Highlights of 2018 in Family Court Research: FCR and More

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Disclaimer: These are my five favorite studies

Others surely would pick different papers

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My favorite study of 2018...

**Poortman: Postdivorce parent-child contact**

Full reference

Take home message
"These findings suggest that it is not so much the frequency of contact per se that matters for child well-being but, rather, the extent to which postdivorce residence arrangements reflect predivorce parenting arrangements." (quote from Abstract)

What I like
- Recognition that selection into different custody arrangements is not random.
- Example that much of best custody research is being done outside of the USA.
Some details

Poortman: Postdivorce parent-child contact

Key methods
- 3,694 Dutch children, ages 4-17
- National sample
- Assessed predivorce parental involvement
- Asked: Does predivorce moderate contact benefits?

Of note
- Careful, unbiased literature review
- Postdivorce father contact no association with child well-being; shared residence weak correlation
- High father postdivorce contact benefits (low contact harms) only if predivorce involvement high (see figure)
My second favorite (OK, this is a review paper, not a study)

Steinbach: Children’s Well-Being in Joint Custody

Full reference (available online)

Take home message
“...there is empirical evidence from different countries that... JPC arrangements can have positive effects... However, the existing studies are... very heterogeneous... [and based on] self-selected highly educated parents with a high socioeconomic status, a low conflict level, and children between the ages of 6 and 15... Thus, the risks and benefits of JPC are not clear yet.”

What I like
- Methodologically careful literature review of controversial subject
- Outlines conditions when JPC may benefit (or harm) children (e.g., geographical proximity, conflict/cooperation
- Another European investigator and a focus on often-overlooked European research
My third favorite (another review paper!)

Maher et al: Shared parenting in high conflict

Full reference

Take home message
“Higher levels of shared parenting were related to poorer child adjustment in samples with high conflict many years following the divorce, but typically not in samples that assessed conflict during the divorcing process or in the 2 or 3 years following the divorce.”

What I like
- Focus on a controversial and much-debated issue
- Thoughtful, careful review representing other side of JPC debate
- Consideration of both parenting and conflict over time, not just at time of divorce
Number four…

Rowen & Emery: Parental denigration boomerangs

Full reference (available online; also see our April 2018 FCR paper)

Take home message
“Normatively, denigration appears to boomerang not alienate. Children consistently report feeling less close to parents who denigrate more than to parents who are the target of denigration.”

What I like
- Empirical test of alienation hypothesis (denigration reciprocal, causes alienation)
- Use of multiple methods, including young adult twins, to study complex problem
- “What goes around, comes around”: Putting down your co-parent harms your relationship with your children
Rowen & Emery: Parental denigration boomerangs

Some details

Key methods
- 994 young adults (157 sibling pairs)
- Structured, reliable measure of denigration
- Multiple analyses (siblings, individual families)

Of note
- Reasonable agreement between siblings
- Denigration reciprocal not one-sided
- Children more distant from denigrator than denigrated
- Finding hold across siblings, marital status, individuals
- Alienation may occur but denigration mostly boomerangs
And number five (something other than custody/coparenting!)

**Brinig and Garrison: Child support in paternity actions**

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**Full reference**

**Take home message**
“... child support practice in St. Joseph County promotes limited contact between children and their absent fathers, nonpayment of prior support obligations, and the accrual of arrears that can never be paid.”

**What I like**
- Detailed, thoughtful consideration background and legal implications
- Excellent empirical research by law professors!
- Calling out a system of “enforcement” that is expensive and produces little increase in support – “getting blood from stones” (as the article is titled).
Some details

**Brinig and Garrison: Child support in paternity actions**

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**Key methods**
- Empirical analysis of 688 paternity actions in Indiana county
- Young, unmarried, minority sample (as is typical in paternity cases)

**Of note**
- Child contact awards low – 94% mother custody; average of 33 overnights (a concern for fathers and children’s well-being and for increasing support compliance)
- 51% of support orders not fully paid, average arrearage was $6,507, 97% in arrears subject to enforcement (mostly contempt/jail), average collection was $428 ($0 collected from 58% of contempt cases).
- The system is broken. There is no easy fix.
More research *is* needed