

The interviewer (principal investigator) was able to validate the main interview questions after interviewing the first 3 pairs of parent participants. These questions were used to guide the interview: (a) What are some of the co-parenting issues that you usually talk about? And how do you go about talking about these issues? (b) What happened when you brought the issue out to him/her; (c) Will it be possible to give me an example to concretize

what you just talked about? (d) What are some of these parenting practices that you learned from your family-of-origin that you brought into this present family? And how do you talk about them with your spouse? (e) If there is a young couple seated here, with a child aged 2-10, what advices or suggestions will you give to this young couple, to go about their co-parenting conversation? All the parent participants were invited to a face-to-face couple interview at the interviewer's residence or at the participants' home upon their request. Informed consent was obtained and further explanation about the process was given before the interview. Participants were asked a series of background questions pertaining to their demographics (e.g., age, education level, and household income, number of children in the family, and years of marriage). Each interview lasted between one and half hours given the content and depth of the parents' responses.

### **Analysis**

For the transcription process, two interviews were transcribed by transcriptionist with signed statement of confidentiality, while I transcribed the other 14 interviews. I went through all the 16 audio recordings to make any necessary amendments to the initial transcription. Following the guidelines on "Analyzing Data for Concepts" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p.160), I analyzed the paragraphs in the transcript and provided my interpretation of them, taking note of any possible concept(s) that emerged from the analysis of the text. Therefore the unit of analysis was based on this interpretation that was drawn from both the parent participants. The main data source came from the interview transcripts that underwent the coding process as described by Corbin and Strauss (2008, p.160). I used the qualitative software (ATLAS.ti) to organize the data for analysis. Open coding was done according to Corbin and Strauss (2008, p.195). I interpreted all the paragraphs before assigning the codes, which enabled me to provide better interpretation of the paragraphs. I summarized the main points in each of the paragraphs before providing my interpretation of them. Thus in open coding, I identified and labeled concepts related to the dimensions of co-parenting conversation. I compared each new incident with previous ones to determine whether it represented a new code or a previously identified code. Hence, codes were assigned based on

the data rather than *a priori*. When I completed the interpretation and assigning code(s) to each of the interpretation, I grouped some of these codes into concepts based on the constant comparative method. Later, I transferred the interpretations (memos) with their respective codes and concepts onto a codebook.

Revisions were made to existing codes based on the interpretation of the paragraph including the concepts that emerged from the open coding to enable later analysis and comparison of all the concepts across the various codebooks. Axial coding was done to relate the various concepts to each other from the analyzed transcript to form category. This provided better explanations to the lived experiences of co-parenting conversation. According to Corbin and Strauss, the distinctions between two types of coding were “artificial” and for explanatory purposes. In fact, “open coding and axial coding go hand in hand” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p.198). When the analysis process for a transcript was completed, I gathered the main concepts from the codebook together with their respective interpretations and wrote the “summary of memos”. Thus the main concepts emerged from the codes through constant comparison across the transcripts. These concepts eventually generated the category that was written up with accompanying quotes from the interview transcript. The quotes provided evidential proof as well as exemplifiers to reflect the perceptions and lived experiences of co-parenting conversation among these Chinese Singaporean parents. Selective coding involves developing, integrating, and refining categories to form a detailed description which eventually lead to a central category that will connect all the main categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Integrative memos was written for selective coding to bring together all the summaries of memos and other written notes so as to further develop, integrate and refine the main categories leading to the emergence of the central category.

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

The analysis and interviews continued until theoretical saturation was accomplished. In order to improve accuracy and credibility of the principal investigator’s interpretation, member-checking was carried out by parent participants. Participants were invited at the end

of the interview to help review the transcript and provide their feedback on the principal investigator's interpretation and summary. The participants agreed and gave their comments. Furthermore, to increase credibility and trustworthiness, two Master's-level graduates in Social Science were asked to serve as internal reviewers to conduct the open coding for the interviews. The internal reviewers together interpreted 20% of all the transcripts, and compared that with the principal investigator's interpretations to ensure that the interpretations were made within context. They also reviewed a draft of the results and verify that quotes were not taken out of context. The internal reviewer also indicated that the categories were consistent with what the participants had said. The advisor familiar with the literature on co-parenting conversation reviewed the in-depth description that emerged from the data and verified that the ideas were grounded in the data.

## **Results**

The central category that emerged from the interviews and data analysis was Conversations along the Co-parenting Journey. It described the fluidity as well as the complexity of co-parenting conversations over time. This central category tied together two main categories: conversations that connect and collaborate in co-parenting, and conversations on family heritage and practices. These two main categories in turn were generated from five subcategories: everyday conversations, decision making conversations, and critical incident conversations, conversations that carry the past and present, and conversations that interpret and transmit (see Table 1). All these were synthesized to formulate a substantive theory of the co-parenting conversation process. This section begins with a description of the central category and its properties, followed by the two main categories and their subcategories, and the theorized pattern of co-parenting conversation process.

**Table 1**  
**Main Categories for Conversations along the Co-parenting Journey**

<p>1. Conversations that Connect and Collaborate in Co-parenting          Everyday conversations          Decision making conversations          Critical incident conversations</p> <p>2. Conversations on Family Heritage and Practices          Conversations that carry the past and present          Conversations that interpret and transmit</p>
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**Description of the Central Category**

The three *properties* that characterize the central category, Conversations along the Co-parenting Journey, and serve to describe the co-parenting conversation process are: a) the co-parenting issue, b) parent’s family-of-origin, and c) parent’s intentionality. (“Properties,” in the context of grounded theory, are characteristics that define and describe concepts (Corbin & Strauss (2008). The *co-parenting issue* property describes how the presenting issue shapes the content and direction of the conversations over time. The issues most commonly addressed by the parents in their conversations were: child discipline and developmental, parenting roles and responsibilities, and interferences from a parent-in-law. The *parent’s family-of-origin* property relates to the influence of each parent’s family-of-origin parenting experiences, on the dynamic of their co-parenting and conversations. The family-of-origin experience is often a mixed bag of experiences, with a predominant experience that is triggered by the presenting issue. The *parent’s intentionality* property describes both the parent’s level of awareness regarding the family-of-origin influences on co-parenting, and his/her use of this awareness in supportive co-parenting behavior.

The following sections describe the main categories and their respective subcategories, with quotes taken from the parent participants to exemplify the various co-parenting conversations.

**Conversations that Connect and Collaborate in Co-parenting**

During the analysis, the three subcategories of co-parenting conversation that eventually emerged were: everyday conversations, decision-making conversations, and

critical incident conversations. Conversations that connect and collaborate in co-parenting was generated as the main category, which brought together these three subcategories (see Table 1). This main category reflects the importance of parents having to stay connected with each other in their co-parenting efforts, and to work towards their shared co-parenting goals through their conversations along the co-parenting journey. Usually the mother is the central person who consults and keeps these connections alive in their co-parenting.

**Everyday conversations.** Everyday conversations happened as issues arose, as compared to any planned conversations by parents during the weekends where they had more time for dialogue. Everyday conversation ranged from routine childrearing issues to those that are perennial, like managing differences in parenting styles, expectations and hopes of parents, including inferences from parent-in-laws. Issues were generally brought up in an “ad hoc” manner by the mother to keep the father in touch with the everyday activities of the children, or as an update on a particular co-parenting situation. In the everyday conversation, one parent might remind the other parent of his/her co-parenting role and responsibility given the developmental changes of the children over time.

This was shown, in an everyday conversation regarding the rescheduling of the children’s sleep routine, and the need for greater co-parenting involvement, when a father wanted his children to experience the same joy he had as a child playing with his cousins in their extended family.

Father: Let them bond and see. Just play around in the garden. I just feel very sad that if they grow up and look back (they will have missed much joy).

Mother: Ok. You try and nap our younger daughter, and then we can bring (them).

Father: No, no need to nap, we just go, then at 8.30 pm or 9 pm, we will just come back. Anyway, nowadays they sleep later also. Holidays, they also sleep quite late. And they still can function properly.

Mother: You have to live with it if they are crazy on Sunday, you should be around.

Father: Of course, I’m around.

Mother: Yah, go ahead. (Couple #4)

The father who initiated the conversation for a change in the children's sleep routine reconsidered his co-parenting involvement, especially on Sundays. The parents would evaluate the situation after attending a few more extended family gatherings.

In everyday conversation, parents shared that they learned from their experience how to adjust, adapt, and accommodate to the other parent's ways of relating and working. They hoped that at end of the day, they could have a meaningful and productive conversation. Everyday conversations that involved the needs, expectations, and hopes of the parent often took much "back and forth" communication, or ongoing conversations over time.

**Decision making conversations.** Parents often cited decision making to describe their understanding of the co-parenting conversation process. The usual decision making conversation involved one of the parents (usually the mother) collecting the needed information and presenting it for discussion. The parents would then assess the value of information gathered, draw from their own knowledge and lived experiences, then weigh the pros and cons of it, before making a decision, or continued with their deliberation with further conversations. Some parents expressed the need to remain objective and calm, to use reasons and relevant (research) findings where necessary to inform their decision making conversation. And if possible, some parents preferred not to let strong emotions interfere with their decision making conversations, but to review the emotions later so as to better understand the cause or reasons for it.

Based on this analysis, a decision making conversation differs from an everyday conversation in that there is a goal of a resolution (e.g., consensus, compromise, status quo, check and balance or healthy tension). Everyday co-parenting conversation may or may not end in a resolution. In the analysis of the decision making conversation, co-parenting decisions could be classified into the categories of unilateral, supportive and collaborative decisions.

**Unilateral decisions** occurred when one parent (often the mother) made the decision on her own without the need to check with the other parent since a prior understanding already existed between them, or there was a lack of co-parenting support to begin with. In

one interview, a husband mentioned that a certain decision was “steam-rolled” by his wife without consultation, as often was the case in their relationship. The wife agreed but added that that they previously had agreed on the “fundamentals”, and she had proceeded based on those fundamentals.

The husband said, “Either we compromised or you just steam rolled ahead and made the decision... You just go ahead and decide. It goes back to our relationship where most of the time, I would say, ‘ok fine, you do whatever you decide’.” The wife then retorted, “Yes, this is one reason I said how I steam-rolled, we both agreed on the fundamentals... I did go with it and steam-roll, and decided on my own that the family needed a break, or rather I needed a break from all that pushing of the exams and I just decided that. So there was no discussion. I decided and I steam-rolled that one. He then gives in, right? I would say, that wasn’t quite actually an agreement...” (Couple #13) In this instance, it was a decision that was unilaterally made, and the parents continued to have conversations around it.

*Supportive decisions* occurred when one parent would provide or need the emotional and moral support from the other parent, so that it would not be a unilateral decision. Often the wife would be the one executing the decision, and updating her husband on its development.

In another conversation with a couple, the wife expressed the need for greater support in an “agreed opinion” rather than leaving her to decide the course of action. She said, “Basically the opinion is mine, I want an agreed opinion but sometimes it just doesn’t come. So I either go back and I mull over it, and then get a bit angry, and then just do whatever I want... Yeah, basically he gave me the decision. So I take him at his word... I want an agreement that both of us agreed on.” The husband replied, “I would lay out the options, whichever one you choose, and then I support it because I said, ‘do it’. If I said, ‘Do what you think is right, do it’, I give her the free play, and she likes a free play but she wants something definite... If you are on the ground and you do what you need to do then, you do, and whatever decision you made, right or wrong. I am not going to criticize you after that, because I said, ‘go ahead and do it’.” (Couple #1) There was the element of “uncertainty” expressed by the

wife regarding their co-parenting decision, and she expected a firmer stance from her husband.

*Collaborative decisions* occurred when both parents were actively involved in the decision making conversation, from the moment the issue was raised, until the execution of the decision, including any follow-up co-parenting activities. A mother shared their collaborative decision making conversation to seek a Chinese language exemption for their son's third grade national exam. She said, "In many of the decisions that we made, I tend to wait for his concurrence; if he doesn't agree, I will give him time. We have always gone on making a decision together. So if he is not ready for it, I wouldn't push ahead. But maybe I would bring it up more often, if I feel the urgency of it. So, in that sense I have to wait for him to be ready to say that, 'ok, we will go for the exemption.' I would not have pushed ahead and applied for the exemption without his concurrence." (Couple #16)

Collaborative decision making conversations for these two parents were time consuming and required much patience from the wife. However, it was a pattern of decision making which they found most helpful in their co-parenting and conversations.

**Critical incident conversations.** Critical incident conversation could surface anytime along the co-parenting journey. It often involved a child's difficult behavior or challenges in co-parenting; for example, the interference from in-laws that might lead to misunderstanding and heighten tension between parents. Critical incident co-parenting conversation led either to a decision-making conversation, or was folded into everyday conversation once the tension had been addressed. Critical incident conversation, like the other conversations, involved different layers and forms of communication, both explicit and implicit, verbal and non-verbal. Text and visual messages allowed for real time interactions. In some situations, these real time interactions could create more challenges and demands, especially when a physically absent parent had to address a tense parenting situation at home. On the other hand, real time interaction sometimes helped fathers to console, affirm and reassure the mother about her parenting abilities when she encountered a difficult situation at home. For example, a mother provided an incident regarding her six year old son's

“inability” to manage tying his shoelaces. Her emotional outburst at the son was partly targeted at her husband’s lack of co-parenting involvement, particularly his silent reaction to the situation. Later he received a call from his wife to talk about what had happened. And in the process, they realized that both of them had to make the conscious efforts to change.

During their telephone conversation, a new insight came to the wife when her husband mentioned, “Maybe you should stop being so responsible and let me take on some of the responsibilities.” She reflected and said, “And that struck me because it was something else, I was expecting him to have a certain behavior. But he turned around and said he expected me to have a certain behavior too, so that he could have this behavior.” The husband also shared his contribution to the issue; “So my problem is stepping up on time, because my wife is impatient. So she does it for me so I don’t get much.... need to practice. I’m always bailed out again.” The wife concluded with this thought, “Yeah. I perpetuate some of the behaviors. Maybe I should be more mindful about doing less so that he could do more. And I also learn that certain things if I can’t change, then I have to do it differently.”

(Couple #9)

Another important aspect in critical incident conversation is to address failed conversations. Parents indicated that it was important to revisit the areas of contention in a failed conversation, especially the following day, when the emotions were no longer that “charged”, and there was the possibility of healing each other’s emotional hurt through their conversations. A part of another couple’s critical incident conversation regarding the father’s harsh parenting style is given here. He said, “Basically, I was trying to tell her from my point of view, what my objectives are, and obviously she was trying to tell me her point of view, and what her concerns were with my delivery (of the message). So that I guess, that is dialogue...I guess in that episode there was never a resolution, it is more like ‘ok, I hear you, I will try not to do it, but you must understand why, what I was trying to get at.’ But you know subsequently there are still episodes like this but it is not as heated.” The mother replied, “So it is better now, much better but that was only after we had that discussion for the longest time until the beginning of the year that we sorted it out right.” (Couple #10)

Critical incident conversations were often challenging and difficult to manage for parents. And they did not lead to easy resolution because of the complexity of the presenting issue or the differences in perception between the parents. Conversations that involved unconscious motivations, expectations, and unmet needs were often influenced by the parent's family-of-origin. The influences of parent's family-of-origin experience, and its related factors on the co-parenting conversation are presented in the following sections.

### **Conversations on Family Heritage and Practices**

Conversation on family heritage and practices was generated as the main category that brought together two other subcategories: conversations that carry the past and present, and conversations that interpret and transmit (see Table 1). This main category reflects the family-of-origin experience, family (cultural) practices, beliefs and values influences on the co-parenting conversation.

**Conversations that carry the past and present.** Co-parenting issues like parenting styles, managing of personal differences and conflicts, unmet needs and expectations were influenced by the parent's family-of-origin. And when parents had open and sincere conversations, they gradually began to be aware of the family-of-origin influences on their co-parenting. These conversations could happen anywhere along their co-parenting journey, especially in couple enrichment programs. Furthermore, positive/negative memories from one's family-of-origin got transmitted to the present family practices or parenting style.

A husband shared his "epiphany" during the first session of a couple empowerment program, which changed his understanding and view of the marital relationship and co-parenting approach. He exclaimed, "I am the one who is supposed to change. I think that was the eye-opener for me, and I think because of that, the approach we took thereafter was a lot more open." His wife then gave her explanation of why she organized parties to celebrate their children's birthday, despite her husband's initial disapproval, and conflict over it. She said, "Just to create these memorable experiences, I had to share deeper as to why I felt it was something important, and then probably he could understand a bit better. But for me, I had to understand where he was coming from in terms of the finances, and then the hassle of

planning (the celebration). So it is not that every year we must have a celebration or something like it, and so that is how we worked something out from there.” (Couple #11)

The wife wanted to “create memorable experiences” for their children which she experienced herself while growing up. She also highlighted the importance of sharing at a deeper level especially the meaning(s) behind one’s actions, and the sentiment regarding the use of money in the family.

Some parents acknowledged that although knowing about the influences of family-of-origin on co-parenting, and conversation is one thing, being intentional about it in their co-parenting actions, is another matter altogether. A mother confided, “So a lot of what my parents did, I tried not to do. And I tried not to be like my dad because he either grunts or shouts. He doesn’t communicate, and of course it does seep into me and my sister. Now that my sister and I are mothers, we try not to be like that.” (Couple #15)

**Conversations that interpret and transmit.** The influence of family (cultural) practices, beliefs and values were not something the parents were always conscious of in their conversations and co-parenting. A mother reflecting the similar view of many parents interviewed remarked, “Actually we haven’t sat down to talk about culture, not on the topic of culture.” The father then interjected, “It just comes, when it comes up, we will discuss about it...There is this kind of unconscious thing that we agree that we carry forward.” (Couple #13)

Often these family practices, beliefs and values had their roots in the parent’s family-of-origin experience; e.g. in addressing the grand/parents and older siblings around the dinner table. A father shared, “Culturally you can’t run from the fact that as Chinese we have more of this filial piety, and more respect for seniors that I feel is still ingrained in our culture. And I don’t think we have moved that far. They (children) have no difficulty calling the entire family even the younger ones to eat, and they go one by one, right round the table. If I have one consolatory moment, that one is big, it always happened invariably.” (Couple #7)

Parents also mutually influenced each other over time in their family (cultural) beliefs and norms, for example, about being a stay-at-home mother. And this mutual influence was

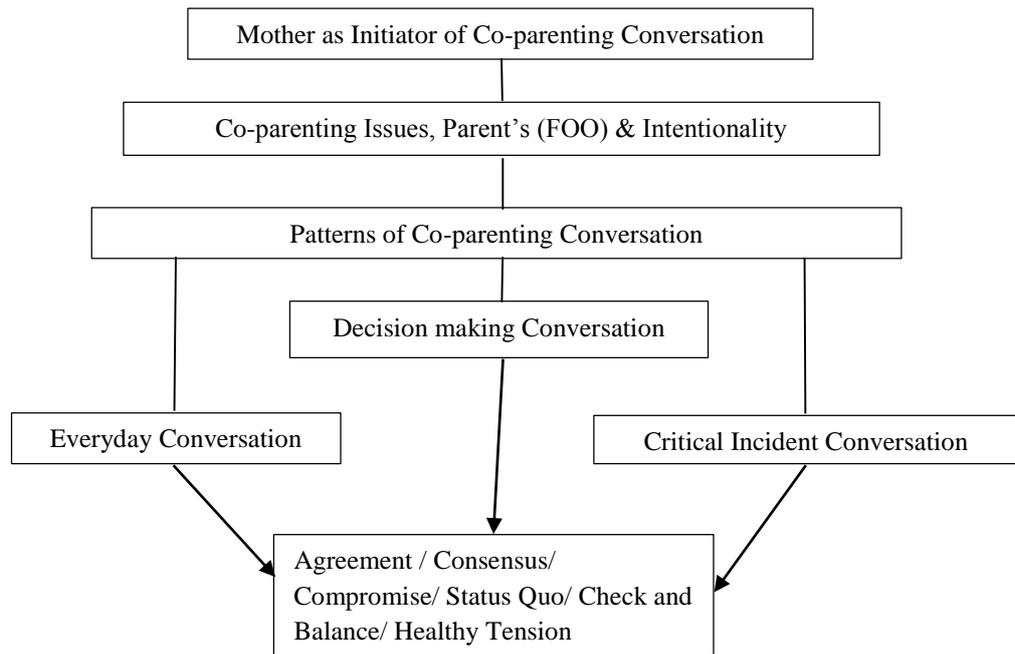
reinforced by the family-of-origin parenting experience besides other practical considerations; e.g. childcare arrangements. A husband believed that the stay-at-home mother was the family norm, and he eventually managed to encourage his wife to remain at home to care for the young children after the birth of their second child. The wife too had a positive experience of her mother being the main caregiver at home. The father said, “Mommy stays home and daddy goes to work, and so to me anything that departs from this, either put it as grandparents and childcare or what, just doesn’t click very well with me.” (Couple #5) The couple was prepared to live on one income as a result of the father’s family belief and their joint decision. The next section describes the patterns of the co-parenting conversation process, based on the analysis of the data.

### **Patterns of Co-parenting Conversation Process**

The patterns of the co-parenting conversation process will depend on the presenting issue, parent’s family-of-origin influences, and the degree of intentionality in accessing family-of-origin influences. The parents’ conversation may lead to either one of the three patterns of co-parenting conversation; everyday conversation, decision-making conversation, and critical incident conversation (see Figure 1). A general pattern of the co-parenting conversation begins with one parent, often the mother. She generally initiates the co-parenting conversation by sharing with the father something she has observed in the child’s behavior. In their conversation, parents share their observations, information, thoughts, and perspectives regarding the given situation. Further conversations may occur based on ongoing parental observations, thoughts, and interactions. The parents’ conversations may eventually arrive at a resolution, which can be a working agreement or consensus, a compromise, or status quo, and implement checks and balances to monitor the co-parenting behaviors, or learn to live with a healthy tension in their co-parenting.

The patterns of co-parenting conversation are also interconnected. For example, an everyday conversation regarding the children’s sleep schedule may lead to a decision making conversation, where the father has to exercise greater discipline to ensure that the children get to sleep on time.

**Figure 1: Schema of Co-parenting Conversation Process**



Alternatively, a critical incident regarding a harsh parenting action can lead to either an ongoing everyday conversation or a decision making conversation. Hence there is a certain fluidity in the co-parenting conversation process.

### **Discussion**

The main objective for this study was to provide an in-depth description of co-parenting conversation in light of the influence of family-of-origin, so as to contribute to the theory of co-parenting; and to inform future research. This grounded theory research has generated an initial substantive theory of the co-parenting conversation process.

### **Towards a Substantive Theory of Co-parenting Conversation Process**

The central category that emerged from the interviews is Conversations along the Co-parenting Journey. This central category reflects the fluidity and complexity of co-parenting conversation process. A substantive theory of co-parenting conversation process was generated to explain this phenomena, and it has four elements: dynamics of co-parenting conversations; the interconnectedness of co-parenting issues; parent's family-of-origin; and co-parenting intentionality.

In the *dynamics of co-parenting conversations*, I propose a typology of co-parenting conversation: everyday conversations, decision making conversations, and critical incident conversations, which formed the patterns of the co-parenting conversation process. This typology is a new concept that emerged from the grounded theory method. The typology attempts to capture the co-parenting conversations that take place in the ordinary lives of the parents, and provides a way of framing the content and dynamics of the conversations. Everyday co-parenting conversations are important because they keep the parents connected, and their co-parenting activities alive. Critical incident conversations, which are an inevitable part of co-parenting, given the many challenges, difference in perceptions, parenting styles, and personality of parents/ grandparents, form an important learning process for parents in their co-parenting journey.

Decision making conversation, which can be classified as unilateral, supportive and collaborative decisions, provides a way of understanding the decision making process. Decision making conversations often involve couple negotiation, especially for supportive and collaborative decisions. In this light, Johansson's (1997) criteria for conceptualizing negotiation can be applied to parents' decision making conversations: (1) there is a perceived disagreement or tension between person's interests or goals, (2) there must be more than one possible option or outcome possible, and (3) parents have mixed interests in negotiation since their interests partly conflict and partly coincide, given their differing interests and goals. This understanding of decision making conversations may partially answer the call by Evertsson and Nyman (2011) to distinguish the concept of negotiation from other forms of couple interaction.

The second element of this theory, the presenting *co-parenting issue*, describes what initiates the co-parenting conversation. The three most common co-parenting issues were child discipline and developmental, parent roles and responsibilities, and interference by a parent-in-law. These co-parenting issues are interconnected and interrelated. Chao (1994, 2000) has highlighted that Asian parents are responsible for governing, teaching and disciplining their children, which requires high level of parental involvement and concern.

Therefore failure to perform these tasks is seen as not taking seriously one's parenting role and responsibility, or a lack of co-parenting involvement. The other common co-parenting issue is the interferences from a parent-in-law. It happens when the grandparent forms an essential part of the childcare system. The Singapore government's special housing policies which encourages working parents to live close or with their own parents for childcare purposes may inadvertently contribute to the tension between them. Therefore, parents have to be aware of the advantages as well as challenges when the grandparent is involved in childcare, and learn how best to manage these challenges. Erel and Burman (1995) have highlighted how family subsystems are interrelated, and what is experienced in one subsystem gets transferred to another subsystem. Thus unresolved couple, and parenting issues, get carried into their co-parenting and conversations.

The influence of the third element of the theory, *parent's family-of-origin experience*, is felt most strongly by parents when they have to manage their conflicts, differences in parenting style or expectations. As observed by Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (1994), past family experience continues to shape and influence one's attitude, and behaviors in the present interpersonal relationships. At times, the influence on the conversation is rather subtle, and the parents may not be conscious of it. As a result, tensions and conflicts will surface if a co-parenting issue is not handled effectively by the parents. In a way, the family-of-origin experience forms the parent's inner working scheme that guides and directs the course of the co-parenting conversations around specific co-parenting issues.

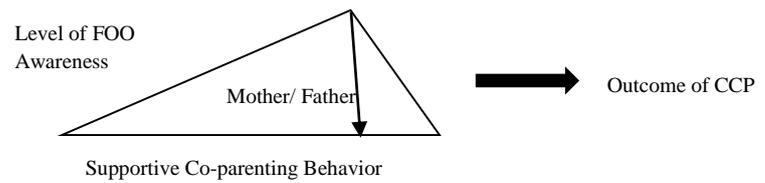
Parents often become conscious of the influence of the family-of-origin when they have an open and honest conversations with each other. It seemed that these conversations helped to create better understanding, including empathy for the other parent, especially when significant meaning(s) behind certain expressed emotions were shared and acknowledged. Thus the ability to express one's vulnerability is important in the co-parenting conversations. And through these conversations, some parents even felt a sense of relief, when they gained insights about themselves, and their own behaviors. These conversations can become powerful emotional bonding moments for the parents along their co-parenting journey.

The findings also showed that family (cultural) practices, beliefs and values have their roots in family-of-origin experience. Certain family practices or beliefs like filial piety and respect for the elders, or the stay-at-home mother may be strongly held by one or both parents. This study reflects the findings of the multigenerational researchers regarding the interpretation and transmission of family practices, values, and beliefs by parents to their children (McGillicuddy-De Lisi & Sigel, 1995; Ogbu, 1988; Super & Harkness, 2002).

The interviews showed that parents mutually influence each other over the years of co-parenting. In this study, mothers were the central persons who initiated the conversations, consulted and kept the co-parenting communication alive, and had most influence on the co-parenting conversation and relationship. The research findings of Sabatelli and Bartle-Haring (2003) found that both husbands and wives family-of-origin experiences had significant influences on their marital adjustment, but the wife's experiences were central to the prediction of marital adjustment. I believe this influence can be extended to their co-parenting conversations and relationship.

The fourth element of the theory, *co-parenting intentionality* is another new concept that emerged from this methodology. Co-parenting intentionality is the parent's level of awareness regarding the family-of-origin influences on co-parenting, and his/her use of this awareness in supportive co-parenting behavior, including the interaction between both parents. In other words, co-parenting intentionality is awareness plus conscious action. Co-parenting intentionality on the co-parenting conversation works on two levels: first, the individual level, where co-parenting intentionality translates to one's supportive co-parenting behavior, which in turn influences the conversations; and second, the dyadic level, where the combination of two parents' degrees of intentionality influences their conversations as well as the outcome of the co-parenting conversation process (see Figure 2). Therefore the outcome of the co-parenting conversation process depends on each individual parent's intentionality and the interaction between the parents' co-parenting intentionality.

**Figure 2: Co-parenting Intentionality on the Co-parenting Conversation Process (CCP)**



In Figure 2, the y-axis of the triangle represents the level of family-of-origin awareness, while the x-axis, its base represents the level of supportive co-parenting behaviors. The origin and direction of the arrow within the triangle indicate the coordinates for the level of family-of-origin awareness, and the level of supportive co-parenting behaviors along a continuum scale respectively. Generally the higher the degree of co-parenting intentionality, the better will be the outcome of the co-parenting conversation process, and their co-parenting efforts.

In this theoretical model, having the awareness does not necessarily translate itself to supportive co-parenting behaviors, needed in co-parenting. If a parent is aware of the family-of-origin influences, but not supportive in his/her co-parenting behavior, then it may indicate a low degree of co-parenting intentionality. So what is important here is intentionality that leads to conscious, supportive co-parenting behavior. These ideas highlight the research work of Floyd and Morman (2000) regarding a compensatory or modeling approach in parenting. However, as mentioned, change for parents can be challenging, since knowing the family-of-origin influences is one thing, and being intentional about change is another matter altogether. In this study, despite their struggles and difficulties, parents gradually learned to accept their limitations, and those of the other parent, and modified their hopes and expectations.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. Only one researcher performed all the interviews and was the main interpreter of the transcripts. The researcher was also the primary instrument for determining the relevant concepts and categories that emerged from the study. Although there were other internal and external (advisor) reviewers, and member checking, to help increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the results, there remains the influence of the researcher's personal biases in this study.

Because the study had a sample size of 16, theoretical saturation may be more tentative than the author believed it to be. Furthermore, the sample was homogenous, consisting of mainly upper middle-class Singaporean Chinese parents who were well-educated professionals, with more children than average Singaporean families. Hence the findings reported are specific to this group and not generalizable in the traditional sense.

### **Implications**

There are several implications arising from this study. First, the typology of co-parenting conversation can serve as a common language of communication for family practitioners, clinicians, and researchers working with parents of young children. Second, the scheme of co-parenting conversation process, and the classification for decision making conversations, can provide a working framework to consider how, when, and where to intervene in therapy for parents dealing with co-parenting issues. For example, when a family seeks therapy to handle a serious behavioral issue of a child, the therapist might use the typology and patterns identified in this study to guide an assessment about what is happening between the parents as they discuss their child's behavior and their responses. For example, the child's misbehavior might have initiated critical incident conversations between the parents, which eventually led to decision making conversations to prevent future behavior problems. In the process, the therapist can explore the type of decision making conversation that was involved: unilateral, supportive or collaborate conversations. From this, the therapist will have a more systematic assessment tool for co-parenting conversations than is currently available in the literature.

Third, in addressing a family-of-origin issue in therapy for co-parenting, it may be important to explore the parent's co-parenting intentionality. The therapist can check with each parent about his/her level of awareness regarding the family-of-origin influences, and the impact of this awareness on his/her co-parenting practices. Furthermore the therapist can explore how each perceives the other person's co-parenting roles and responsibilities in light of the family-of-origin influences.

## **Future Research**

Future research can examine the other ethnic groups in Singapore and parents from different socioeconomic status. In addition, the research can focus on addressing other kinds of complexities, such as the interactions between the parents' intentionality, the influences of parent's personality, and interference of grandparents on co-parenting conversations. The contributions of these other influencing factors could add richness, clarity, as well as provide a more extensive paradigm towards developing a substantive theory of the co-parenting conversation process. Finally, it would be important to learn how well the substantive theory emerging from this study relates to co-parenting in countries beyond Singapore.

## **Conclusion**

When two individuals become parents, it can be said there is a merging of horizons. Parents gradually come to know and understand each other's ways of parenting. And in their co-parenting journey, what binds these parents together is their willingness to learn from their challenges and failures. This study contributes towards building a theory of co-parenting, and towards greater research knowledge about Southeast Asian families.

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## **Appendix 1: Revised Guide to Interview Questions**

1a. To start off with something general, what are some of the co-parenting issues that you usually talked about? And how do you go about talking about these issues?

The idea here is to look at the basic steps taken in your co-parenting conversation. So what are some of these issues you have in terms of co-parenting together?

1b. Maybe the first and a general question – can you tell me something about the way both of you worked together as parents in terms of taking care of your children?

2a. The other thing I'm looking at is the family of origin – and how the way you were being parented when you were growing up, and now the way you are parenting your children as well as how it influence your negotiation on co-parenting?

What about from your own family, the experience of it that you bring into this family, especially the way you talk about the co-parenting issue?

2b. Looking at your family of origin, where you were brought up, how you were brought up, the way you were parented. What are some of these parenting that you learned from your family of origin that you are bringing into this present family and how do you talk about it between the two of you?

2c. Having the experience of being parented by your parents, now looking at your own family, what are some of the knowledge or experiences that you bring into this relationship, this marriage, and especially this co-parenting that you talk about?

3a. I have one area which is connected to co-parenting negotiation process, and that is the whole area of cultural beliefs and values, I'm just wondering from your own personal experiences, what are (of the important) these cultural values or cultural beliefs that you bring to your present family and how both of you talk about them or to come to a sort of agreement regarding cultural values and beliefs?

3b. I shall ask another question which is very much related to the negotiation process, looking at the family values, cultural values, what cultural values, beliefs that you have from your family-of-origin that you bring to this family here and how do you talk about it?

3c. What are the values and other beliefs you have about parenting together that is important for you whereby some things are negotiable where others are not in the process of it? Are

there cultural values and beliefs you hold important whereby you bring into this marriage and this family that you talked about, in terms of co-parenting negotiating?

4a. I am looking at one area which couple usually talked about, how things are being resolved, how you talked about differences or talked about conflict. If you have a conflict/difference, how do you then resolve it or seek a compromise in your conversation with regards to co-parenting? How do you talk to each other about it?

4b. If you have differences in terms of perhaps your way of doing co-parenting or parenting, how do you resolve it or seek a compromise, how do you talk about it if you have differences?

Can you think of a recent past, if you have an unresolved issue, how do you go about managing it and talking about it? If there is one co-parenting issue you need to discuss and you are not able to resolve, how do you go about it?

5a. I have one last question, if there is a couple here with one child or two children, what advice would you give this couple in terms of co-parenting conversation or negotiation? What advice would you give this couple to help them in their own process of negotiation about co-parenting?

5b. I have two more questions that I would like to ask you, if there is a young couple seated here, a young couple with a young child, or 2 children, what advice would you give this young couple with regards to talking about co-parenting issues, or working through challenges? What advice will you give this couple in terms of talking through these issues?

5c. Looking back at the years of co-parenting together, what did you find that helped you in your negotiation process all these years? Evaluating it, what do you think works for you? What do you think that did not work for you?

6. My last question is how do you find / feel about this conversation that we just had? How was it for you? What are some of the things that you find helpful / insightful about yourself or your co-parenting relationship or the family?

Anything else for you, or any other thoughts or feelings regarding this conversation? What are some of these insights/ thoughts?

## Appendix 2: Sample of the Transcript Analysis for Couple Z

**Interviewer:** To start off with something general, what are some of the co-parenting issues that you usually talked about? And how do you go about it? The idea here is to look at the steps taken in your co-parenting conversations. So what are some of these issues that you have in terms of co-parenting together?

**Mother:** I think mainly it is about the disciplining of the child. Usually happens after an episode that the child misbehaves, and we have disciplined the child. Sometimes, we may have doubts or I may have doubts whether I have done it in the right way or am I being fair, and I would speak to him about it. Can you give me feedback about it?

I: How do you do that? Do you sit him down? I am looking at the processes...what is being done?

M: Depending on the situation. Sometimes we, most of the time we speak at the end of the day, before bedtime. If not if I feel a sense of urgency I will call him, and then ask him if he had witnessed it. If he had gone to work, I will call him and ask him. If not, usually we will wait till the end of the day, isn't it? Or if we have moments where we are able to talk?

**Father:** It is a bit more challenging for me. I am not at home so much. So usually, when I witnessed an episode a disciplinary issue, I don't often have the whole context.

And there are two things.... I don't react so easily but secondly because I am not at home, there is less of a context for me to react to. So, but I am also very aware that when one parent is disciplining a kid, the kid is looking at you to see whether you have misgiving to the disciplining of the other parent. And they are also looking for sympathy from the less active parent when they are being disciplined. And the whole challenge of co-parenting becomes very challenging because you have to figure out what is the teaching point, and figure out how to support the disciplining action, without making things worse for the child or unnecessarily decreasing the intent of the disciplinary action.

**Researcher's Interpretation:** Co-parenting negotiation is on the discipline of the child and often after an episode of misbehavior, as to the doubt around disciplinary action. Conversation happens at the end of the day or before bedtime or if a parent senses the urgency, the other parent will be contacted soon after the episode to seek counsel, affirmation or support regarding the disciplinary action.

Father highlighted some challenges regarding co-parenting, *“And there are two things.... I don't react so easily but secondly because I am not at home, there is less of a context for me to react to. So, but I am also very aware that when one parent is disciplining a kid, the kid is looking at you to see whether you have misgiving to the disciplining of the other parent. And they are also looking for sympathy from the less active parent when they are being disciplined. And the whole challenge of co-parenting becomes very challenging because you have to figure out what is the teaching point, and figure out how to support the disciplining action, without making things worse for the child or unnecessarily decreasing the intent of the disciplinary action.”*

Thus having supportive couple relationship and the good understanding of the given context are important for co-parenting negotiation to happen (p.2). Issues of Co-parenting / Children\_IIOC, Factors Influencing Negotiation\_ FIN

I: Would it be possible to give me an example, so that we can look at the steps involved in your conversation later on?

M: An example. Maybe the most recent one which was just a couple of days ago. We were leaving the house in the morning and I was trying to get E (son) to tie his shoe-lace, and he was clearly.....

I: Your eldest boy?

M: Yes, my eldest son. I was trying to get him to tie his shoe-lace, he took a long time to tie it. And he kept saying he doesn't know. He just didn't want to try. As a result, we were late for school. And I started to raise my voice because I was upset with him for not trying. And one of the punishment.... and because I was upset with him for not trying and giving up so easily. I told him that I was going to take away a reward which I promised, and that was to go to the bird park on the weekend. So.... I was quite angry with him. We all left the house together. C (husband) kept quiet throughout, only asking him to hurry to wear his shoes, he just refused. After I dropped the kids off, I called him and I asked him whether what I did was right, to take away the reward of the bird park and I was quite harsh with my words so I also asked him whether I was too harsh with him with my words?

F: She used the word 'lousy' with the child - our older boy needs a lot of validation. This one needs positive reinforcement. She chose words to use which she knew wouldn't work for him, "So, you're so lousy.... you're just lousy. Lousy. Lousy...." Trying to make him recognize that this kind of action generate some judgment that he is unhappy with. And I was..... of course caught. If I had been more proactive and been participating in the shoe-lace tying, then I would have prevented A (wife) from needing to react to this. Because I was lost in my own space, I didn't participate in this and could have prevented this from happening. So I am not at an emotional advantage in this situation. But at the same time, I knew A (wife) was using words on him that she knew would be hurtful for him, which I also knew that she herself wouldn't agree with if she was in a more positive frame of mind. So indeed, I was not at all surprised that 10 minutes after she dropped off the kid, I got a phone call to say if she was very harsh....

Mother provided an example of a recent episode regarding their eldest son inability to manage his shoe-lace and her negative remark which she thought was rather harsh on the son. She called her husband right after the episode to check/ counsel regarding her remark and disciplinary action.

On the other hand, the husband recognized his lack of parenting involvement leading to that episode and was caught as to how best to respond to wife's question, recognizing that he was part of the issue as in not helping the son tie his shoe lace, thus resulting in the wife's negative comments and disciplinary action. He felt partly responsible for him being reprimanded.

The co-parenting conversation involved the dynamic of having to provide consul to the other parent and at the same time accepting one's lack of participation in co-parenting efforts resulting in the disciplinary action of their son. Thus the process of this co-parenting negotiation involved few layers of interaction / couple dynamics both explicit and implicit, following the pattern/ steps in their conversation/ negotiation. Thus personal dialogue happens involving the recognition / reflection of one's action/ limitation within the co-

parenting negotiation process (p.3). Steps in Negotiation Process\_ SNP, Personality and Mode of Interaction in Negotiation\_ PIN

**Appendix 3: Sample of Codebook for Couple Z**

Concept	Code	Designation	Memo	Page No
	IOC	Issues of Co-parenting / Children_	Co-parenting negotiation is on the discipline of the child and often after an episode of misbehavior, as to the doubt around disciplinary action. Conversation happens at the end of the day or before bedtime or if a parent senses the urgency, the other parent will be contacted soon after the episode to seek counsel, affirmation or support regarding the disciplinary action.	2
	FIN	Factors Influencing Negotiation	<p>Father highlighted some challenges regarding co-parenting, <i>“And there are two things.... I don’t react so easily but secondly because I am not at home, there is less of a context for me to react to. So, but I am also very aware that when one parent is disciplining a kid, the kid is looking at you to see whether you have misgivings to the disciplining of the other parent. And they are also looking for sympathy from the less active parent when they are being disciplined. And the whole challenge of co-parenting becomes very challenging because you have to figure out what is the teaching point, and figure out how to support the disciplining action, without making things worse for the child or unnecessarily decreasing the intent of the disciplinary action.”</i></p> <p>Thus having a supportive couple relationship and a good understanding of the given context are important for co-parenting negotiation to happen (p.2). Issues of Co-parenting / Children_ IOC, Factors Influencing Negotiation_ FIN</p>	
	SNP	Steps in Negotiation Process_	<p>Mother provided an example of a recent episode regarding their eldest son's inability to manage his shoe-lace and her negative remark which she thought was rather harsh on the son. She called her husband right after the episode to check/counsel regarding her remark and disciplinary action.</p> <p>On the other hand, the husband recognized his lack of parenting involvement leading to that episode and was caught as to how best to respond to wife's question, recognizing that he was part of the issue as in not helping the son tie his shoe lace, thus resulting in the wife's negative comments and disciplinary action. He felt partly responsible for his son being reprimanded.</p> <p>The co-parenting conversation involved the dynamic of having to provide counsel to the other parent and at the same time accepting one's lack of participation in co-parenting efforts resulting in the disciplinary action of their son. Thus the</p>	3
	PIN	Personality and Mode of Interaction in Negotiation_		

			<p>process of this co-parenting negotiation involved few layers of interaction / couple dynamics both explicit and implicit, following the pattern/ steps in their conversation/ negotiation. Thus personal dialogue happens involving the recognition / reflection of one's action/ limitation within the co-parenting negotiation process (p.3). Steps in Negotiation Process_ SNP, Personality and Mode of Interaction in Negotiation_ PIN</p>	
	PNP  PPCC	<p>Pattern(s) of Negotiation Process_</p> <p>Parent's Personal and Co-parenting Challenges_</p>	<p>Father provided the dynamic involved in their conversation after the son's episode and another example of his lack of co-parenting involvement which resulted in the daughter being reprimanded for taking too long to finish her meal. He realized that to avoid the children being reprimanded he needed to step-up to his co-parenting involvement which meant a conscious effort on his part, a certain mindfulness of the task given to him by his wife.</p> <p>Thus the co-parenting conversation pattern would involve the mother seeking counsel or validation of her disciplinarian actions from her husband who knew that in validating or affirming her actions, it would also mean that he has to be more involved in co-parenting so as to avoid having his wife being overwhelming with caregiving and disciplining the children.</p> <p>Father is in a "bind", if he wants his wife to be less reactionary then he has to be more engaged in co-parenting which will require conscious efforts on his part to be more mindful of the given co-parenting task. Father's response to his wife is a kind of a reminder/ call/ demand/ challenge for him to be more involved in their co-parenting efforts. In this co-parenting episode the parents provided the dynamics of their interaction leading to a conflictual situation (p.4). Pattern(s) of Negotiation Process_ PNP, Parent's Personal and Co-parenting Challenges_ PPCC</p>	4
	FON  ICSCP	<p>Form Of Negotiation_</p> <p>Interaction between Co-parenting Styles of Parent and Child Personality</p>	<p>Father continued with his description of the episode regarding their daughter's lunch and the interactions between them where he focused on getting her to finish her lunch while she was crying having been reprimanded by the mother.</p> <p>He said later, <i>"I recognize my failing. But in so-doing, I had to make sure the child didn't play the sympathy card, by acting up so that I would rush to her rescue."</i> However, they did not talk about the situation since it was "history repeating itself" as remarked by the father. The mother said, <i>"Because I was angry with him too because he walked away"</i>. The father continued, <i>"So..... She gave me this knowing</i></p>	5

			<p><i>look as well – if you want this to stop happening, you know what your role is. And that part requires me to be a bit more mindful than I usually am.”</i></p> <p>A non-verbal interaction between the parents with implicit message that was understood by both since it was a recurring event in their co-parenting. Part of the co-parenting conversation process/ pattern is non-verbal communication which speaks louder than words (p.5). Form Of Negotiation_ FON, Interaction between Co-parenting Styles of Parent and Child Personality_ ICSCP</p>	
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#### Appendix 4: Sample of Summary of Concepts and Codes

##### Summary of Concepts and Codes of Couple Z: No. of Children

Concept	Code	Designation	Page
IOC		Issues of Co-parenting / Children	2, 7
FIN		Factors Influencing Negotiation	2, 10, 14, 22, 24
PNP	SNP	Steps in Negotiation Process	3
PIN		Personality and Mode of Interaction in Negotiation	3, 7, 11, 12, 15, 22
PNP		Pattern(s) of Negotiation Process	4,7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 18, 21
IOP	PPCC	Parent's Personal and Co-parenting Challenges	4
FON		Form Of Negotiation	5, 6
ICSCP		Interaction between Co-parenting Styles of Parent and Child Personality	5
FIC		Factor(s) Influencing Co-parenting	6, 17, 23
DMP		Decision Making Process	7, 8, 9, 10
FIN/D		Factors Influencing Negotiation/ Decision	9
IOP	PPCC	Parent's Personal and Co-parenting Challenges	12, 14
FOC		Family-of-Origin on Co-parenting	13, 14
IOP	PRM	Parental Role Modeling	14, 20
PNP	SNP	Steps in Negotiation Process	17
IOP	IFP	Insights From Parent(s)	17
VC		Values for Children	18, 20
IOP	PCB	Parental Contradictory Behaviors	18, 20
AYP	AYP	Advices for Younger Parents	23, 24
	FP	Feedback from Parents	25
	OTN	Other Thoughts on Negotiation	25

## **Appendix 5: Summary of Interpretations for Couple Z**

Co-parenting negotiation would be on the discipline of the child and often after an episode of misbehavior, as to doubt around disciplinary action. Conversations happen at the end of the day or before bedtime or if a parent senses the urgency, the other parent will be contacted soon after the episode to seek counsel, affirmation or support regarding the disciplinary action. Thus having supportive couple relationship and the good understanding of the given context are important for co-parenting negotiation to happen (p.1).

The co-parenting conversation involves the dynamic of having to provide counsel to the other parent and at the same time accepting one's lack of participation in co-parenting efforts resulting in the disciplinary action of a child. Thus the process of this co-parenting negotiation involves few layers of interaction / couple dynamics both explicit and implicit, following the pattern/ steps in their conversation/ negotiation. Personal dialogue happens involving the recognition / reflection of one's action/ limitation within the co-parenting negotiation process (p.2).

The co-parenting conversation pattern involves the mother seeking counsel or validation of her disciplinarian actions from her husband who knows that in validating or affirming her actions, it will also mean that he has to be more involved in co-parenting so as to avoid her being overwhelmed with caregiving or taking unnecessary disciplinary actions. Father is in a "bind", if he wants his wife to be less reactionary then he has to be more engaged in co-parenting which will require conscious efforts on his part to be more mindful of the given co-parenting task. Father's response to his wife is a kind of a reminder/ call/ demand/ challenge for him to be more involved in their co-parenting efforts (p.4).

A non-verbal interaction between the parents with implicit message that was understood by both since it was a recurring event in their co-parenting. Part of the co-parenting conversation process/ pattern consists of non-verbal communication which speaks louder than words (p.5).

They described their parenting roles/ responsibilities including the wife's expectations of her husband needed involvement in co-parenting. In the dynamics of co-parenting, the father has to step-up his co-parenting responsibilities so that mother can avoid disciplinary action on the children. Thus in the co-parenting negotiation process, their conversations are both implicit and explicit because of the recurring co-parenting episodes (p.5).

The "default mode" of the husband is an area of contention in their co-parenting efforts especially when the wife is overwhelmed with co-parenting duties / responsibilities. The negotiation / conversation/ argument comes only when the wife expresses her dissatisfaction of the situation which will then get the husband's attention and engagement. The couple then talks about what needs to happen in their co-parenting. Thus their co-parenting conversation is driven by the need to engage the husband to be more involved in the co-parenting efforts so as to support his wife (p.6).

In their conversation around decision making, the negotiation/ conversation steps will depend on the gravity/ importance of the decision to be taken, whereas smaller decision are left to the wife and then she will inform the husband about it. The more important decision(s) is jointly taken and involves the three decision blocks mentioned by the father: the task at hand, the internal (values) and external (expectations) considerations, including the balance between them (p.8).

## **Appendix 6: Letter to Participants to Review Transcript and Interpretations**

Dear

Good Morning!

I have completed transcribing, analyzing the transcript and writing up the summary for you to review the accuracy of my interpretation as well as to make further comments or suggestions. I would greatly appreciate if you could kindly consider these questions after having read the transcript with its interpretations and summary.

1. What are some of your thoughts or impressions when you read the researcher's interpretations and summary?
2. What else have you thought of since our first interview that you would like to share about the experience of co-parenting negotiation process?
3. What questions haven't I asked that you think are important?

To help you in your reading of the transcript, I have put in different color, (M) stands for Mother which is in maroon, (F) for Father which is in purple, (I) is the Interviewer/researcher and green is my interpretation of the above paragraphs.

**The summary of interpretations is given on page 26ff.**

N.B: I am attaching a copy of your signed consent form for future reference.

I apologize in advance if I am not able to fully capture the actual meaning of what you shared in the interview due to my limitations, and will be happy to make any amendments to my interpretation. Thus any mistakes or misinterpretations are the fault of the researcher.

Once again thanks for your kind understanding and assistance! Hope to hear from you soon!

Yours sincerely  
Charles Sim, S.J.  
26/10/14

## Appendix 7: Collective Wisdom

Parents would inevitably take the wrong turn in their co-parenting journey. But they learned from their experience, healed their misunderstanding and emotional wounds, and moved forward with greater confidence, trust and support for each another. The following are some advices shared given by parents in their co-parenting journey and conversations.

There is a need to keep a constant, open and honest communication, where parent can speak freely what is on her mind within a safe environment, including the certain emotions that accompanied the conversation.

As shared by a father, “constant dialogue with couple about, not the issues but how they feel is very important. They can talk about the issues, but the issues come in all sorts of shapes and forms but how they feel, where is this coming from, to have a deeper level, second level of understanding of why I do what I do? Where is it coming from?” (#Couple 3)

Issue(s) where possible should be addressed “upstream” by being proactive. Issue needs to be calmly and rationally address if possible, using relevant or research guided information to guide decision-making. Parents should take a longer term view, not “lose sight of the forest in search of a tree” or vice versa. The experiences from other parents are also valuable resource in the co-parenting efforts and conversation.

As a parent remarked, “We’ve bridged a lot more upstream in the process than downstream..... And as a result of that, I think even if we disagree, it helps us both work jointly towards an outcome.” He continued, “I think the moment you start the (co)parenting journey as a parent, one has to be prepared for a lot of disappointments. And if you are not, than you are not prepared for parenthood...” (#Couple 8)

It is important to understand and learn from one’s experience, the uniqueness of one’s spouse and the marital relationship. To remember to put one’s ego and pride out of the co-parenting conversation, so as to focus on the common goal or the well-being of the child. Listen, observe and learn more about the child including accepting the unique personality and needs of each child. Make the effort to change one’s attitude or behavior by being mindful and intentional, in what needs to be done in co-parenting, or the marital relationship.

Accepting that there will always be differences, and learning how to talk about them over time. The key ingredients for an open, honest and good conversation are willingness to listen and respect for the other parent.

Here a mother emphasized, “So you seek to really listen and then understand what the other person is saying, then you seek to be understood. That will help I think, this is the whole fundamental of any communication as long as you listen and try to understand then things will go much easier.” (#Couple 6)

The importance of working first on the marital / couple relationship, carve out “couple time”, and renewing the love for each other. Learning to forgive the other’s limitations and faults, over and over again. The need to talk about shared goals, hopes, and dreams including values for the children early in the couple relationship. The willingness to place a positive connotation to the actions of the other parent in his/her co-parenting efforts, including conversation. It helps to have shared faith, values, cultural practices and beliefs in co-parenting and in the marital relationship.

A mother shared, “Never lose touch with each other because the two of you are the foundation. And if any one puts too much effort on the kids and lose sight of each other than everything might just crumble.....Must love each other than the kids will be happy, it really makes the difference.” (#Couple 10)

Lastly, another mother gently puts it, “I think the most important (thing), both have to have the same goal in mind, ‘we want to work, we want the marriage to work’. And that must be the first basis, when we both know that we want this marriage to work then it is easier to talk about issues.....” (#Couple 11)

## **Appendix 8: Feedback from Parent Participants after Reviewing Transcript and Interpretation**

The interpretation and summary were accurate. We are sure that your research will be very useful to parents in the future.

Both of us are fine with the transcripts, and your interpretations do resonate with both of us. :)

We have reviewed your research interpretations and have made some changes which are tracked in the attached document. We agree with most of your findings. Do let us know if there is anything we can help you with!

My thoughts following a read through. Thank you for the insightful analysis. I found it helpful to understand the co-parenting requirements even more.

First, apologies for the delay in coming back to you on this. It's been a very hectic last couple of weeks. Overall, the transcript and summary represent quite well the content and intent of our input. Great job!

It is interesting and reflective. I would agree with the interpretations. It has been a long time and reading it again was interesting as we have since moved on to other things. But it is really important to see how we have grown from there.

Aside from some typos in our transcribed interview (which are minor) and does not change the underlining meaning of your interpretation of our answers, we are agreeable to everything said and interpreted by you.

I believe that co-parenting is difficult and needs a lifetime to work out, just as all marriages do. You will never know how right or wrong you had been until the end of your child's journey on earth and hopefully, we go before them! Appreciate how your interview had opened grounds for discussion and thought sharing between us! Thank you!

Had a look thru. Wow! Really took a great deal of effort to transcribe and even more for you to pen down your reflections. I didn't bother much with the occasional grammar/spell errors. It was quite an interesting experience re-reading our conversation with you.....helped me to stop and re-reflect on both the things I said as well as Brian's responses then. I found it particularly helpful to get a "3rd person perspective" on our co-parenting styles/ patterns. Tks for the experience and opportunity to participate in your study.

We have read through and the transcript captures what we had shared during our session and we propose no changes. Thanks for the wonderful opportunity to be part of the study. We enjoyed ourselves being part of it.

I have reviewed the transcript. It is fairly close to what I recall. And your conclusions are fair and reflective of what we tried to convey. My deepest apologies once again for taking so long with this!! Hope it didn't hold you up from your schedule.

Sorry that we took so long to reply. There are no changes to the transcript and interpretation. All is accurate. My thoughts when I read you interpretations and summary, thanks for the enlightenment! it really helped me us to better understand our "issues" and a good reminder for us to always want to work on our marriage as we have managed to every time we encounter each challenge.

The interpretations & summary reflected accurately what we have expressed during the interview. We found it to be very useful as well to read the interpretation and have our thoughts summarized for our own reflection. We will use this document to review some of the areas we can do better to improve our negotiation skills and co-parenting styles so as to help our couple relationship and to support our children and family better. The interview was comprehensive and we do not have anything further to add. After reviewing the questions, we think most of the key questions have been asked so we do not have anything else to add.

All the best in your project and thank you for your time. We will be praying for you and that your study can help and support the pastoral needs of couples and families better in the near future. If we can be of any further assistance to you in any other way please don't hesitate to call us.