Navigating Prolonged Conflict:

Subject positions and meaning constructions in postdivorce families

Jan Stokkebekk

Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (PhD)
University of Bergen, Norway
2022

UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN

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Date of defense: 08.06.2022

Year: 2022

Title: Navigating Prolonged Conflict:

Name: Jan Stokkebekk

Print: Skipnes Kommunikasjon / University of Bergen

Scientific environment

This Ph.D. project has been affiliated with the child welfare, equality, and social inclusion research group (BLI) at the Department of Health Promotion and Development (HEMIL), Faculty of Psychology, University of Bergen. The doctoral education was carried out at the Graduate School of Human Interaction and Growth (GHIG) and the general doctoral program at the Faculty of Psychology, University of Bergen. The project was financed by The Office for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufetat), Bergen Vicinity Family Counseling Office.

The main supervisor for the Ph.D. project was Professor Anette Christine Iversen and Associate Professor Ragnhild Hollekim (co-supervisor) at the Department of Health Promotion and Development and Professor of Counseling, Ottar Ness (co-supervisor) Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Department of Education and Lifelong Learning.

Acknowledgments

The research for this thesis was financed by Bufetat region vest, through a PhD scholarship position at Bergen and Vicinity Family Counselling Office, where I also had "duty-work" as a mediator and Family Therapist.

For the realization of the research, the people that I am most indebted to are the postdivorce family members who participated in the study. The writings contained in this thesis is an effort to deconstruct negotiated subject positions of family members that is challenged by prolonged postdivorce conflict. Special recognition is also due to all my colleagues at Bergen Vicinity Family Counselling Office and the "Strong children in two homes team", Ingeborg, Melanie and Waldo for inspiration and joint collaboration in the search for how to promote resilience in post-divorce families that is entrenched in conflict. I would also like to thank my colleagues at the specialist competence milieu on family violence and high conflict in the Norwegian family Counselling services, for their support and enthusiasm.

My deepest gratitude goes to my main-supervisor Professor Anette Christne Iversen and my co-supervisors Associate Professor Ragnhild Hollekim and Professor Ottar Ness. I truly appreciate the dedication you have shown as ever-patient and knowledgeable scholars sharing your advice along the PhD journey. In addition, I am deeply grateful for Anette and Ragnhild that took up a position as a mentor-team; you have relentlessly supported me as supervisors and co-authors with your wisdom through countless drafts and revisions of academic papers. Equally, I am very appreciative for your enthusiasm, your readiness on short notice to give hands-on supervisions Ottar. I am also indebted to Professor Jukka Törrönen, of Stockholm University and Professor Robert Emery of the University of Virginia, USA for their contributions as co-authors in paper III. Dr. Törrönen contributed with his extensive expertise on positioning theory and Dr. Emery have contributed with insights and advice, being an internationally acclaimed expert on postdivorce families.

Additionally, I gathered much inspiration and support from being part of a research community of PhD candidates within (or with attention to) the Norwegian family Counselling Service. This research community/network consisted of Dr. Bård Bertelsen, at the university of Agder, Trine Eikrem, at University of Oslo and Dr. Ellen Syrstad, at VID Specialized University in Oslo. In working on the synopsis, I felt great appreciation for the many discussions and valuable feedback from the kappe-hub with Olin (HEMIL) and Kari (Department of Education) at the Faculty of Psychology, UIB. In addition, I would like to thank all the staff at HEMIL, and the members of the GHIG research school for providing relevant courses and for providing a supportive meeting place for PhD candidates.

To my parents, Eva and Kjell, thank you for your warm hospitality and for your belief in me. To my sister Hilde, thank you for always offering kind words and a smile. To my extended family and friends, thank you for the support and encouragement and for providing distractions.

To Trude, my love and most valuable teammate: thank you for being there in every sense of the word. You have encouraged me to celebrate every small victory and reminding me that there are other aspects to life that needs my attention. To my daughter Tiril and my son Lars, thank you for your patience and for all the “late PhD nights” where you kindly reminded me to turn off my PC.

Abstract

Background: Prolonged conflicts among postdivorce or noncohabiting parents are found to threaten the welfare of children, parents, and functioning in two household families. These family contexts are known in the literature as having intensified psychosocial risk, pressuring subject positions of family members, and having difficulty functioning as a family. Many resources are spent from an array of public institutions—court, health, and child and family welfare institutions—to promote cooperative coparenting, help resolve custody conflicts, and aid the functioning of the family. A need exists for a further understanding of children's and parents' positions in prolonged conflict and their views on family life. More knowledge about postdivorce families (in chronic conflicts) is important for policy-makers and various service providers for children and families.

Overall aim: This thesis aims to explore the meaning constructions and subject positions of postdivorce families in prolonged conflicts. Social constructionism and the systemic perspective have been a meta-theory in this thesis, combined with a discursive framework and the use of positioning theory. In this thesis, the term postdivorce or separated families involves families with noncohabiting parents, with parents having been married, with others having been cohabiting, and with some having not lived together at all. The main ambition of this study is to expand the knowledge about postdivorce families in prolonged interparental conflicts and how these family circumstances seem to be constructed from children's and parents' perspectives. The possible consequences of various positions for the family, the professionals in family services, and society are discussed. Knowledge from the children's and parents' perspectives might help us discern how one can support their well-being in (to them) relevant ways. We also add to the knowledge of how to aid and strengthen families embedded in enduring postdivorce conflicts.

Research questions: The following research questions were asked to illuminate the overall aim in three papers. The first paper focused on child subject positions and

asked (I) *how do children position themselves for challenges in postdivorce family conflicts, and how does family conflict position children?*

The second paper focused on the parallel storylines and subject positions of conflicted parent couples and asked the following three questions. (II a) *What storylines emerge when separated couples in prolonged conflicts talk about their coparenting relationship?* (II b) *What positions of the self and the other are constructed when talking about the conflicted coparenting relationship?* and (II c) *What does it mean for the duty of parenthood when separated parents are in prolonged conflict?*

The third paper focused on fathers' stories in prolonged conflict and asked the following three questions. (III a) *What storylines of parental agency emerge when separated fathers talk about their children who are in distress from the conflict?* (III b)*What positions of agency do fathers take up in these storylines, and in what kinds of subject positions are fathers other-positioning their children and ex-partner ?* (IIIc) *How do these storylines legitimize fathers' own subject positions and actions towards their children and ex-partner?*

Methods and Data: The ontological and epistemological stance in this research project is from systemic paradigms—that of social construction (Gergen et al., 2015) and bringforthism (Maturana & Varela, 1992; Maturana et al., 1980). The research project uses a qualitative methodology. The empirical material is from in-depth interviews with children and their parents in prolonged postdivorce families with frameworks from social construction, systemic theory, and the discursive framework of positioning theory. The interviewed families were participants in a family therapy program in Norway that aimed to assist families with parents with a history of more than two years of conflict and who had been unsuccessful in resolving conflict or their coparenting challenges through family mediation, counseling, or legal proceeding/court attendance.

Findings: Paper I: Children take up three dominant positions to address family conflict: (1) *keeping balance* (in the storyline of the family conflict), (2) *keeping distance* (in the storyline of the troubling parent), and (3) *keeping on with life* (in the storyline of life—as more than family challenges). Arguably, each position is an act of resistance against threats from family conflict. Paper II: Two typologies of conflicted storylines from an overarching storyline of "The Troublesome Other and I" were prominent in the findings: *(1) storylines of violations of trust*, positioning the coparents in relation to traumatic events in the past, and (2) *storylines of who is bad*, positioning the coparent as either a disloyal coparent or a dysfunctional parent. The findings indicate that prolonged conflicts made it impossible to find available positions for cooperation. Paper III: Three positions of father agency emerged in the analyses: (1) *The Savior*, (2) *the Jungle Guide*, and (3) *a Beacon in a Fog of Uncertainty*. Each position exemplifies fathers' "world views," "microcosmoses," or "moral orders" of postdivorce dangers that surround children and shows how fathers typically position their children and their ethical stance in terms of parental agency. Our understanding of fathers' agency from the perspective of positioning theory is fathers' storylines (world views) about their obligation to carry through a line of action (perform agency) in response to how they perceive their children and their needs. This could be viewed as an alternative to understanding actions of father`s in high conflict divorce families that are often explained through the lens of psychopathology.

Discussion and conclusive reflections:

The discussion chapter in this thesis discusses patterns across the individual papers. In addition, some implications for professional practice and methodological strengths and limitations are discussed.

The findings highlight how prolonged conflict positions the family system and how different family members typically construct and take up available subject positions to address conflict-related challenges. Such knowledge is relevant for Norwegian

family counseling services and all agencies in contact with children and parents of postdivorce families, such as schools and child welfare agencies. It is also relevant internationally for professionals and various forms of behavioral and mental health services that aid children and parents in postdivorce families. This thesis further argues that children with parents in prolonged conflict are not passive victims but agents dealing with conflict challenges. Prolonged postdivorce conflict is found to be a disruptive positioning force and a threat to parents' agency. This thesis argues that family counseling services should aid postdivorce parents within the boundaries of their *joint capacity of cooperation* and that parents in prolonged conflict might more successfully practice parallel parenting to reduce conflict exposure. This thesis also states that prolonged postdivorce conflict is a responsibility of society and not of conflicted parents or families alone. Therefore, it is important that welfare institutions, such as family counseling services, apply a nonjudgmental and systemic framework and take into account the different subject positions in the family mean. Furthermore, this thesis also adds to our knowledge of how various subjects' positions taken up by that family members in families embedded in prolonged conflicts restrain the possibilities of other members from taking up their preferred subject position as a child, as a parent vis-à-vis the child, or in relation to the other parent. This study uses positioning theory to add an interconnected perspective of discourses of postdivorce families and how families negotiate subject positions.

In the final reflection, family counseling services are warned against professional diagnostics and the use of terminology that creates a linear and fixed/rigid positioning of family members in prolonged postdivorce conflicts. This thesis has broad relevance for understanding challenges and dilemmas that family counseling services face today, as well as the more specific need for more research that investigates the meaning-making of children and parents as service users and how different welfare services position the postdivorce family with conflict-related challenges.

Sammendrag

Bakgrunn: Langvarige og vedvarende konflikter mellom skilte eller ikke-samboende foreldre truer livskvaliteten til barn, foreldre og den sosiale fungeringen i familier med to hushold. Disse familiekontekstene er identififisert i litteraturen for å bidra med økt psykososial risiko. Subjekt posisjonene til familiemedlemmer er presset og det er vanskelig å fungere som familie. Mange ressurser brukes fra en rekke offentlige institusjoner i alt fra domstol til ulike helse- og barne- og familievern instanser for å fremme samarbeidende foreldreskap, bidra til å løse bosted og samværskonflikter og bidra med å styrke fungeringen til familien. Det er et behov for en økt forståelse av barn og foreldres posisjoner i vedvarende konflikter og deres syn på familielivet. Mer kunnskap om skilsmissefamilier (i kroniske konflikter) er viktig for beslutningstakere og ulike velferdstjenester for barn og familier.

Overordnet mål: Denne avhandlingen tar sikte på å utforske meningskonstruksjoner og subjekt posisjoner til skilsmissefamilier i vedvarende konflikter. Sosial konstruktivisme og det systemiske tenkning har vært en metateori i denne avhandlingen i tillegg til et diskursivt rammeverk med bruk av posisjoneringsteori. Termenologien skilte eller separerte familier betyr i denne avhandlingen familier med foreldre i to adskilte hushold, der noen foreldre har vært gift, andre har vært samboere og noen har ikke bodd sammen i det hele tatt. Hovedambisjonen med denne studien er å utvide kunnskapen om skilsmissefamilier i vedvarende foreldrekonflikter, og hvordan disse familieforholdene ser ut til å være konstruert fra barn og foreldres egne perspektiver. Mulige konsekvenser av ulike posisjoner for familien, fagfolk i familietjenester og samfunnet diskuteres. Kunnskap fra barn og foreldres perspektiver kan hjelpe oss til å forstå hvordan man kan støtte deres livskvalitet, på måter som er relevant for dem, samt videreutvikle kunnskap om hvordan man kan bidra til å styrke familier som er i vedvarende konflikt etter skilsmisse.

Forskningsspørsmål: Følgende forskningsspørsmål ble stilt for å belyse det overordnede målet, i tre artikler. Den første artikkelen fokuserte på barns posisjoner,

og undersøkte; (I) *hvordan posisjonerer barn seg til utfordringer i konflikter i skilsmissefamiler, og hvordan posisjonerer familiekonflikten barn?*

Den andre artikkelen fokuserte på de parallelle historiene og subjekt posisjonene til foreldrepar i konflikt, og stilte tre spørsmål,(II a) *hvilke historiefortellinger dukker opp når separerte par i langvarige konflikter snakker om deres foreldresamarbeidsrelasjon ?*(II b) *hvilke posisjoner hos selvet og den andre konstrueres når foreldre snakker om sitt konfliktfylte foreldresamarbeidsrelasjon ?* (II c) *hva betyr det i forhold til plikten ved et foreldreskap, når skilte foreldre er i vedvarende konflikt?*

Den tredje artikkelen fokuserte på fedres historiefortellinger i langvarig konflikt, og det ble stilt tre spørsmål (III a)*"hvilke historier om foreldre agens fremkommer når separerte fedre snakker om sine barn som er belastet av konflikt?* (III b*) hvilke posisjoner inntar fedre i disse historiefortellingene, og hvilke posisjoner plasserer de sine barn og ekspartner ?* (III c) *Hvordan legitimerer disse historiefortellingene fedres egne posisjoner og handlinger overfor barn og ekspartner?*

Metoder og data: Den ontologiske og epistemologiske utgangspunktet i dette forskningsprosjektet er fra systemisk tenkning, sosial konstruksjonisme (Gergen et al., 2015) og bringforthisme (Maturana &Varela, 1992; Maturana et al., 1980). Forskningsprosjektet bruker kvalitativ metodikk. Det empiriske materialet er fra dybdeintervjuer med barn og deres foreldre i langvarige og vedvarende konflikter i skilsmissefamilier med rammeverk fra sosial konstruksjonisme, systemisk teori og diskursiv forståelseramme med utgangsounkt i posisjoneringsteori. De intervjuede familiene var deltakere i et familieterapiprogram i Norge, rettet mot familier der foreldre hadde vært i konflikt i mer enn to år, uten å lyktes med å løse konflikt eller deres samarbeidsutfordringer i mekling, rådgivning eller i retten.

Funn: Papir I: Barn tar opp tre dominerende posisoner for å håndtere familiekonflikt: (1) *holde balansen* (i historien om familiekonflikt), (2) *holde avstand* (i historien

om den trøblete forelderen) og (3) *holde på med livet* (i historien om livet - som mer enn familieutfordringer). Det hevdes at hver posisjon er handlinger av sunn motstand mot trusler fra familiekonflikt. Artikkel II: To typologier av konflikt historier fra en overordnet historiefortelling om "The Troublesome Other and I" var fremtredende i funnene *(1) historier om tillitsbrudd*, posisjonering av den andre foreldrene i forhold til tidligere traumatiske hendelser, og (2) *historier om hvem som er dårlig*, posisjonerer medforelder som enten en illojal medforelder eller en dysfunksjonell forelder. Funnene tyder på at langvarige og vedvarende konflikter gjorde det umulig å finne tilgjengelige posisjoner for samarbeid. Artikkel III: Tre posisjoner om fars aktørskap fremkom i analysene: (1) *Redningsmann* (2) *Jungelguiden* og (3) et være et *Lyspunkt i en tåke av usikkerhet*. Hver posisjon eksemplifiserer fedre "verdenssyn", "mikrokosmos" eller "moralske standard " i forhold til farer som omgir barn som følge av skilsmissekonflikter, og viser hvordan fedre vanligvis posisjonerer sine barn og sin egen etiske holdning når det gjelder aktørskap for forelder. Vår forståelse av fars aktørskap er, med utgangspunkt i posisjoneringsteori, fedres historiefortellinger (verdenssyn) om deres forpliktelse til å gjennomføre en handlinger (utføre aktørskap) i forhold til hvordan de oppfatter sine barn og deres behov.

Diskusjon og avsluttende refleksjoner:

Avhandlingens diskusjonskapittel drøfter mønstre på tvers av de enkelte artiklene. I tillegg diskuteres noen implikasjoner for fagfeltet og metodologiske styrker og begrensninger.

Funnene belyser hvordan langvarige og vedvarende konflikter posisjonerer familiesystemet, og hvordan ulike familiemedlemmer konstruerer og tar opp tilgjengelige posisjoner for å håndtere konfliktrelaterte utfordringer. Slik kunnskap er særlig relevant for familievernet, og alle etater i kontakt med barn og foreldre til skilsmissefamilier, som skole, barnevern. Det er også relevant internasjonalt for fagpersoner og ulike former for helse og velferdtjenester som bistår barn og foreldre i skilsmissefamilier. Denne avhandlingen argumenterer for at barn med foreldre i

langvarig konflikt ikke er et passivt offer, men en agent som forsøker å håndere utfordringer i en konflikt. Langvarig konflikt etter skilsmisse er funnet å være en forstyrrende posisjoneringskraft, og som en trussel mot foreldrenes agens. Avhandlingen argumenterer familievernet bør hjelpe skilsmisseforeldre innenfor rammene av deres *felles samarbeidskapasitet* og at foreldre i langvig og vedvarende konflikt i større grad kan praktisere parallell foreldre for å redusere eksponering av konfliktekt. Avhandlingen sier også at langvarig skilsmisse-konflikter er et samfunnsansvar og ikke kun et ansvar for konflikteksponerte foreldre eller familier alene. Det er derfor viktig at velferdsinstitusjoner, som familievernet, andvender en ikke-dømmende og systemisk forståelse og tar hensyn til hva ulike subjekt posisjoner i familien betyr. Videre legger avhandlingen også til vår kunnskap om hvordan ulike posisjoner som familiemedlemmer tar opp, i familier som er dratt inn i langvarige konflikter, begrenser andre medlemmers muligheter til å ta opp sin foretrukne posisjon som barn, som forelder `vis a vis´ barnet eller i forhold til den andre forelderen. Denne studien, med bruk av posisjoneringsteori, legger til et utvidet perspektiv på diskurser av skilsmissefamilier og hvordan familier forhandler om posisjoner.

I forhold til implikasjoner og siste refleksjoner, så advares familievernet mot en diagnose orientert forståelse med bruk av terminologi som skaper en lineær og rigid posisjonering av ulike familiemedlemmer i vedvarende konflikter etter skilsmisse. Det vurderes at avhandlingen har bred relevans for å forstå utfordringer og dilemmaer som familievernet og andre barn og familie orienterte velferdstjenster står overfor i dag. Det er behov for for mer forskning som undersøker meningskapning til barn og foreldre som brukere, og om hvordan ulike velferdstjenester posisjonerer skilsmissefamilier med konfliktrelaterte utfordringer.

List of Publications[1]

Stokkebekk, J., Iversen, A. C., Hollekim, R., & Ness, O. (2019). "Keeping balance", "Keeping distance" and "Keeping on with life": Child positions in divorced families with prolonged conflicts. *Children and Youth Services, 102, 108-119.* *https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.04.021*.

Stokkebekk J, Iversen A, Hollekim R, Ness O. (2021) "The Troublesome Other and I": Parallel stories of separated parents in prolonged conflicts. *Journal of Marital Family Therapy, 47*(1), 52-68. https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12474

Stokkebekk, J., Törrönen, J. Emery, R.E., Iversen, A. C., & Hollekim, R. (2022)The Heroic Savior, the Jungle Guide and the Beacon Amidst a Fog of Uncertainty: Agency of Fathers in Prolonged Postdivorce Conflicts and their Positioning of Children. *Manuscript submitted for publication.*

[1] *The published papers are open access.*

Contents

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

This thesis aims to explore subject positions within postdivorce families, with parents in prolonged conflict, and their constructions of family life. Postdivorce family life is studied from the venture point of how prolonged conflicts between noncohabiting parents position the family and how families position themselves and other family members to the challenges of postdivorce conflicts.

In Norway, between 30 and 40 percent of all children experience family dissolvement or live in a family arrangement other than with both parents (Statistics Norway, 2018). Since the 1990s, the number of child-related parental conflicts that ended up in court has increased considerably in Norway (Vimblemo et al., 2016) and other Western countries (Bergman & Mark Cummings, 2018). Among divorced families, between ten and 15 percent of parents are estimated to have conflicts for more than two years (Hetherington, 2002; Kitterød & Wiik, 2017). Family environments with prolonged conflicts are found to involve a range of efforts from welfare institutions and services, from the court system (Poitras et al., 2021) to child welfare (Rød et al., 2013) and health services (Harold et al., 2002; Shantz & Hartup, 1992). Additionally, exposure to conflict is found to potentially have a derogatory effect on child development (Cummings et al., 2015; Emery, 1992) and parent and family functioning (Davies et al., 2004). Each year, child welfare services in Norway receive 8800 reports of conflict and 10000 reports of family violence (Statistics Norway, 2019a). The literature is replete with the challenges faced by families involved in prolonged conflict (Harold & Sellers, 2018; Warmuth et al., 2020; Zemp et al., 2016) and the need to develop services that address the unique needs of families involved in enduring parenting disputes.

The traditional belief of divorce (as described in Section 1.2) as a major predictor of children's maladjustment (Amato, 2010; Emery, 1999; Kelly, 2013) is exceeded by a

more recent, complex understanding that prolonged postdivorce family conflict might be more significant to family wellbeing than the singular consequence of parental divorce (Warmuth et al., 2020; Zemp et al., 2016). Topics central in most theories about the effect of postdivorce family conflict (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Emery, 2011; Grych & Fincham, 1990) are the meaning-making of potential challenges (Gerard et al., 2005). Additionally, the developmental capabilities of children (Kelly, 2000; McIntosh, 2014) and their ability to influence the situation (Birnbaum & Saini, 2012; Brummert Lennings & Bussey, 2016; Brummert Lennings & Bussey, 2017; Camisasca et al., 2017) have been explored to some extent.

However, how families conceptualize and navigate conflict-related challenges individually and relationally vis each other is still not completely understood (Francia et al., 2019a). Although research has established that frequent and unresolved conflict is a risk (see Sections 1.2./1.3) and that wellbeing and functioning in family vary according to the meaning-making of challenges, these findings raise a number of questions, including how family members in prolonged conflict construct meaning and navigate family life (Francia et al., 2019a; Francia et al., 2019b). Drawing on this literature, I argue that additional research on the meaning-making of family members in these circumstances is crucial. Studies concerning children, parents in general, and the specific perspectives of fathers in postdivorce high conflict families are lacking (Campo et al., 2021; Forsberg & Autonen-Vaaraniemi, 2019).

This thesis is based on interviews with children and their parents in more than two years of conflict past separation. By exploring child and parent meaning-making, available subject positions, and how they position themselves in postdivorce conflict-related challenges, more insights into family life in these families might be gained. My aim is that this study will expand the knowledge about postdivorce families in prolonged conflicts and how various family members position themselves to family life in general and to conflict-related challenges in particular. Knowledge from the children's and parents' perspectives could help discern how to support their

wellbeing in (to them) relevant ways. Furthermore, my ambitions are also to add to the knowledge of how to aid and strengthen families embedded in enduring postdivorce conflicts. More knowledge about these families is important for policy-makers and various service providers for children and families.

1.2 The postdivorce family and family welfare institutions

In this introductory chapter, I provide a short historical background of the postdivorce family and the interwoven interests of society and the research community, and the development of specialized family welfare institutions (low threshold family counseling), such as the Norwegian Family Counseling Services, that address this form of family structure. My intention is that this information will provide a larger frame for this research endeavor.

The family is an institution with pivotal importance; a larger society is highly dependent on the family unit as a producer of social welfare (e.g., caregiving, social connectedness), even in well-functioning social welfare states such as Scandinavia (Bogenscheider, 2013). Therefore, it is of no surprise that politicians, policy-makers, and the research community have closely monitored the growth of divorce and the development of a greater diversity of family constellations (Walker & Abela, 2013). The number of divorces in Europe has more than doubled in the last 50 years (Eurostat, 2020). Additionally, the majority of parents in Western countries share households without being married. Consequently, the predominant proportion of family dissolvements (i.e., dissolvement of the one household family structure) is among unmarried cohabiting parents. More than 40 percent of children in Scandinavia experience family dissolvement; 9 out of 10 children in Norway live with both of their parents at birth, compared to 6 out of 10 when the child is 17 years old (Statistics Norway, 2019b). Although family transitions such as divorce are common (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Walsh, 2016c), the family arrangement is still conceptualized as a binary contrast to the traditional nuclear family

(Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2016). The latter is often considered a stable family arrangement, whereas the other is unstable and involves a multitude of psychosocial risks (Emery, 1999). When I use the term “postdivorce family” in this thesis, I refer to two household families with noncohabiting parents regardless of whether or not the parents have been married. Post-divorce families are also referred to as binuclear family system-in contrast to a nuclear family system (one-household family). Family therapist Constance Ahrons (1979, p. 499) coined the term the binuclear family system to aid continuing postdivorce parenting relationships in “its institutionalization and in lifting from it the stigma of social deviance”. Ahrons (1937-2021) sought to replace postdivorce pejoratives like “broken home”, her legacy is the development of a language to identify a postdivorce family structure and to introduce the term “good divorce”(Ahrons, 1994). Additionally, she wanted professionals, researchers and society to see that divorce was as much a social institution as marriage, a common experience rather than a deviant one, and that it could have beneficial outcomes.

Nevertheless, research endeavors have frequently used concepts such as marital disruption or “broken families,” and social scientists have often examined families with a mandate of documenting risk regarding challenges of family transitions, child rearing across two households, stressors related to structural/economic resources, etc. A range of research has also been conducted to establish how diverse family structure arrangements after separation impact wellbeing and psychosocial health (Baxter et al., 2014; Breivik, 2008; Dinisman et al., 2017). The importance of conducting research that identifies the consequences of divorce for children and adolescents is amplified by societal concerns for the wellbeing of children and by social policies intended to benefit children’s health and wellbeing. A review by Amato (2000) documented that more than 9200 studies examining divorce were published in the 1990s alone. Research has often relied on numeral data from larger populations (Breivik & Olweus, 2006; Nilsen et al., 2019) using methods such as psychometric tests and self-reports to measure children’s and parents’ adjustment and general well-

being in the aftermath of a divorce. Qualitative research with a focus on family members' own meaning-making is seldom used (Bertelsen, 2021a, 2021b; Haugen, 2010; Kay-Flowers, 2019; Marschall, 2017; Moxnes, 2016; Ruschena et al., 2005; Smart, 2006).

Kaganas and Day Sclater (2004) describe divorce as "a process that is framed at the intersections of legal practice, social policy, welfare ideology, relationship breakdown and personal pain" (2004, pp. 3-4). In the last 20 years, a debate has occurred over custody arrangements postdivorce with a focus on the rights to equality in parenting (father's right to be considered as equally important as mother's) and children's rights to be heard and influence parents' decision making. Additionally, the presence of father factors has been identified as important for child wellbeing after family dissolution (Steinbach et al., 2020). The focus in research and legislation is often on the wellbeing of children with undercurrents of different emphases that promote a father's rights to be equally involved (shared parenting) versus an argument of "natural"/common heterogeneity in living arrangements decided by each family and informed by child best interests and inclusion (McIntosh & Chisholm, 2008; Sclater & Piper, 2019; Visser et al., 2017). The ontologies of these different perspectives portray custody conflict as the result of a father's absence and a lack of fathers' rights versus the perspective that highlights parental conflict, their disagreements about child related concerns and communicative issues related to family transitions (Steinbach, 2019).

The shifting perspectives on postdivorce families and the legal rights of children and parents are evident in public debate and are highlighted in legal reform processes in different Western countries. At present, there is a public hearing about an Official Norwegian Report (NOU) (Frantzen et al., 2020), in which a panel of experts has suggested changes in Norwegian legislation that regulates child and parental rights ("Children Act," 1981). These debates highlight different discourses about the postdivorce family and the legal positions of parents and children. One discourse is

that of *gender equality* and universal parental rights (emphasizing the promotion of father rights) and for which the postdivorce child is positioned as a legal object (Hawthorne & Lennings, 2008; Sclater, 1995). The postdivorce child is also positioned as dependent and subject to heterogeneous welfare contexts. Within this *child welfare discourse*, parental rights are presented as contextualized and something that should vary and depend on each parent's custody responsibilities and situated child knowledge. Another discourse rests on children as a legal subject with the individual rights to have a say in important decisions that affect their lives. The expert panel has suggested that postdivorce parents (with legal parental responsibility rights) should agree before one parent is able to relocate with the child to a different part of the county and that the court should rule when one parent disagrees about where their child should live ("Children Act," 1981capter VI). The majority in the expert panel upholds the belief that ensuring both parents an equal right to decide their child's location (regardless of custody rights) is in the best interest of the child. Today, parents who have sole physical custody have the right to decide where the child should live ("Children Act," 1981; § 37). However, parents who intend to move with the child must notify the other parent no later than three months prior to a relocation (§ 42a.). If parents disagree, the parent who intends to relocate with the child must request mediation (Child act § 42). These suggested changes in legislation mean that the primary (custodial) parent, with the primary caretaking responsibilities, should have no more of a say than a parent that sees their child every other weekend. The minority of the expert group warned that these changes might lead to more conflicts that are brought to the court. The majority of the expert panel states that domestic relocation should (be part of parental responsibility rights) *because this promotes the consideration of equal parenting* (Frantzen et al., 2020, p. 205).

Internationally, the tendency is to promote the idea of "equal parental rights," with joint shared physical custody as an ideal (Smyth, 2017). Although increasingly applied, the equal shared burden of living and caring responsibilities for children (shared custody) is still very rare in the majority of Western countries (5 percent or

less), whereas the shared burden (gender equality in parenting) is more common in Nordic countries, such as Norway (8.8 percent) and Sweden (in the lead at 20.3 percent) (Steinbach et al., 2020). Consequently, most postdivorce living arrangements are with a parent with primary physical custody and with more responsibilities for daily care than the other parent. Thus, the process of divorce obliges parents to position themselves in relation to a range of often competing discourses (legal, welfare, therapeutic, and child and human rights) and to find ways of living alongside them. One of the most prominent discourses is the welfare of the child. This discourse promotes the principle of the "best interest of the child," in which parents have a legal and moral responsibility to provide living arrangements after separation that are in the best interest of the unique needs of the individual child. Similarly, an emphasis is placed on the child's rights in Section 104, second paragraph, of the Norwegian Constitution and in Article 3 no. 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as the child's right to be heard and express his or her opinion. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child dictates that the welfare of the child is of paramount importance, and children themselves should have a say in major decisions about their lives. The discourse of the welfare of the child might also be typically promoted along (and in many times in conflict) with the discourse of gender equality in parenting. In addition, a discourse of joint coparenting emphasizes parents' responsibility to jointly address how to meet the individual needs and best interest of the past separation of one's child.

Another discourse is related to individualism and Western ideals of autonomy and historical changes in beliefs about marriage and the nuclear family. Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992) states that modern society is characterized by the ideology of romantic love being progressively eroded and replaced by "confluent love," which is contingent and lacks the "forever" quality of romanticism. The search becomes that for the perfect relationship, in which the individual is viewed as having rights to personal autonomy and fulfilment; where one relationship fails to satisfy, the individual must be free to move on to try another; "a reflexive project of the self, as

people become less bound by ideas of duty and obligation and more prone to reflect upon whether certain courses of action are in their own interests or not" (Giddens, 1992). Although Giddens views changing beliefs and expectations associated with intimacy as major driving forces in the contemporary separation of marriage and parenthood, other social scientists emphasize structural or economic changes, such as women's rights and equal participation in paid work. Some social scientists focus on changes in society that made marriage and the nuclear family less central as a financial institution. A shift occurred during 1960–1970 through the increased awareness of women's rights (of independence) and when more women had paid work. Financial independence paved the way and empowered women in difficult relationships to divorce, whereas women before the Second World War most often largely depended on their husbands as breadwinners (Fine et al., 2006). The empowerment of women is important because, then as now, women are most often the initiators of a divorce process (Emery, 2011). Numerous studies have shown that women initiate two out of three divorces (couple dissolutions), and men initiate one-fourth of them; the rest are mutual decisions (Braver et al., 2005, p. 314; Emery, 2011).

The general finding in the literature regarding separating parents' wellbeing is that, following divorce, women tend to show greater emotional adjustments and recovery than men (Ahrons & Tanner, 2003). Studies show that men typically have more health concerns and psychosocial problems than women following a separation process. Women are often the initiators of a couple's dissolvement and, thus, start the process of adjusting to the romantic dissolvement before separation. Men often start the process of adjustment during and after separation. Additionally, men usually have fewer social networks and social support and have coping strategies that are less effective than those of women (Fine et al., 2006; Philip, 2014).

According to (Amato, 1994), three basic perspectives exist on the consequences of divorce for children: the lack of parental support/parental absence perspective, the

economic disadvantage perspective (Cooper et al., 2009), and the family conflict perspective (Buchanan et al., 1991; Grych et al., 2000). In their extensive meta-analysis, Amato and Keith (1991) and, subsequently, (Amato, 2001) found more support for the family conflict perspective than the other perspectives at a group level. Other researchers have later contributed to this position (Harold & Sellers, 2018) and found that family conflict independently involves more risk than the separation process (Xerxa et al., 2020). However, all of these perspectives of the consequences of separation are relevant; for the individual child, the factors that contribute to risk or that promote adjustment might vary (Amato, 2010). Additionally, although the risk and wellbeing might vary among various family structures, research from resilience perspectives has shown that children can attain positive outcomes within a number of different family structures. Most postdivorce families are resilient and typically fare well after family transitions, which matters most in the effectiveness of the family processes and the quality of the relationships within a family (Walsh, 2016a).

Significant research has focused on children in prolonged postdivorce families from a risk perspective, often with quantitative measurements of child adjustments from children and adult (parents, teachers, therapist) reports (Breivik, 2008; Breivik & Olweus, 2006; Forehand et al., 1989; Grych et al., 1992; Holt et al., 2020; Nilsen et al., 2019; Weldon et al., 2019). Children's own accounts (Rød et al., 2008) and meaning-making of family life with prolonged conflict have been explored to a lesser degree. This topic is emphasized in article I in this thesis, in which children's own meaning-making is examined (see article I in this thesis for further information). Despite the recurrent use of adult-reported research, the value of child-reported research is well recognized (Emery, 1999; Fosco & Bray, 2016).

The risk of ill health in children exposed to intense and unresolved parental conflict has been well established in the literature (Harold & Sellers, 2018; Zemp et al., 2018). However, most research on postdivorce parental conflict has been conducted

in North America (USA; Canada), Australia, and Great Britain. Consequently, research on the phenomenon of postdivorce family conflict situated in a Scandinavian welfare context (Holt et al., 2020) and qualitative research of child and parents meaning-making of family life in prolonged postdivorce conflicts in general are lacking (Francia et al., 2019a; Rød, 2010; Rød, 2012; Rød et al., 2008). In the Scandinavian context, parental conflict might have other meanings and involve other consequences related to the meaning-making of family dynamics and the nature of postdivorce family conflict. Significant gender equality and a high degree of social security—with both parents involved in parenting and mothers participating in paid work—might resonate in less conflict, meaning that parents in separated households are less exposed to economic stressors than in European countries or in the United States. Additionally, the population in Norway is highly educated; 34.6 percent completed some form of university-level education in 2019 (Statistics Norway, 2020). Children of highly educated divorced parents are at risk of lower academic performance than their nondivorced peers (Nilsen et al., 2019). However, higher education and high norms of gender equality might also involve higher social expectations of shared custody that could put pressure on parents who struggle with coparenting. Additionally, different ideas of parenting practices might involve different social expectations on the position of a child, which might also resonate with how children are exposed or engulfed in conflict. However, that divorce is associated with adverse outcomes among children has been suggested, and Scandinavian countries have effect sizes quite similar to those obtained in the United States (Nilsen, 2020b).

1.3 Aim of the thesis and research questions

The main aim of this thesis is to answer the following overarching research question: *How do two-household families with parents in prolonged conflict construct and position themselves and others in family life?* I was interested in how children and their parents constructed family life and how they took up various subject positions

when dealing with prolonged dyadic family conflicts as a child, as a coparent vis-à-vis the other parent, and as a parent vis-à-vis their child. The research was informed by social construction, systemic theory, and the discursive framework of positioning theory.

The overarching research question was explored in three papers as follows.

1) a) How do children position themselves to challenges in postdivorce family conflict, and how is family conflict positioning children? (Paper I)
2) (a) What storylines emerge when separated couples in prolonged conflicts talk about their coparent relationship? (b) What positions of the self and the other are constructed when talking about the conflicted coparenting relationship? (c) What does it mean for the duty of parenthood when separated parents are in a prolonged conflict? (Paper II)
3) (a) What storylines of parental agency emerge when separated fathers talk about their children who are in distress from the conflict? (b) What positions of agency do fathers take up in these storylines, and in what kinds of subject positions are fathers other positioning their children and ex-partner? (c) How do these storylines legitimize fathers' own positions and actions towards their children and ex-partner? (Paper III)

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of five chapters. I have thus far (in the introduction chapter) described the historical background of the postdivorce family and family welfare

institutions, the aim of the project, and the knowledge status related to postdivorce families. Updates and reviews of the literature are integrated in the thesis.

In Chapter 2, I present the theoretical framework used in the thesis, with reference to how the theory was applied in the three papers. The method chapter (Chapter 3) presents the scientific and theoretical assumptions of the thesis, the research design, the sampling strategies, and the analytical approaches and discusses aspects of ethics and quality. In Chapter 4, I present the results of the thesis by summarizing the results of the articles. In Chapter 5, I discuss some overarching patterns across the material considering the current research and theory and the methodological limitations and implications of the thesis.

1.5 What are prolonged conflicts in a postdivorce family?

Conflict means fighting from the Latin noun conflictus, which originates from the Latin verb con fligere, meaning clashing together (Borisoff & Victor, 1998). Conflict is an unavoidable feature of family life, and episodes of conflict can help facilitate and understand different needs and clarify expectations and roles. Conflict could be used as an intrapersonal construct, for instance, when a parent faces dilemmas of making choices that involve contradictory values, such as interpersonal conflict among two or more persons (e.g., parents, child–parent) or as a conflict between groups, for instance, between two households and their families of origin (Coleman et al., 2014). The thesis includes all aspects of these forms of conflict, but the main focus is on interpersonal or social conflicts between individuals in and across two household family structures.

Ekeland (2014) proposed a definition of social conflict as follows:

> We talk about conflict when differences between mutually interdependent persons are perceived as excluding or threatening to the needs and interests of individuals, and tensions and emotional reactions occur due to one of the

> individuals' perceptions that the other person is using force to influence the situation to his or her advantage. (Ekeland, 2014, p. 88; My translation)

The presented definition of conflict has two important characteristics. First, polarized differences combined with mutual interdependency must exist (such as being part of a family as a child or a parent). Second, some amount of emotional vulnerability must exist that is related to the fact that one of the family members is using his or her powers to gain an advantage and deny other members his or her rights (needs or interests), thus creating high levels of tension between those involved.

Interpersonal conflict can be constructive but also destructive, especially when it is prolonged and unsolved, as in postdivorce conflicts. Braver et al. (2005) suggest that conflict among divorced parents can be conceptualized as including three dimensions: legal conflict, behavioral conflict, and attitudinal conflict (Braver et al., 2005; Johnston, 1994). Legal conflict involves actions in the court system, such as a continued series of mediation and litigation, requests for change or noncompliance with court decisions, or written agreement in mediation. Behavioral conflict refers to how the conflict is expressed between family members through direct interactions between parents, such as verbal disputes, or through indirect interactions, such as denigrating the other parent to the child. Finally, attitudinal conflict involves a parent's hostility and negative emotions, including negative attitudes toward the ex and their parenting role. In this thesis, the focus is on postdivorce conflicts in all of these aspects and on conflicts recognized by parents themselves to be challenging or destructive. Characteristics often highlighted in research about destructive family conflict are longevity, severity, degree of resolution, and content (Saxbe et al., 2012).

During family transitions, such as divorces, parents might have different opinions about the termination of their romantic relationship (Emery, 2011). Future child living arrangements, parenting styles, and roles as separated parents are often difficult to negotiate. Following a divorce, parents' financial psychological, emotional, and psychological resources might be drained, resulting in more stress, conflict, and

difficulties with parenting (Afifi et al., 2016). All of these stressors can be managed to make the conflict manageable, but the complexity, which involves a myriad of interdependent relations and aspects that are central to quality of life, makes conflict somewhat unique in divorced families (Samp, 2017).

Postdivorce conflicts are often child oriented, and the risk increases that children will be caught in the middle (Amato & Tamara, 2006) of their parents' conflicts. Feeling caught in the middle (Amato & Tamara, 2006; Buchanan et al., 1991) from the perspective of balance theory (Heider, 1958, 2020) points out that holding positive feelings toward two individuals who hold negative feelings toward one another results in a psychological dilemma. Children who attempt to remain close to parents who are hostile toward one another might feel instantaneously loyal and disloyal to both, resulting in an aversive state of dissonance. Consequently, being close to both (conflicted parents) involves psychological costs that might outweigh the benefits of having strong ties with each parent. This concept is explored further in Paper I, which aims to explore children's positions in conflicted families.

Children often fare badly when their parents are in ongoing conflict and fare even worse if parents are unable to shield them, and long and more intense conflicts are associated with a greater likelihood of long-term damage to children (Amato & Keith, 1991; Kelly, 2013). After an initial period of conflict, most parents are able to cooperate with low levels of conflict, whereas 10–15 percent remain in conflict 2–3 years after separation (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Statistics Norway's survey on child living arrangements from 2012 showed that 17 percent of fathers and 16 percent of mothers experienced conflict to a large extent (Lyngstad et al., 2014). International estimates of "high conflict" typically range from 10–25 percent, with 5–15 percent being the most common estimated range of enduring conflict (Smyth & Moloney, 2019).

Anderson et al. (2010) suggest that high conflict is characterized by two core clusters: (1) pervasive negative exchanges and (2) a hostile, insecure, and emotional

environment. Furthermore, parental conflict can be described along five different dimensions: intensity, frequency, expression, content, duration, and the extent to which conflicts are resolved (Helland & Borren, 2015).

Post-divorce parents in high conflict is often distinguished from less severe conflicts on the one hand and domestic violence on the other. The prevalence of violence increases sharply during separation and divorce processes (Brownridge et al., 2008). Definitions of high conflict and family violence often overlap. The results from a number of studies have contributed to distinguishing between the mutual violence sometimes exercised between partners in high-conflict couples and the more one-sided violence that takes place in cases of serious partner violence or maltreatment (Simpson et al., 2007). Not uncommon is including mild, mutual or situational violence in the high conflict concept (Anderson et al., 2010). "Exposure to violence includes experiencing, viewing, hearing, or being involved in the aftermath of the physical violence that has taken place" (Edleson, 1999). Kimball and Kimball (2016) promote the idea of broadening the definition of children's exposure to violence and include sexual, psychological, emotional, and economic abuse to capture the full effects of children's exposure and to identify the key protective factors that promote resilience.

Smyth and Moloney (2019) propose two different forms of postdivorce conflict: (1) *circumstantial conflict* from failed attempts to resolve difficult situations, such as how best to adjust parenting arrangements to children's changing needs and differences in parenting practices, and (2) *entrenched* or *enduring conflict*, whose primary factor is not the content of the dispute itself *"but the dysfunctional interpersonal dynamics underpinning and/or triggered by that content"* (Smyth & Moloney, 2019). From my understanding of conflict, I have added another distinction: separated parents who have a history of more than two years of conflict post-separation and with serval unsuccessful efforts involving professionals (mediation/court/therapy) to resolve conflict or to successfully coparent. This form of

conflict that prevails after substantial efforts of attempting to resolve disputes and involving involvement from multiple professionals (i.e., counseling, mediation, court) is referred to as (3) *prolonged conflict* (see article II in this thesis for further explanation). Ahrons (1994) indicates that some parents indefinitely persist in high conflict. Parents who remain in postseparation conflict are described as more challenging to understand due to the following:

> A specific domain of conflict may be perceived by one party and not by the other, the parties may employ different conflict tactics (for example, one might avoid and the other may litigate), and one party may harbour greater hostility than is reciprocated by the other (Johnston, 1994, p. 166).

Meaning-making is central in many of the theoretical perspectives used to help understand why children are affected by their parents' conflict. The cognitive-contextual (Grych & Cardoza-Fernandes, 2001) and emotional security (Cummings & Davies, 2010) framework signifies that conflicts are mediated by how family members conceptualize and position themselves in conflict-related challenges. How we perceive, manage, and communicate about conflict varies among persons and in families. When people are asked to provide a metaphor for conflict, the focus is mainly on conflict as negative and problematic, likening it to "a war," "a battle," "unhealthy," and "a struggle" (McCorkle & Gayle, 2003; McCorkle & Mills, 1992). An investigation showed that none of the conflict metaphors used by people in conflict were positive. McCorkle et al. suggest that it appears to confirm the Euro-American cultural assumption that conflict is by definition negative or that conflicts that are easily or successfully resolved are perhaps not considered conflicts at all (McCorkle & Mills, 1992). The Grych and Fincham (1990) cognitive-contextual framework maintains that children's meaning-making of parent conflict mediates the association between the parent's conflict and child wellbeing and adjustment. Children often blame themselves for the conflict and, consequently, feel threatened by conflict-related subjects or situations in the family. The Davies and Cumming

(1994) emotional security hypothesis suggests that children's emotional security is threatened by parents' conflict. Parents who are hostile or aggressive toward each other make children question their family life and their attachments with their parents. Children tend to respond physically, emotionally, and physiologically when they feel insecure in their family environment.

One welfare institution that has been central in supporting individuals, couples, and families in family transitions is family counseling services in Norway.

1.6 The Family Counseling Service in Norway

The Norwegian Family Counseling Service (FCS) is a nationwide statuary public low-threshold family welfare service that is subject to its own law and that offers mediation, counseling, and treatment for family-related issues to individuals, couples, and families (Norwegian-Official-Report(NOU), 2019: 20). The main objective of the FCS is to provide treatment and counseling when there are "difficulties, conflicts or crises in the family" ("The Family Councelling Service Act," 1997, p. §1). Family counseling services (also translated as family welfare centers) are a form of public service that is unique even in a Scandinavian context. Although most welfare states offer services targeted to children and families, having nationwide low-threshold services with the sole aim of promoting family relationships and in which the couple or the family unit (or relationship) is defined as the client is unique. Presently, 41 family counseling offices operate nationwide. Family counseling services have traditionally been autonomous offices organized under the county or municipality with a "motto" that once reflected low-threshold services for "*ordinary people's ordinary problems"* (Skauli, 2009). However, in 2005, the Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion established the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir). Bufdir then became responsible for the management and operation of state-funded child welfare agencies and family counseling services (Norwegian-Official-Report(NOU), 2019: 20). Child welfare are

the dominant focus and assimilative force within the organization, spending approximately 60–80 percent of the total funding in providing specialized institutions or foster care for children/youth from high-risk populations(Bufdir, 2020). Important divides exist concerning mandates with different legislation and roles among the different fields of service providers. State-funded child welfare services have a normative/paternalistic mandate with responsibility for the institutionalized caretaking (help/control) of children/youth with a history of abuse/maltreatment, whereas family counseling services are identified by therapeutic traditions of providing services to a generalized population with an emphasis on autonomy, nonnormative interventions, and confidentiality (Syrstad, 2020). However, although FCS and CW have different mandates, the low threshold counselling services for couple and families are no longer found in organisational structure of Bufdir, the department (division) with responsibilities that is most closely related to FCS is labelled “Growing up” (Oppvekst), indicating a decontextualized child development focus rather than an emphasis on the family unit or social context where children grow up (Bufdir, 2022). The centralized and directory-led organization (Bufetat) have focused on risk populations, standardization, and the promotion of equal services in CWSs and FCSs, that is, with the introduction of nationwide specialized teams with the responsibility of competence development. Four national specialized competence teams (in FCS) are responsible for promoting competence in various subjects related to child involvement in services and the promotion of parental functioning in general and in high-risk populations. The national competance teams is as follows: Parental support and Prevention work, (Family) violance and high conflict, Parental support after taking child into care, Children and youth in family councelling(Norwegian-Official-Report(NOU), 2019: 20). Although FCS is the only state funded welfare service that offer couple therapy, there is currently no national specialized competence team for couple (or family) therapy.

Family-oriented systemic knowledge and family therapy training have traditionally been central to the ontological and epistemological identity, orientation, and

professional development of services.(Norwegian-Official-Report(NOU), 2019: 20) The family therapy field emphasizes relationships rather than the individual psyche as the primary unit (Jensen, 2013; Walsh, 2014). In Norway, the family therapist is not a profession with a protected title or authorization, as it is in Sweden, Finland, the United Kingdom, the United States, and many other western countries (Jensen, 2013). Nearly all European countries deem family therapy training to be at a specialization on post graduate level (Borcsa et al., 2013; Carr, 2013).The need for specific competence requirements for family therapists and government approved authorization has been an emphasis in many European countries (Carr, 2013; Stratton et al., 2011). Most therapist in FCS services have a background as clinical social workers or psychologists (SSB, 2019). Until 2001, some level of family therapy training was required (for both leaders and therapists) and protected by law (Norwegian-Official-Report(NOU), 2019: 20, p. 67). However, after revisions to the family counseling act (§ 4), formal family therapy training is no longer a competence requirement that is protected by law.

During the last two decades, the predominance of service users has shifted; today, service users are predominantly postdivorce families (if mediation and counseling cases are included), in contrast to the earlier predominance of couple therapy (statistics Norway, 2020). Thus, conflict (the topic of this thesis) is a concept of vital importance in FCS in many aspects; it provides a mandate and focus to services and invites service users to get help to prevent, deal with, or resolve various conflict challenges, especially in postdivorce families. Postdivorce families are introduced to services on their initiative (voluntarily) in counseling and therapy or through mandatory family mediation. Mandatory mediation for parents that are separating is unique to Norway (Tjersland & Gulbrandsen, 2017, p. 8).

A mandatory mediation scheme was implemented in 1993 to address postdivorce conflict as a situation that is potentially harmful to children (Bertelsen, 2021a; Tjersland et al., 2015). This scheme was established to assist parents in securing good

access to agreements between them and to take care of the children's best interests, to prevent and help during conflicts, and to avoid court proceedings. The scheme is obligatory for separating married parents with children 16 years or younger ("Marriage Act," 1991, §26) and for nonmarried cohabiting parents moving apart ("Children Act," 1981, § 51). Mediation is also a requirement when attending court for custody issues. Parents with enduring conflicts have been reluctant to use the full extent of the services (seven sessions of mediation) and often took their cases to courts after one session (Jensberg et al., 2011; Tjersland & Gulbrandsen, 2017). Mandatory mediation has also been criticized for violating the central principles of mediation/conflict resolution work—conflicted parties have ownership over their conflicts (Christie, 1976)—and the ideals of autonomy/volunteerism. Additionally, it is argued that the "mediation scheme does not "provide sufficient assistance to those who strive the most" (Tjersland & Gulbrandsen, 2017, p. 18; my translation), leading to a new scheme that aims to identify populations with high conflict and mobilize resources to aid these families. A standardized model—"Processual Mediation in High Conflict," was developed from 2015 to 2018 (Bufdir, 2015). Additionally, efforts were made to involve children in services, mediation, and therapy—particularly among separating or postdivorce families. This Ph.D. project had its outspring from efforts to establish a child-involved family therapy program to postdivorce families in prolonged conflict (Huglen et al., 2020). A need existed for more scientific knowledge of the high conflict postdivorce population, which led to the funding of this Ph.D. project in 2016.

2. Theoretical framework

In this chapter, I present and discuss theoretical frameworks that have informed the thesis and describe some of the process of acquiring a theoretical perspective.

Initially, I present the social construction, systemic theory, and discursive framework of positioning theory that became the main theoretical focus in this research project.

The search for a theoretical framework is an inherent part of the development of any Ph.D. project. I convey some of the process and reflections (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009) and search for a suitable theoretical framework because transparency is essential in a theory-informed qualitative project (Bøttcher et al., 2018) (see also the methodology chapter).

The research project initially focused on theories of coping (Dyk & Schvaneveldt, 1987) and child and family resilience (Margolin et al., 2001; Walsh, 2016b); hence, the initial title of the research project was Styrking av barn i høykonflikt ("Strengthening of Children in High conflict Divorce") (Norwegian-Official-Report(NOU), 2019: 20, p. 185). This hopeful focus was inspired by participating in the development of a resilience-informed family treatment program called Strong Children in Two Homes (Huglen et al., 2020). The foundations of resilience are shown in the empirical evidence that reveals that, given any exposure to risk, one can also find individuals or groups with an ability to thrive. An array of studies have found that no combination of risk factors, regardless of severity, gives rise to the significant and long-lasting disorders in most children exposed to such factors (Rutter, 2012). Although the resilience perspective has found its place regarding family violence (Alvarez-Lizotte et al., 2020; Chester & Joscelyne, 2018), as a perspective, it has been noted to be lacking research on postdivorce conflicts (Smyth & Moloney, 2019). Family resilience refers to "the capacity of the family system to withstand and rebound from adversity, strengthened and more resourceful" (Walsh, 2016b, p. 315). Additionally, the potential for families to protect children and

facilitate their resilience makes up important capacity available for adaptive responses in adverse contexts (Masten, 2018). Child and family resilience is a construct that is relationally oriented and focuses on the strengths and abilities of households or families to jointly support each other and overcome challenges, such as divorce. The family therapist Froma Walsh (2016a) has developed a framework with a systemic view of resilience, in which the central concepts are belief systems that focus on household joint meaning-making, a sense of coherence, and a positive outlook on challenges. Additionally, family therapist Michael Ungar (2001; 2004) applied an understanding of child and family resilience as a phenomenon that is culturally diverse and socially constructed. He found that the path and struggle to wellness for high-risk youth could be found in circumstances or when performing activities that researchers, professionals, and adults construed as risky or illbeing (Ungar, 2001; Ungar, 2004).

However, as the project evolved, I found it crucial to determine a theoretical framework that could shed some light on meaning-making, conflicts, and power balance, the construction of the self and others, and agency and restrictions on agency. This quest for a "multipurpose" theory led me to discursive psychology and positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990). I ended up applying perspectives from social construction, systemic theory, in addition to the discursive framework of positioning theory constitute the main theoretical perspectives of the thesis. Positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) was applied, although in dialog with "resource-oriented" theories, such as child and family resilience (Walsh, 2016b)family salutogenesis (Antonovsky & Sourani, 1988). A resource-oriented focus is found in for instance paper I: on children's unique meaning-making of conflict-related challenges and how they position themselves to promote wellness for themselves and their families.

2.1 Social construction and systemic theory

In this thesis, social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Gergen et al., 2015) and systemic theory (Bateson, 1987; Minuchin, 1965) have two functions: first as part as a theoretical framework and second as part of an ontological and epistemological view of science (Heatherington et al., 2015). Social construction as a theoretical framework is about how I describe the empirical material and is used to reflect on and discuss the results of the thesis. From a theoretical standpoint, social construction is about how I position myself in relation to how I understand that knowledge is being developed and research is understood, as well as how the research process is being developed (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Burr, 2015; Gergen et al., 2015; McNamee, 2010).

Systemic theory rests on a cybernetic metaphor about how the family *as a living system* is made up of complex relationship patterns among its members and between the family and the outside world. This antireductionist view emphasizes the importance of wholeness and interdependence. A family system has three characteristics: (1) wholeness and order; (2) hierarchical structure; and (3) adaptive self-organization (Cox & Paley, 2003). The first characteristic means that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and that a part cannot be understood by itself (Watzlawick et al., 1967). The second characteristic means that a family consists of subsystems with different roles and hierarchies, such as sibling, parent–child, or coparental relationships. The third characteristic means that a family is an open, living system that can reorganize itself by adapting to external forces, such as the challenges arising from divorce or dyadic family conflict post separation (Cox & Paley, 2003).

Robert Emery (1992) developed a theory of conflict within a systemic family framework. Here, family is described as neither a collection of individuals nor a collection of dyadic relationships (parent–parent-child) but a functioning whole—a unit that contains interdependent individuals and relationships. Individuals are

affected by conflict in the relationships between other family members and not only by conflict in their relationships. Although they no longer share the same household, the parent–child–parent triad continues to influence all members of the divorced family. Even when one parent is physically absent, that parent is often psychologically present in topics of conversation (e.g., in outbursts of anger, denigration of the other parent)—or in topics that are avoided (e.g., when it is forbidden to mention the other parent). In most cases, children are exposed to conflict (related topics) from being with one of their parents but also when mother, father, and child are present, such as at school graduations, family mediations, or custody hearings. Thus, the triadic mother–child–father relationship—the entire family system—continues to be influential after divorce.

Emery states that family conflict is often related to negotiations of boundaries and that intimacy and power are the basic dimensions (or contents) of family relationships around which boundaries must be (re)drawn (Emery, 2011). Boundaries have been conceptualized and subsequently operationalized in several ways in the family literature (Afifi, 2006). From a systems perspective (Minuchin, 1982), boundaries are often described as physical boundaries from one system or subsystem to another (e.g., having a physical access rule that regulates contact between nonresidential parents and children) and as intimacy boundaries (e.g., emotional boundaries with one's ex) or role-relational boundaries (e.g., rules and norms for appropriate parenting). Intimacy boundaries—both love and hate—indicate very involved (intimate) relationships, and parents' intense anger can sometimes represent stronger—not weaker—intimacy during the separation process (Emery, 2011). Parents might be unable to regulate or contain their emotional reactions and could attack their coparent as a form of retribution. Consequently, fathers might threaten to reduce their involvement as parents, and mothers might threaten with claims of greater financial support to "get even." Postdivorce parents need to renegotiate roles, from being a romantic couple to friends, business-like partners, or enemies.

Emery (2011) argues that parents often fight over parental power, which is defined as holding special privileges that are rarely challenged by others. The theme of power is discussed in articles I and II and in relation to agency and positioning power in article III. Parents often have much more power than children, who gain more privileges (power) as they grow older. Along this line of thinking, power is different from influence or control. Infants have a strong influence in the family, but it could be argued that they have little power.

A second position of systems theory is that causality is reciprocal in the natural chains of interactions such that cause and effect are a matter of perspective. For example, from one point of view, it can be argued that a father's avoidance of discussing parenting issues causes his ex-partner`s attack/critique. However, from another perspective, a mother's critique/attack can be said to cause her ex-partner's avoidance. This form of circular causality or conflict pattern is often referred to as the pursuer–distancer cycle (Gottman, 1993; Levite & Cohen, 2011). In relation to triadic conflict, reciprocal influence means that individuals are not only affected by others' family conflicts but also affect the process and outcome of those conflicts.

Given the complexity and multiple reciprocal processes in a family (an open system), various means and/or developmental paths could lead to similar outcomes. Equifinality states that the same end might be reached from a widely different set of beginning points (Samman & Moreno, 2019). For instance, all members in a conflicted household could feel distressed, but their perspective (connotation) of the conflict and the cause of the distress might be different. Prolonged conflict intervenes in all areas of family life that are essential for the quality of life of the children in conflict families (van Eldik et al., 2020). Some children, despite parental conflict, experience good quality of life, whereas others find life challenging as a result of the same risk burden (Smyth & Moloney, 2019). Multifinality is the idea that a variety of different ends (some desirable and some not) from the same beginning point occur in open systems (Ungar, 2018). Therefore, conflicts and difficulties in parents'

relationships interact in several aspects in the family system. Difficulties in conflict in divorced families often affect the children through (1) children's opinion of the conflict and the extent to which the conflict was perceived as a threat, (2) the quality of the relationship between parents and children, and (3) the quality of care/parental functioning (Harold & Sellers, 2018; van Dijk et al., 2020). A child might feel protected from an ongoing conflict by an attentive and reassuring parent, whereas a sibling could feel that the same support is unhelpful.

Systemic theory often refers to the evolution of different perspectives of the systemic metaphor (Tomm, 1998). In first-order cybernetics, the perspective is grounded in traditional systems theory with a focus on (observable) family interactions and communication patterns. From this perspective, the researcher often remains outside the system being observed/examined (Ochs et al., 2020), as in quantitative research (Nilsen, 2020a). However, the second-order perspective is grounded in social constructionism and second-order cybernetics (Scott, 2004). From this perspective, the researcher is part of the system of observation—also referred to as the linguistic turn (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988)—which involves a shift from a focus on interactional patterns to meaning-making. Thus, the focus is on exploring discourses, positions of meaning-making, and patterns of seeing and giving meaning in a family. Being part of the observed system means that, as a researcher, I must reflexively examine patterns of looking and must work to understand how looking and seeing things in different ways is part of the research process (Bertrando, 2018).

Social construction emphasizes that how we see and understand the world is created within social and cultural discourses and language rather than as a result of inner psychic processes. Knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is more a construction than a reflection of an independently existing reality, inseparable from the knowing subject or else the observer (Burr, 2015). Thus, our understanding of the world is always evolving, and our use of language contributes a common understanding of reality within social communities (Gergen et al., 2015).

We understand the world by how we talk about it; the world is not something out there for discovery (Gergen et al., 2015). Given this light of thinking, parents or children might display certain characteristics or tendencies. However, the focus is not on inherent personality characteristics that exist independent of the system; rather, they emerge from the interactional patterns in the system. Thus, the emphasis of the family statement, "he has always been like this," is considered a statement about rules or how family members position themselves. In the thesis, I have applied a focus on meaning-making from the venture point of social construction and systemic and discursive theory.

2.2 Discursive framework

Foucault defines discourse as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). In this definition, practices might refer to the performative function of language, and systematically, Foucault's definition suggests that discourse forms a structuring principle in people's social life. The objects that Foucault refers to are nominal categories that include physical objects, identities, activities, social entities, and relationships (Willig, 2014). The last words of Foucault's definition, "the objects of which they speak," point to the reciprocal functioning of discourse (Winslade, 2006).

The discursive framework is often described as a divide between two traditions—that of discursive psychology and the poststructural tradition (Smith, 2015). Discursive psychology constitutes a theoretical proposal for the reconceptualization of psychological phenomena in ways similar to the reconceptualization of psychotherapy introduced by systemic family therapy. The focus of interest shifts from the intrapsychic realm in which psychology traditionally locates the understanding and the study of psychological phenomena to the realm of language use and interaction (Tseliou, 2020; Tseliou & Borcsa, 2018).

The latter often focuses on "larger" discourses in society and emphasizes the historical and political constitution of language use, often referring to Foucault (1980) and his conceptualizations of genealogy (historical inquiry), the mechanisms of power, and subjectification/signifying practice. However, discursive psychology focuses on the study of how people use discourse as agents/subjects in the context of achieving interpersonal aims (Willig, 2014).

I place myself within the discursive framework because social constructionist (Gergen, 2019) people navigate life within larger discourses but also take up subject positions in conversations with others. Thus, meaning-making is dialogical, and people strive to find agency and their place within different discourses that is offered and that is constructed. Postdivorce families constitute their roles and navigate family life in relation to different discourses about family, family conflict, gender, parenting, and being a child (Sclater, 2017; Sclater & Piper, 2019). Thus, I relate to both a larger Foucauldian view of discourse as the production of power in society and from the traditions of discourse psychology, which focuses on the social agent and the ability to navigate and coconstruct discourses.

One way to integrate larger discourse with coconstructed meaning productions of social agents is through concepts such as *position* and *positioning*. The concept of position and positioning was introduced into the social sciences by Wendy Hollway (1984), who studied gender differences among couples and their production of subjectivity. When referring to variations in gender discourses in heterosexual couples, Hollway (1984, p. 235) asked, "How is it that people take up positions in one discourse rather than another?" She concluded that these positionings within a discourse are not "mechanical" but examples of what Foucault referred to as power-knowledge relations (Foucault, 1980; Foucault & Gordon, 1980). Holloway found that certain gender discourses "confer power on men which, in a circular way, motivates them recurrently in taking up that position"(Hollway, 1984, p. 245). In other words, if a woman is unable to resist her complementary positioning by having

access to an alternative discourse and practice, the couple reproduces the discourse and, thus, the existence of gender differences in practices and subjectivity (Hollway, 1984).

In the following, I describe positioning theory. Tirado and Galvez (2007) argue that positioning theory owes a major debt to Foucault's discussion of subject positions and discourses. I have also placed this framework within the discursive tradition, although as (McVee et al., 2019) argue, the ideas pertaining to positioning theory are also from varied fields, such as linguistics, speech-act theory, social psychology (Vygotskij et al., 1978; Vygotskij & Kozulin, 1986), and the philosophy of language (Bakhtin, 1981; Wittgenstein, 1953).

2.2.1 Positioning theory

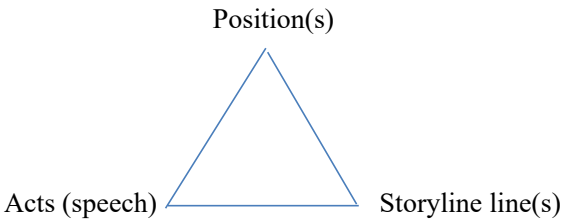
Positioning theory was developed by Professor Bronwyn Davies and the late Professor Rom Harrè (1928-2019) as the result of a "synthesis of trends in human science easily seen as anthropology just as much as it is psychology" (Harré & Gillett, 1994). The idea of positioning theory was to replace the idea of the "role" in social science (Goffman, 1971). According to positioning theory, people are not passively given roles in which they interact with others but rather actively negotiate subject positions that involve notions of who we are and what we can do (Davies & Harré, 1990). Whereas theories of roles denote stability and predictability, the concept of positioning "catches the continuous shifts in how people perceive themselves and how others perceive them" (Baert, 2012, p. 310).

Positioning theory has developed as a triangle of concepts known as the "positioning triangle"—positions, storylines, and speech act types (Harré, 2015)—and these connecting nodes mutually influence one another. Harré and Moghaddam (2003) define positions as follows: *"A position implicitly limits how much of what is logically possible for a given person to say and do and is properly a part of that person's repertoire of actions at a certain moment in a certain context."* (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003, p. 5)

In every social context, practice, or situation, there exists a "realm of positions" in which people are located, and such positions are inescapably moral (Harré & Lagenhove, 1999). Positions consist of rights to do certain things, acting in specific ways, and duties to be taken up and acted on in specific ways. Different storylines entail a set of often complementary positions (e.g., powerful/powerless, responsible/irresponsible) with inherent social expectations of the self and others that entail normative expectations in the context of "language games" (Wittgenstein, 1953), that is, parenting or coparenting.

Family life displays an order that can be described by norms and established patterns of development, known as storylines typically "expressible in a loose cluster of narrative conventions" (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). Article III in this thesis refers to how a storyline of bad parenting positions the child as a victim and the other parent as irresponsible. When a parent talks about himself or herself as a competent parent, doing so often involves an implicit positioning of her or his ex-partner as an incompetent parent. Speech acts refer to the fact that an utterance or action can have different effects depending on how it is interpreted. I describe speech acts in article III; when "fathers talk about child-related challenges", it often involves speech acts that could be heard as either pleading (a child in need of protection) or as resentment (accusation of others).

Figure 1: The positioning triangle



Positioning theory emphasizes that the moral standards in a group shape "all thinking, expression of feeling in emotional and other displays, and social actions that take

place," and the distribution of rights and duties to think, speak, and act in certain ways (Harré, 2012). Therefore, a family as a social group has a moral order or orders implicit in its form of life, some aspects of which are made explicit from time to time. Social episodes, such as how a family navigates life in the context of prolonged parental conflict, are capable of multiple interpretations. Some social episodes are more salient to the unfolding and understanding of family life than others. Family members preposition others in the family and provide them with attributes that give them certain "rights and duties." A father might attribute a mother as more influential or powerful and, thus, himself as less powerful. In ascribing the mother as more influential, the father might also other-position her along a storyline of a cooperative coparent—with a duty to meet him and convince their child to stay with him. Such other positioning might be challenged and eventually be part of a polarized conflict cycle. I describe in article II how a mother might make claims that her ex-partner has been abusive; thus, she repositions herself within a storyline of selfcare, with a right to selfcare, and opposite any "cooperative duty" to meet him face to face. Another perspective to understand parents' coparenting negotiations is to combine positioning theory with theories of the self and other positioning influenced by motivational styles or orientation. Parents can be viewed as people who negotiate coparenting positions by motivational orientation toward other influences (of children and coparents) and self-protection (Apter, 2003). Orientation in a coparenting conflict could be seen as seeking power to "primarily desire control for oneself" (control/self-protection) or "primarily desire it on behalf of others whom one identifies" (the subjective child) (Apter, 2003, p. 17).

The idea of positioning (from Holloway and Davies) builds on Foucault's (1978, 1980) descriptions of how power becomes constituted in the everyday exchanges of life. This idea accounts for how people take up gendered subjectivities, even when doing so costs them personally. It allows for distinctions between "forced" and "deliberate" positioning of either ourselves or of others (Harré & Langenhove, 1991,

p. 399) and between ‘tacit in cultural discourses, power is also present, as these discourses constitute our “truths” and normality (Foucault, 1977).

2.2.2 Positioning theory in a systemic theoretical meta-framework

I apply premises from systemic theory in my understanding of positioning theory. I find that systemic principles (such as multiple perspectives from being simultaneously part of dyads/triads, circular processes, and others) strengthen the application of positioning theory in relation to complex family systems. Additionally, positioning theory concepts, such as positioning and speech acts, have many similarities to systemic concepts such as connotation, punctuation, or reframing (Dallos & Draper, 2010). Positioning theory could be applied at any social level with a focus on the reflexive positioning of individuals, in conversations between individuals, and in or between groups or nations. However, the focus in positioning theory is often reduced to self–other constellations or entities. Although positioning theory focuses on acts/speech acts and nonverbal communication (Davies & Harré, 1990), this does not involve a focus on conflict dynamics and the quality or contextual dimension of relationships (Bateson, 1958). An application of a systemic framework adds a relational and dynamic dimension that is influential in the subject position offered, the discourses coconstructed in child–parent dyads, and the self-positioning that children take up when navigating “between” two homes and in each household. As previously noted, a systemic framework invites a relational and reciprocal view of a family, and the actions of each individual and each relational constellation are simultaneously influencing and influenced by the other, creating a causal loop that defies reduction to a linear cause–effect (Schermerhorn, Cummings, & Davies, 2008). I argue in article I that family members position themselves not only to individuals in the family but also to relationships involving dyads, triads, and the family system as a whole.

In my view, the use of systemic theory as a meta-framework invites both a relational view (interactions between relational entities) and a triangular view, meaning that, for

instance, a mother–child dyad takes up a joint position vis-à-vis a father (Dallos & Vetere, 2012). Positioning theory within the meta-framework of systemic theory could be viewed as discursive proceedings based on different levels of positional negotiations, with mutual influence or feedback in the family system. One of the main tenets of the "cybernetic metaphor" in family systems theory is that the family system is motivated to maintain equilibrium or family homeostasis. Changes in one part of the family system must be followed by compensatory changes in other parts as an irreducible whole (Minuchin, 1974). Divorce is a transition to a binuclear family and the formations of two subsystems that are separate but also interconnected to the larger family system (Minuchin, 1974; Walsh, 2010). An antecedent, such as divorce, which activates family homeostatic mechanisms can be any type of change greater than the tolerable limit, such as a family conflict. In paper I, my coauthors and I argue that from a systemic theoretical perspective, prolonged family conflict across households could be viewed as antecedent positional meaning-making that threatens or disturbs the homeostasis processes in developing boundaries and equilibrium in one or both households.

Positioning theory has, to my knowledge, only been described in relation to family mediation by family therapist John Winslade (Winslade, 2006; Winslade, 2005). Winslade (2005, p. 352) argues that mediation and therapy "has focused solely on the construction of the individual psyche in the dynamics of the nuclear family and the immediate interpersonal environment." People who seek therapy usually focus on their immediate challenges and are not typically concerned with the need to tackle widespread social discourses or bring about social change. Nonetheless, challenges in personal lives are affected by dominant cultural discourses in society about parenting, gender, children, and the position that the therapist construed as his or her responsibility. Winslade (2005, p. 351) refers to Foucault and constructionist writers (Burr, 2015) who have promoted a vision of "a self that is multiply located in competing stories, and produced over and over again in the process of interaction, that is in discourse, rather than proceeding out of a programmed inner core."

Winslade argues that positioning theory offers a means to heighten the consciousness of the effects of pervasive social discourses and simultaneously attend to the particularities of personal experience. He further argues that concepts such as discursive positioning offer us some leverage in addressing local and particular experiences without losing sight of powerful social discourses within which subjectivity is constructed. Client talk is not just a response to the therapist's immediate words but also to conversations with friends, colleagues, and media sources. Winslade (2006) introduces the term "political field" to describe meanings that are established and that privilege certain positions in social relations over others. Meanings have just come to be accepted as how things are or have been authorized with institutional legitimacy. For instance, it is difficult to be heard in family mediation if one promotes meanings that conflict with dominant understandings of what the best interest of the child implies, or in gendered talk that promotes gender stereotypes of what it implies to be a father or a mother. When is parenting an individual responsibility as part of the discourse of autonomy? When are parents jointly responsible from the discourse of cooperative coparenting? The potential of positioning theory lies in how a conflict can be opened up to make visible the discursive influences at work within them. When discursive influences become more visible, they cannot continue to do their work in secret, and people can make more informed choices about the positions they choose to take up in relation to discourse. The possibility of contradiction is needed to exercise agency. Parties to a mediation are frequently active in taking up such agency by refusing how they are positioned by other parties in relation to a particular narrative construction of events, in relation to the dominant legal discourse, or in relation to social or psychological norms.

Family therapist Valeria Ugazio (2013) argued that positioning theory inevitably implies a systemic arrangement in which positions are only possible and sustainable in relation to a systemic whole. The anthropologist Gregory Bateson (2000, 2002) brought this intuition from cybernetics into systemic family therapy (Ugazio, 2013). Ugazio referred to the fieldwork of Gregory Bateson (1958) when staying with the

Iatmul people and his observation of the polarized behavior pattern; the greater the men were exhibitionist and boastful, the greater the women became quiet and contemplative watching them. Bateson hypothesized that Iatmul society acted as a self-correcting system through a process that he referred to as schismogenesis. Ugazio took inspiration from the theory of schismogenesis and positioning theory, developed a theory of how (semantic) meaning-making caused polarities in a family and sometimes caused distress related to individual psychopathology. Family semantic polarities theory (FSPT) is an oppositional polar structure of meaning that contributes to the understanding of how self-identity is interdependent on others (Ugazio, 2013; Ugazio & Guarnieri, 2018). To be positioned as intelligent, good, or cheerful, other people in the same social context must be positioned as stupid, bad, or sad. If a family is dominated by the semantics of competition, polarities of winners and losers exist. Ugazio argues that patterns of semantic polarities are related to different forms of individual psychopathology. Although Ugazio mostly refers to semantic polarities in intact families, children in two conflicted household families are, notably, often triangulated between their parents' hostile polarities, as discussed in Paper I. Within this framework, one could hypothesize that children in highly conflicted families are dominated by the semantics of alignment or loyalty (Dallos & Vetere, 2012; Karamat Ali, 2014). Additionally, oppositional positionings might result in an adverse state of conflict/anxiety, similar to a double bind or strange loop (Cronen et al., 1982), as discussed in Paper II, which is similar to how polarized positions render conflicted parents unable to coposition themselves as cooperative coparents.

3. Methodology

This study is about the subject positions of postdivorce families in prolonged conflict and their constructions of conflict-related challenges and family life. In this chapter, I describe the research process from the onset until reporting. In doing so, I attempt to answer two questions: What is my view of the world (ontology) and how is knowledge attained (epistemology)? Furthermore, how did I go about inquiring and developing new knowledge about divorced families in prolonged conflict (methods)?

First, I discuss the scientific and philosophical underpinnings using arguments that set the project in a socially constructive and critical paradigm of science. Second, I describe and discuss my research design and describe how I went about recruiting and conducting interviews. Additionally, I describe my analytical approach and ethical considerations and discuss quality in research.

3.1 Scientific and philosophical outlook

How I as a researcher construed scientific knowledge and how I think such knowledge production comes to bear are crucial in the development of a research project. Denzin and Lincoln (2018, p. 22) propose that "The net that contains the researcher's ontological, epistemological, and methodological premises may be termed a paradigm, or an interpretative framework, a basic set of beliefs that guides action." Guba claims that the answers to the following set of three basic questions can produce a particular paradigm: The ontological question of what is the nature of the "knowable?"; the epistemological question of what is the nature of the relationship between the knower (the inquirer) and the known (what is knowable)?; and the methodological question of how should an inquirer go about generating knowledge about what is knowable? (Guba, 1990).

Qualitative research emphasizes the researcher's presence and interpretation: […] "and that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to

make sense of, interpret, phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Thus, also of importance is that I, as a qualitative researcher, reflect on my preconceptions in the field of study and am transparent about the research process.

3.1.2 Social construction and bringforthism

The ontological and epistemological stance in this research project is from constructive paradigms—that of social construction (Gergen et al., 2015) and bringforthism (Maturana & Varela, 1992; Maturana et al., 1980). Tomm (2020) argued that social construction and bringforthism could be referred to as systemic paradigms.

A major strength of social constructionism is the emphasis on how social interaction—what takes place in the interpersonal space between persons (i.e., in a family)—is instrumental in creating knowledge (McNamee et al., 2020). However, in the study of individual agency, who through their interactions come to generate knowledge, the bringforthism paradigm prioritizes understanding how individuals become capable of constructing distinctions and generating realities in their social interactions (Maturana et al., 1980). Bringforthism is a term coined by Heinz von Forester to explain how Maturana's view of reality emerged from his "theory of knowledge or cognition" (Akdeniz, 2021). My understanding of this bringforthism perspective is derived from Karl Tomm (Akdeniz, 2021; Tomm, 2019, 2020). In this project, I look at how family members within self/other distinctions construct social life and conflict-related challenges. The ontological outlook from bringforthism helps explain why, for instance, siblings (Paper I) take up different subject positions and how multiple realities in families are also subject-dependent. The social construction perspective helps us understand each available subject position relative to how conflict-related challenges were jointly construed in each family context (when parents' silence about the conflict is met with silence from their child). The ontology of social construction is that reality exists in the form of multiple constructions that

are local and specific, as in a family environment. The epistemology of social construction promotes intersubjectivity, and the methodology is often deconstructive (focus on language use/discursive/meaning construction). The ontology of bringforthism is that of a multiple reality. Each reality is that which a family member is structure-determined to bring forth as "real" in his or her available subject position. Thus, epistemology is subject dependent, and methodology is that of recursive reflections (Tomm, 2020).

3.1.3 Discursive research methodology

The term "discursive research methodologies" is usually deployed to denote mostly hermeneutic, qualitative research approaches that broadly share a constructionist and pragmatic approach to the study of discourse in that they focus on the ways that people construct their world(s) in talk (Tseliou & Borcsa, 2018). There are two main typologies of discourse methodology, namely, discursive psychology and post structural informed discourse analyses (Willig, 2014). Discursive psychology focuses more on the study of how people use discourse in the context of achieving interpersonal aims, whereas poststructurally informed discourse analysis emphasizes an analysis of the historical and political constitution of language use (Willig, 2014). In my research, I have focused on deconstructing family members' discourse using positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) and discussed the subject positions of family members in light of broader discourses of parenting, coparenting, and postdivorce family life. I then undertake a "both–and" perspective in that I combine the detailed analysis of the "bottom–up" subject positions with the macroorientation of the "top–down" (Foucault, 1980) approaches to discourse. Furthermore, the developers of positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) have forwarded the idea that language use is not neutral. Instead, history, culture, and ideology shape language use and delineate certain power relationships (Willig, 2013).

A discursive perspective has led me to critically reflect on how society and the professional field construct postdivorce conflicts and, thus, positions children and

parents in these families. Research within a discursive paradigm looks at such an "othering process" in which society and professional helping systems produce power structures (Foucault et al., 1978) and ways of understanding phenomena with labels such as "high conflict" or "alienated" parents (this term is explained further in this chapter). Being a family therapist (or professional helper) involves a coproduction of professional storylines of how to frame conflict-related challenges and how one should aid families within shifting discourses of what it means to be a family. High conflict parenting postseparation is a field in which professional and academic debates often parallel acrimony among parents themselves (Asen & Morris, 2020; Lee et al., 2014; Sclater & Piper, 2019). Discerning between polarized viewpoints among different lobby/interest groups, media, politicians, and the conflicting opinions in the research community can sometimes be difficult (Bertelsen, 2021a; Sclater & Piper, 2019). Many researchers are not transparent about their values, alignments with lobby groups, and preunderstandings; in some research traditions, the results are presented as decontextual and objective facts (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In some instances, researchers might promote controversial concepts without disclosing that the validity and reliability of the concepts are controversial and disputed (Milchman et al., 2020). Constructs that are controversial and regarded as quasi-scientific within the research community might be presented and understood as reliable and validated in public debate and among decision makers (Feresin et al., 2018; Lapierre et al., 2020). For instance, a focus on media in which complex custody conflicts are framed as "custody-sabotage" [samværsabotasje] has led Norwegian parliament politicians and ministers to promote changes in the management of welfare benefits "to avoid economic incentives that promote custody sabotage, where the resident parent [mothers] benefit" (TV2, 2021). Custody conflict often involves disagreements about the best interest of the child regarding his or her living arrangement, and the research community has divided viewpoints about child living arrangements in relation to the interparental conflict level (Braver & Lamb, 2018; Nielsen, 2018), child age (Emery et al., 2016), parental quality and risk behavior (abuse/violence) (Kelly, 2007), or how to understand children who show affinity/alignment to one parent when resisting

contact with the other parent (Johnston & Sullivan, 2020). One controversial issue that is much debated is the effect of parental denigration when parents undermine each other's relationships with their children following separation. Denigrating one's coparent in front of one's child(ren) is a behavior central to assertions of what is known as the *parental alienation perspective*, in which one parent is said to be a victim of the other's hostility, resulting in the children becoming distant from the victimized parent. The parental alienation hypothesis or "Parental Alienation Syndrome" (PAS) is a term created by psychiatrist Richard Gardner (1992) based on his clinical experience with custody disputes. According to Gardner, PAS is characterized by one parent "programming" a child against the other parent. The assumption is that a child's disdain for one parent is generally unjustified and solely attributable to denigration on the part of the other, alienating parent. Gardner claimed that most child reports of abuse and violence were a consequence of a child in custody cases who was brainwashed by the preferred parent (often the mother) and made false claims about the alienated parent (often the father). PAS is criticized for having no explicit criteria for doing so or objective evidence to support his claim (Emery et al., 2005; Fidler & Bala, 2020; Garber, 2020; Johnston, 2017; Mendes & Bucher-Maluschke, 2018).

In contrast, a family conflict perspective predicts that denigration is reciprocal, not one-sided, and distances children from both parents, particularly the one who denigrates the other more. Empirical research indicates that denigrating one's coparent (Rowen & Emery, 2014, 2018; Rowen & Emery, 2019a, 2019b) appears to boomerang and hurt the parent's relationship with the children rather than distancing a child from the coparent. Although parental alienation is controversial, it remains a popular and influential perspective within the court system (Lubit, 2019), positioning one parent as guilty and the other as a victim. Thus, in custody disputes, it is not uncommon that allegations of abuse are followed by counter allegations of parental alienation (Emery et al., 2016; Milchman, 2019). Meier (2020) has conducted a review of US litigation with allegations of abuse versus counter accusations of

PAS/PA. The findings confirm that mothers' allegations of abuse, particularly physical or sexual abuse of children, increase the risk of losing custody, and that fathers' claims of alienation almost double this risk. The impact of PA/PAS accusation's is gender-specific; fathers who claim that mothers are abusive are not undermined in the same way when mothers claim alienation(Meier, 2020; Mercer & Drew, 2021).

Applying positioning theory leads to a critical awareness of how postdivorce families are positioned and how one in writing academic text is both self-positioning oneself as a researcher and other-poisoning the subject in the study, among different discourses of postdivorce family. Furthermore, as a novice researcher (Ph.D. candidate), one is confronted with theories, academic debates, and "conundrums" in the field of research (Fidler & Bala, 2020). In finding a position as an explorative qualitative researcher, I was curious to know how children and parents themselves constructed prolonged family conflicts. This curiosity led me to explore how the understanding of children with parents in a prolonged conflict reflects the professional portrait as being a "victims without agency" (Paper I). Furthermore, in article II, I explored how the parallel positioning of coparent couples in prolonged conflict reflects professional typologies of coparenting.

A discursive research paradigm involves a critical stance, often by deconstructing power structures that surround the phenomenon in the focus of the research and in which I as a researcher take a certain position in how the phenomenon is constructed (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). The motivation behind critical research is often to bring about social change in how society treats or perceives certain groups. This was also the case in this thesis, with the focus on the self-positions of children (article I) and parents (article II) that are discussed considering other positioning from society and professionals. Thus, in taking a "critical stance" as a researcher, it has been vital to reflect on my own connotation of high-conflict families. In this regard, I found it useful to reflect on my own position and on the ethical aspect of the research (more

about this in the chapter on ethical considerations). Additionally, critical research is often used in ethnological research through a combination of interviews and fieldwork, in which first-hand experience, participant observations, and interviews "allow the researcher to go beyond relying solely on interview accounts" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 171). I argue that the position of a fieldworker might resemble that of a family therapist, in that one "visits" different "tribes" of families and becomes familiar with different challenges and dilemmas. In this sense, as a listener, I have been addressed by many parents in prolonged conflict. As a mediator and a therapist, I have been positioned as a judge, heeding arguments from two conflicted parties. As a therapist or mediator, one is also expected to act to help parents resolve conflicts and find agreeable solutions. In this sense, being an interviewer involves a different other positioning: that of just listening or other-positioning of sympathizing. In addition, in some instances, I also acted to clarify messages of gender suppression, for instance, when fathers give hints of parenting inequality based on their gender. Thus, being a critical researcher also involves being attentive to how one is positioning the interviewee and how the interviewee is positioning the researcher in how one understands the phenomenon or interaction in the interview setting (discussed in article 3). Additionally, in having felt the burden of attempting to solve stalemate positions (and create equilibrium), one can recognize speech acts of convictions and strategic other positioning as a listener.

3.2 Research process and design

The qualitative research process begins when planning what (data) material one should acquire to answer the research questions (Thagaard, 2013). When planning research in 2015/2016, many efforts were used to decide the scope of the research and what research design and material to apprehend.

Initially, the Ph.D. project was meant to aid and supplement the development of the family therapy program: strong children in two homes (Huglen et al., 2020).

However, the primary object of the Ph.D. project was to be a scientific endeavor. As the project developed, the focus of the research became more explorative and attuned to the child's and parents' construction of living in a family with prolonged conflict. It also became clear that there was a research gap on qualitative research about the meaning-making of children and their parents in high conflict during the past two years of separation (Francia et al., 2019a).

3.3 Design; the qualitative research interview

The field of family therapy has seen an increase in qualitative research; within this research base, the interview has been the most frequently utilized method (Beitin, 2008). Interviews are a valuable means of obtaining information about the experiences of families, couples, and individuals (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The interview provides a unique opportunity for interpretation and meaning-making. In family inquiries, a researcher decides on the configuration of people involved in the interview. This choice can influence the perspective and depth of the findings. One choice is to interview households together, which allows family members to interact around a question and create meaning while supplementing or commenting on each other. This approach also adds another dimension—that of family interaction. Another choice is to interview family members separately, allowing members to expand on a topic, from a backstage position (Goffman, 1971), without the fear of how doing so would affect oneself or others in the family. Additionally, individual interviews of multiple family members provide an opportunity to compare answers within the family, for instance, in parent–parent dyads, child–parent dyads, and others. When conducting interviews of families embroiled in conflict, one must be attentive to issues of safety and an array of ethical considerations (subsequently discussed in Chapter 3.8 on the ethical consideration).

Davies and Gannon (2006) emphasize that the quality of the data constructed from qualitative interviewing is relative and situated and dependable on the best efforts of participants and interviewers/researchers. The authors explain:

> An interview can be described as the interviewee's best attempt to describe or explain, in the particular dialogic context of the interview, what he or she remembers based on a particular history of observation and experience. Similarly, our analysis of the interview transcript is our best attempt, based on what we remember having seen or heard or read, both "in" the data and outside the data, to make sense of what is said. (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 1)

Interviews are, as stated, a "particular dialogical context," in which the researcher typically asks questions, and the interviewee gives answers on an agreed topic, for instance, family life (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). These positions might sometimes be challenged, which was the case in an interview with a father. Perhaps being attentive to the dual role as a researcher and therapist/expert, he was other-positioning me (the interviewer) as an interviewee. After having no answers for his child's reactions (child's coping strategies), he repositioned himself (F) as an interviewer pushing for answers (perhaps implicitly criticizing the earlier probing question in the interview).

> F: Ehm.. You don't have an idea?!
> I: Yes, I have an idea about it. But right now, I am most interested in, <Short laugh> surely the therapists will say more about it I'd think. When you talk to them.
> F: What do you think?
> I: No, I mean I think sometimes it might be a good idea. That you get an overview before you go into something, rather than the other way around.
> F: Do you have a good example of when it is ok to confront/walk into a situation?

> I: I think if people want to influence the situation right away, feel the need for it, then occasionally people run in and confront the situation. While others need an overview before they do this.
> F: So, it is kind of person-dependent on what you need?
> I: Yes, for what you are as a person, I think. What "person you are" also depends on the circumstances.
> F: So, some people will be able to profit from rushing in while others will profit from observing from the outside? (724-737, father 7; my translation)

An interview is a social situation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Similar to other conversations, a need exists to renegotiate subject positions, as in this example on the required role reversal before returning to interviews about family life. The style of the research interviews could be presented as a determinant of the positioning of the interviewee and interviewer, which might range from doxastic (focused on understanding interviewees' experiences or behaviors) to epistemic (focused on coconstructing knowledge) (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020).

To answer the overall research question, I needed data on how children and their separated parents in a prolonged conflict perceived their family life. Thus, the qualitative research interview was found to be a suitable tool (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

3.4 Sampling and recruitment

To answer the research questions, a strategic sampling strategy was carried out. By sampling from a clinical population of a family counseling office, I was able to include a variety of families in which one or more family members were found to be "clinically destressed" from the conflict among parents in dual household families (e.g., noncohabiting, separated, divorced parents).

In using the term prolonged, I sought to target family members who had experiences with coparental conflicts of more than two years. This is in line with other research endeavours that focus on parents in high conflict past two years of separation (Francia et al., 2019a). By targeting this population, the sample is part of the 10–15 percent of parents whose past separation is entrenched in conflict and who struggle with establishing a working coparental relationship (Anderson et al., 2010; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Children and parents were recruited from a family therapy program in the Bergen Vicinity family counseling office that aims to strengthen families in prolonged conflict; the children and parents met the following inclusion criteria: (1) all families had a child 9 years of age or older; (2) parents were not currently part of a child protection investigation or part of a family mediation or court proceedings; (3) parents had not succeeded to solve their conflict in post separation counseling, mediation or in court (4) parents had more than two years of experience with postseparation conflict or problems with coparenting; and (5) parents were in a conflictive relationship, in a deadlock, were distressed, and viewed the situation as unsolvable for their child or themselves.

The samples were classified as being in a prolonged conflict through the following process.

First, postdivorce parents who contacted the family counseling center (because of postdivorce family conflict distress) met the inclusion criteria through screening at intake. A 10-point screening tool was applied (developed by the “Strong children in 2 homes” family therapy program) to identify cases of prolonged conflict to the specialized family therapy program (Huglen et al., 2020).

Second, parents who met the criteria of the therapy program were invited to a clinical assessment interview (individually) conducted by a team of therapists (family therapist MA and/or a clinical psychologist). The clinical assessment interview 1)

focused on the longevity, severity, and nature of the conflict (serious and active domestic violence cases were excluded); 2) identified whether prior professional effort had been made to promote cooperative parenting and failed; 3) identified whether one or more of the family members was clinically distressed by the conflict; and 4) identified whether both parents were willing to write a therapeutic contract through which they gave permission for child participation and withholding family court/mediation attendance during therapy.

Third, parents who were included (by invitation/acceptance) in the specialized family therapy program were recruited for the study. Each family received an information letter targeted to 1) parents, 2) children (9–15), and 3) youth (16–18). Parents were contacted if they wanted more information about the study or wanted to participate. Children participated in the study only if both parents gave their consent. Youth older than 16 were able to participate by giving their consent.

3.5 Sample

3.5.1 participants

Seventeen families were invited to participate. In total, nine families participated; for five of these families, both children and parents took part, whereas in four families, only one of the parents gave their consent to be interviewed. In other words, 14 individual interviews of parents (eight fathers and six mothers) and nine individual interviews with nine children (six girls and three boys) were conducted.

Children were from the age of 9 to 16. At the time of the interview, most adolescents lived with one parent, and younger children often had shared custody arrangements and spent equal time with both parents. On average, parents lived for six years in separate households. Most were from a middle-class background. One or both parents had a university college degree, and one or both parents had a new cohabiting partner.

I was interested in collecting knowledge on how children and parents constructed being a family member in a dual household family with prolonged conflict. Although the interview was guided by a semistructured question, participants were encouraged to tell their unhindered story about how they viewed family life. To trigger the telling of stories of family life, I emphasized the desire to know more about their experience of family life. An interview guide approved by the ethical research committee (REK) directed my probes along with the following themes: a) descriptions of the family, b) sources of wellbeing; in general, c) resources/qualities in the family, d) family relationships, and e) child and family beliefs. Youth participants were told that their parents were interviewed. Additionally, siblings from the age of nine were invited with the intent that family involvement would empower children to focus on their perspective, knowing that a) they had relational permission to talk freely and b) all members would have a say. I adopted a facilitative style and attempted to emphasize and highlight reflections in the conversation. Early adolescents were encouraged to draw pictures of their family households and family members. Each interview lasted from 30–70 minutes. A sound recording of each interview was later transcribed and supplemented with observation notes from the interview.

3.6 Data generation and analysis

Interviews were conducted in Norwegian. Therefore, all participants, except one, were interviewed in their first language (the interviewee preferred Norwegian rather than English because neither was his first language). I felt that I had an advantage in conducting all of the interviews myself and had a reference point by listening to my own follow-up questions and summarizations. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by me or two research assistants. Both research assistants had a university master's degree, but neither had any experience with therapeutic work with parents in prolonged conflict. The quality of the transcript varied. In some cases, the research assistant shared a dialect with the interviewee. In these circumstances, transcripts were written with the use of a dialect. In other cases, only certain words were written

with the use of a dialect. Additionally, in some instances, the research assistants noted that identifying certain spoken words was difficult (due to a muffled voice). In these cases, having audio records was useful. However, my analytical approach did not require strict linguistic details because the focus was on meaning-making and the illocutionary force of utterance or speech acts (Austin et al., 1975), such as apologizing, promising, ordering, requesting, complaining, warning, inviting, and refusing. Listening to audio recordings when reading excerpts was especially useful in analyzing speech acts. Tone of voice and nonverbal communication (clearing of her voice, hitting the table) that bring bearing to emotional messages is easier to identify when listening (e.g., is this utterance a "tired" complaint or an "angered" request?). For instance, complaints are often indignant invitations of sympathy, whereas requests often involve agency or a moral conviction (in being entitled to more than just sympathy). Additionally, in instances in which I translated excerpts to English, listening to audio records to ensure that the translation was as close as possible to the utterances of the children and parents was useful.

3.6.2 Theory-informed thematic analysis (Paper I)

In analyzing the interview transcripts of nine children in article 1, I used a constructive content and thematic-oriented approach of Clarke and Braun (2018) that was supplemented with theory-informed analyses (Bøttcher et al., 2018; Smith, 2015). First, all transcripts were read and reread without any attempts to analyze the text. The next analytical stage was conducted using theory-informed analyses with concepts from positioning theory (Brinkmann, 2007; Bøttcher et al., 2018; Davies & Harré, 1990). In accordance with the research question, my attention was on children's perceptions of family challenges that became apparent in the text. In reading over the interview transcripts, the concept of the storyline was a "prism" through which to view the text (Bøttcher et al., 2018; Jevne, 2017). Although the "positioning triangle" can be entered empirically at any of the verticals of "position," "speech act," or "storyline," the latter is the recommended entry (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003, p. 9). In reading transcripts, I asked analytically *in what dominant*

themes of storylines do children construct challenges in the family? In coding themes of storylines across the interview transcripts, the findings emerged in the analytical process as three dominant storylines as follows: a) family in conflict, b) the troubling parent, and c) life—as more than family challenges. I coded the material in themes, and then the supervisors (coauthors) contributed by reading segments of the transcript and in the process of discussing, developing, and revising themes of storylines and dominant positions. In the last analytical step (I asked with attention to the research question), *what type of dominant child position is present in each of the three storylines?* When answering this question, three dominant positions were identified, one connected to each storyline. The term dominant position was used to demonstrate that each dominant position could be viewed as a meta-position to variations of subpositions that children take in prolonged conflict families.

3.6.3 Reflexive thematic analyses and dyadic analyses (Paper II)

Article 2 analyzed the reflexive positions of five parenting couples' past separation in prolonged conflict. In analyzing the interview transcripts, I applied a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) supplemented with a discursive analysis of social conflicts from a positioning theory perspective. First, all transcripts were read and reread without any attempts to analyze the text. In the next analytical stage, I focused my attention on the parents' storylines, which became apparent in the text. In reading the transcripts, I analytically asked, *what dominant storylines emerge when parents talk about their coparent*? The dominant storylines that appear in each transcript were coded in parallel as a father and a mother storyline in each of the five parental couples. In the last analytical step, I asked, *what positions do parents take up in their talk about their coparent, and what other-positioning do they give their coparent?* Furthermore, I noted who in the storylines did and did not have "positioning power," as suggested by (Harré & Slocum, 2003, p. 114), to gain insight into how some of the conflict storylines became more dominant and challenge parental cooperation. This final step offers insights that I found useful in discussing what it means for parenthood when separated parents are in prolonged conflict.

3.6.4 Discursive analyses informed by positioning theory (Paper III)

Article 3 explores the reflexive self-positioning of fathers in prolonged conflict and how they are other-positioning their child. In analyzing the interview transcripts, we applied a discursive analysis of social conflicts from a positioning theory perspective (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003; Päivinen & Holma, 2016). First, I focused on storylines of parents' talk about family challenges. In reading the transcripts, we analytically asked what storylines emerge when parents talk about parenting challenges that are related to family conflict. The storylines appearing in each transcript were coded. In the last analytical step, we asked, *what positions do parents take up in their talk about their child, and how do they position their child?* Furthermore, I noted how these descriptions reflect on parental agency as the "positioning power as parent."

3.7 Quality of the research project

When evaluating research affiliated with a constructionist epistemology, it is important to assess quality in all phases of the research. The reason for this is closely related to assumptions about the world (multiverses constructed through language) and how the role of the researcher is conceptualized as a coproducer of knowledge. Willig (2008) describes the qualitative research process as a form of adventure, in which the researcher is heading for the "yet unknown" in the pursuit of finding a way to approach the research question. In my view, the adventure metaphor also includes notions of the risk of being able to convey quality (scientific value) and contributions to knowledge. One central aspect of quality in qualitative research is how to deal with subjective elements in the research process. Doing so requires active engagement with the material, which presupposes a standpoint or point of departure. Thus, the quality of the research depends on the transparency and documentation about choices that I as a researcher have made during the entire process (Thagaard, 2013) and the "reflection of several levels and/or directed at several themes" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 8). Clearly, this was the case in this project. As the project leader of a small-scale qualitive project, I had to make

many choices that had a bearing on the research quality. The "only thing" that was decided from the start was that the focus of the research should be on children and their parents in prolonged conflict, as described in the requirements for the Ph.D. candidate position/scholarship at the Bergen and Vicinity Family Counseling Office. Additionally, one of the requirements of the Ph.D. position/scholarship was having 25 percent of clinical duty work as a family therapist and to aid the development of therapeutic methods that included children (Strong Children in 2 homes; see the Introduction for more information).

To judge whether the findings in a qualitative research project can be regarded as trustworthy and useful requires transparency about more than methodological questions. Barusch et al. (2011) state that credibility in research "involves generating confidence in the truth value of the findings of qualitative research, reminding ourselves that all texts are local, and all researchers write themselves into the text, and, thus, 'truth' has a local quality to it" (Barusch et al., 2011, p. 12). It also requires reflective transparency about the context of research—the other positioning of research participants and self-positioning as a researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Finlay & Gough, 2003). This further underlined the importance of being aware that I had a dual position as a researcher and therapist relevant to the field of study.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe eight available validity strategies, and the authors recommend applying at least two of these validity precautions. One strategy is the use of reflexivity or self to be transparent about the "bias" that the researcher brings to the study—the ability to convey accounts of how the findings are shaped by their background, such as "their gender, culture history and socioeconomic origin." In this regard, including coauthors with different professional backgrounds (psychology, social work, health promotion, sociology), different genders and cultural backgrounds (Norwegian, Finnish, USA), and different fields of expertise is a strength.

Willig (2008) suggests that research quality is characterized by a systematic and clear presentation of analyses that are "demonstrably grounded in data." In this paper, I have sought to demonstrate using excerpts on how the categories generated fit the data. An effort has been made to clarify and explain the theoretical perspectives and important concepts in each paper. Regarding discourse analytic approaches (e.g., application of positioning theory), a need exists for critical and informative reflections concerning how the researcher's values, interests, and experiences shape research, such as through the questions asked and the choice of method.

The concept of reflexivity is a central quality concept in qualitative research. A need exists for critical and informative reflections regarding how my values, interests, and experiences shape research, such as through the questions asked and the choice of research design. Thus, it has been important for me to make my assumptions as explicit as possible (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Based on my epistemological orientation, I *author* (construct) rather than discover knowledge. This approach calls for "a reflexive awareness of the problematic status of one's own knowledge claims" to be necessary (Willig, 2014). For others to assess and evaluate the findings, acknowledging the premises that guide the research more easily is important. The choice of social constructions and a discourse-oriented approach—inspired by positioning theory—guided the questions asked and the analytic focus and, thus, the findings that could be produced. Therefore, other theoretical lenses and methodological perspectives on the same material could produce other findings and knowledge (Burck, 2005).

I was once asked by one of the senior members in the research group (BLI), "*As an experienced family therapist, don't you already know the answers to these research questions? You must have heard many stories about how separated families in prolonged conflict view their family life?*" This valid input reminded me of my epistemological assumption that knowledge is contextualized. Professional discourses about children and families are negotiated and produced in a therapy context. Research in a social constructionist paradigm calls on the researcher to take responsibility for his or her positioning. A research stance can open areas of inquiry

in a new way. Being curious (as a researcher) without the responsibility of change enables conversations of a different order than those that occur in therapist–patient talks. To differentiate my knowledge, which is constructed in the asymmetric relationship of a therapist and patient, I found it useful to firmly position myself as a researcher. Thus, I also chose a theoretical research design in which I could be an explorer (in contrast to, for example, an action research designer with an emphasis on model development).

This study applied validity procedures, as suggested by Creswell and Miller (2000, p. 126), which fit my constructivist paradigm assumptions. First, a *thick, rich description* from parents and children provides an ample opportunity to show the complexities and assess the (face value) credibility of the presented findings. Second, my background as an experienced family therapist with *prolonged engagement in the field of study* can add credibility from vital insights. However, such preconceptions from a therapist could also "cloud" and limit new outlooks on the phenomenon, which is crucial in an explorative research design (McLeod, 2001). Consequently, to enhance the quality of the exploratory research process, efforts were made to increase the awareness of possible preconceptions and alternative constructions. By having insider knowledge, one might be blind to the obvious. In contrast, by having in-depth knowledge of a phenomenon, one might be able to perform in-depth "explorative probing." Thus, the development of analytical themes and findings was critically assessed and contested by coauthors and the research group. Additionally, efforts *to disconfirm evidenc*e were conducted to present alternative storylines and findings. Transparency throughout the study process and the rich stories also facilitate readers' assessment of the value of our findings for other relevant situations and impact areas.

3.8 Ethical considerations

This study involves a clinical sample of children and their parents in prolonged conflict. Ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by the Regional

Committee for Medical and Health Ethics in Norway (REC; Project number 2016/1915, see Appendix X).

Connecting with a vulnerable population and asking them to disclose information about a sensitive aspect of their lives involves many ethical dilemmas. Ethically responsible research has a research interest that justifies any disadvantages or distress of participants or other parties that are part or are affected by the research (NESH, 2006).

I doubted whether the research project needed approval from REC according to the Health Research Act or whether it was subject to notification to The Personal Data Act/Personal Health Data Filing System Act. Thus, I applied to both REC and the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

The Health Research Act usually applies only to research that aims to generate new knowledge about health and disease. Although participants were recruited from family therapy programs, relational difficulties were not necessarily considered health difficulties or illnesses. Additionally, the act on family counseling (§ 1 Act of Family Cancelling Offices) describes it as a "unique specialised service for treatment relational difficulties" that is neither a social service nor a health service (" Lov om familievernkontorer," 1997). However, children in prolonged conflict are at particular risk, and the REC could argue that the project was applicable to the Health Research Act of 2007 (the act was revised in 2017).

As a project that involved vulnerable groups (children at risk), the study was found by REC to be a health research project. Therefore, the project followed ethical guidelines by The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committee for Medical and Health Research (NEM). NEM has drawn up specific guidelines for the ethical and scientific evaluation of qualitative research projects. In addition to national rules, these guidelines also involve international conventions, such as the Declaration of Helsinki.

In the following, I address some ethical concerns that required further ethical reflections and elaboration before permission was granted by the REC. The initial research protocol from REC had two main objections: 1) conducting individual interviews with children at risk of being caught in loyalty conflicts could be distressful for child participants and 2) I had a dual role as a researcher and a therapist and unclear boundaries between therapy and research participation. I address ethical dilemmas regarding interviews with families at risk and discuss my dual affinity as a researcher and therapist.

Backe-Hansen and Frønes (2018) argue that an assessment of the potential benefits and harm when children participate in research should be considered in context with the research topic. Research methods and content in the research must also be adapted to children's ages and individual situations. Backe-Hansen (2009) refers to the principle that, "In general, we can say that the more harmful or unpleasant the research, the greater the benefit the researcher should be able to demonstrate to the participant." According to Section 18 in the Health Research Act concerning child participation in research, an account of risks or disadvantages should be negligible.

In my letter to the Committee, I revised the research protocol and argued for the possibility of conducting "resource-oriented" explorative research to ease the potential distress of child participants. The protocol also emphasized that both parents agreed to permit their child to voice their opinions in both therapy and participation in research, which would probably alleviate the pressure of loyalty conflict. I argued that a resource focus would make it less likely that child participants would be distressed when talking about family life. The research question, "how do children position themselves to family conflict and how in do family conflict position children?" involves a focus on children as agents and recognizes the risk of distressful life circumstances. Obviously, children are both vulnerable and competent (Backe-Hansen & Frønes, 2018; Mayall, 2002). On the one hand, children should be protected from being involved in research that might cause unwarranted distress; on

the other hand, children who experience hardship (e.g., postdivorce conflicts) might find empowerment from being given a voice (Salamonsen et al., 2020). Children's vulnerability is also a term that reflects their competence to grant consent to participate in research on their own behalf. This primarily applies to legal competence, which children generally do not possess until they come of age. The general rule for minors (younger than 16) at the time of the research is that their parents or guardians must grant consent and that children and adolescents then agree or refuse to participate. NESH's Guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences, the law, and the humanities state in article 12 that children are entitled to special protection that should be commensurate with their age and needs (NESH, 2006). The same point is made in the Declaration of Helsinki, which regulates medical research.

One could also argue that when conducting interviews in qualitative research, that I as a researcher have ethical reflexivity and knowledge about the negative life circumstances that make children vulnerable is crucial. Children might be distressed by a negative focus on children or family issues by emphasizing child problems or by triggering emotional processes (Vestby, 1999). Thus, I attempted to be attentive to emotional and verbal expressions during the interview to ensure that the child not only conceded to participate but also was attentive to potential subjects that children might find disturbing or difficult. Participants' experiences were assessed at the end of the interview, and difficult matters were brought to a closure.

Nevertheless, predefining vulnerability is difficult. One could assume that children are more vulnerable by their status as minors and that parents are "stronger." However, in the research context, parents might be in the greatest need of protection. From a systemic perspective, inflicting distress in parents could consequently harm their abilities as parents and have negative consequences for their children (e.g., children might be further triangulated by their parents). I found that parents often needed help to bring closure to emotional or traumatic themes and maintain structure during the interview. One ethical dilemma in recruiting families in treatment is when

themes that are inquired on in research overlap sensitive themes in therapy. Additionally, a qualitative research interview might resemble psychotherapy. This type of "transference" might have unintended therapeutic consequences. Questions are interventive; an interview does not just elicit a story already known but often contributes to the construction of a new account with its own effects. Therefore, taking into account these effects and building ethical ways to manage them is important. However, this raised important questions about whether a research participant can ever truly give "informed" consent (Burck, 2005). Although I as a researcher may give information about the research topic and the scientific rationale and potential benefits and stressors to participants, interview participants cannot foresee how they might experience the interview process. Thus, informed consent is processual and requires that I, as a researcher, be sensitive to signs of distress or "disconsent" during the entire interview/research process, especially when concerning children.

Research in a social constructionist paradigm "calls on the researcher to take responsibility for their own positioning" (Burck, 2005; McNamee, 2010). An examination of the interactional processes in the research interviews can help highlight researcher effects, neglected themes, and opened and closed areas. Paradoxically, some research interviews could have more "therapeutic value" than talk therapy itself (Morecroft et al., 2004; Rossetto, 2014). When conducting qualitative interviews, it is suggested that "participants need an opportunity for feedback and discussion of their feelings, and a contact for additional help needs to be identified and provided following the interviews" (Murray, 2003, p. 235). Therapist experiences and clinical knowledge of the characteristics of high-conflict families can provide understandings that might be challenging in an exploratory design. As a family therapist, I will bring clinical and professional understandings about high-conflict families, which can make it difficult to discover more expanded knowledge as a researcher. Such understandings were also part of the experience of any therapist role because a researcher is influenced by his or her life experiences and

position in relation to conflicts. The roles of therapist and researcher do not hinder research but require reflexivity throughout the research process. “Field knowledge and understanding are not negative as long as it is made explicit, and the researcher discusses its importance” (Qualitative Research Projects in Medicine and Health Sciences, Author’s translation p. 17). Discussing the understandings of coauthors and research groups to attempt to identify the implicit expert knowledge and explore what others find interesting in the data or findings has been valuable.

This research project emphasized gaining an inside perspective from children and parents and their perspective on family life in the midst of conflict. The therapy context is used because it provides a safe framework for the explosion of high-conflict families. That I have therapist competence in relation to the fact that the families are in a vulnerable position is considered a significant advantage, and some would argue that clinical child competence is a prerequisite for interviewing vulnerable children. The researcher must have professional competence in child development, experience talking to children, and expertise in specific challenges such as high-conflict children—this involves knowledge of how avoiding or reducing potential charges can be done in the interview. Furthermore, knowledge from the research context as a therapist provides a better prerequisite to assess whether additional therapists are needed. Whether the role of researcher and therapist involves weakening the research project must be considered in relation to the choice of research questions and informants and the research design. Overall, I assessed that competence as a therapist is a strength for the research project as long as the roles of the therapist and the researcher are clearly separated.

Another ethical dilemma is that of ensuring the anonymity and safety of the participants. This dilemma occurred in the choice of design, during the analysis, and when presenting the results. This dilemma was constant; for instance, the use of dyadic analyses and comparing parenting stories risked confidentiality (Paper 2). In some instances, this made it necessary not to use excerpts with detailed descriptions

of accusations of violence, for instance. In a prolonged family climate, a risk is that a break in confidentiality could result in violent episodes or conflict. Jory et al. (1997) studied couples with a history of violence and discussed the need to interview partners separately in the interest of the safety of participants, which was the case in my study.

In this chapter, I have attempted to provide a thorough clarification about the ethical aspect of the research and all of the measures taken to ensure the safety of the participants.

4. Findings

In this chapter, I provide a short presentation of the three articles with the main findings. The overall aim of the thesis was to explore how postdivorce families with parents in prolonged conflict construct and position themselves and others in relation to conflict-related challenges. To illuminate the overall aim, I developed more specific research questions that were addressed in the three papers (Table 1).

Table I: *Summary of the three papers*

	Paper I	**Paper II**	**Paper III**
Title	"Keeping balance," "Keeping distance," and "Keeping on with life": child positions in divorced families with prolonged conflicts	"The Troublesome other and I": Parallel Stories of Separated Parents in Prolonged Conflicts	"The Heroic Savior, the Jungle Guide, and the Beacon Amidst a Fog of Uncertainty": Agency of Fathers in Prolonged Postdivorce Conflicts and their Positioning of Children
Research-Question	a) How do children position themselves in challenges in postdivorce family conflict, and how does family conflict position children?	a) What storylines emerge when separated couples in prolonged conflicts talk about their coparent relationship? b) What positions of the self and the other are constructed when talking about the conflicted coparenting relationship? c) What does it mean for the duty of parenthood when separated parents are in prolonged conflict?	a) What storylines of parental agency emerge when separated fathers talk about their children who are in distress from the conflict? b) What positions of agency do fathers take up in these storylines, and in what kinds of subject positions are fathers other positioning their children and ex-partner? c) How do these storylines legitimize fathers' own positions and actions towards their children and ex-partner?
Sample	Nine children	Ten parents (from five parenting couples)	Eight fathers
Analysis	Theory Informed Thematic Analysis	Reflective Thematic Analyses and Dyadic Analyses	Discursive Analyses Informed by Positioning Theory
Dominant Positions (Main findings)	Self-positioning of children: -Keeping balance -Keeping distance -Keeping on with life	Other and self -positioning of parents: The troublesome other and I	Self-positioning of fathers: The Savior The Jungle Guide A Beacon in a Fog of Uncertainty

4.1 Paper I

Stokkebekk, J., Iversen, A. C., Hollekim, R., & Ness, O. (2019). “Keeping balance», «Keeping distance” and “Keeping on with life”: Child positions in divorced families with prolonged conflicts. *Children and Youth Services, 102*, 108-119. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.04.021

The interviews showed that children took up different subject positions according to their storylines of family challenges. Three dominant subject positions were generated in the analysis: *keeping balance* in the family conflict storyline, *keeping distance* in the storylines of a troubling relationship with one of their parents, or *keeping on with life* in storylines in which children talked about life as more than family challenges.

The findings indicate that children are not passive victims in dealing with prolonged family conflict-related challenges. Children take up different dominant positions according to their meaning-making of conflict-related challenges (storylines). We argue that children take up subject positions on behalf of their self (self-care) and on behalf of their family to promote family connectedness and avoid fueling conflicts. The findings also indicate that older children have more positioning power (capabilities to take up certain positions) than younger children.

4.2 Paper II

Stokkebekk J, Iversen A, Hollekim R, Ness O. (2021) “The Troublesome Other and I”: Parallel stories of separated parents in prolonged conflicts. *Journal of Marital Family Therapy*, 47(1), 52-68. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jmft.12474

Drawing on positioning theory, self-identity as parents emerged in the analyses as implicit counter positions in storylines, which construct the coparent as “the troublesome other.” In these storylines, “I as a parent” is self-positioned implicitly as

a good parent or a parent being hindered or denied cooperative coparenting by the troublesome other. Ten parallel storylines were identified (Table II).

Table II:

Parallel storylines of *the troublesome other and I*

Parental couples	**Fathers' storyline**	**Mothers' storyline**
John and Mary	*"Being falsely accused"*	*"Being a victim of violence"*
Stig and Mette	"*The invasive female manipulator"*	*"The angry father in a home far, far away"*
Brian and Karen	*"The betrayal and destruction of a nuclear family man"*	*"The bitter ex-husband who blames me for everything"*
Adam and Hilde	*"Not being accepted as a separated father"*	*"Motherhood as being responsible and fatherhood on trial"*
Roger and Margaret	*"The drained father who refuses to build more bridges between mother and child"*	*"The father's coup and the dismantling of a mother in being told, ignored and kept in the dark*"

Conflicted storylines were prominent as two typologies: storylines of violations of trust that positioned the coparent in relation to traumatic events in the past and storylines of who is bad that positioned the coparent as either a disloyal coparent or a dysfunctional parent. The findings indicate that prolonged conflicts made it impossible to find available positions for cooperation. Often, one parent positioned himself or herself as predominantly willing or unwilling to participate in cooperative coparenting with the effect of forced positioning as an uncooperative parenting couple. Parents with dominant self-representations who were willing to cooperate talked about how the other parent made joint parenting impossible with acts of hostility, denigration, and sabotage. In contrast, a predominantly unwilling parent was reluctant to engage in joint coparenting due to the need for self-protection from intrusiveness and critique. The result was then forced positioning as a noncooperative couple. Thus, we argue that this has consequences for the duty of parenthood and that conflicted parents should focus on parenting rather than continued efforts to influence the other parent.

4.3 Paper III

Stokkebekk, J., Törrönen, J., Emery, R.E., Iversen, A. C. & Hollekim, R. (2022) "The Saviour, the Jungle Guide and a Beacon Amidst a Fog of Uncertainty: Agency of Divorced Fathers in Prolonged Conflicts and their Positioning of Children. *Manuscript submitted for publication.*

Three positions of father agency emerged in the analyses: (1) the savior, (2) the jungle guide, and (3) a beacon in a fog of uncertainty. Each position exemplifies fathers' "world views," "microcosmoses," or "moral orders" of postdivorce dangers that surround children and shows how fathers typically position their children and their own ethical stance in terms of parental agency.

In the ***Polluted Realm storyline,*** omniscient fathers want to change the circumstances in which their children live with their exes. In the ***Jungle Storyline,*** well-informed fathers teach their children coping skills to survive the intrusive environment caused by their ex-partner. When parents are other-positioning their children, they legitimize their own

position as a duty to rescue; thus, they become a savior, legitimizing fathers in taking a position as a coach toward their children with a duty to promote children's coping skills. In the ***Foggy Moor storyline,*** fathers do not know the circumstances in which their children live (Table III). As fathers in this third storyline self-position themselves as powerless in terms of knowledge, their repositioning efforts to change things turned from circumstances or from children to their own actions. In particular, they think that the only way they can provide a good environment in which their children can grow is to make their own behavior clear, routinized, and easy to interpret. They attempt to *act as a beacon* to bring hope and stability to their children amid the mysterious uncertain surroundings that resemble a foggy moor. These attempts legitimize fathers to focus on their own acts of parenting or in their relationships with their child.

Table III:

Matrix of three storylines of father agency, views of child dangers and positionings of child.

	Story Line 1	**Story Line 2**	**Story Line 3**
Danger ethology Microcosmos	Postdivorce Dangers as Impurity; **as in a Polluted Realm**	Ever-present Postdivorce Dangers; **as in a Jungle**	Postdivorce Dangers as Mysterious; **as on a Foggy Moor**
Threats to child Child needs	Toxic/unnatural environment Child need to be removed/saved	Dangers are natural Child needs survival skills	Dangers/world a mystery/ambiguous Child in need of safety/routines
Type of father agency	*Savior/rescuer* from a polluted environment	*Coach/Jungle Guide*-knowledge of risk and survival techniques	*Acts as a beacon*, efforts to provide an illuminated area of safety and hope
Positioning of child	Victim of contamination from passivity/impurity	Agent (jungle child) with potential to cope in a risk environment	Ambiguous child (the child and its world) is obscured by uncertainty
Ontological/ Knowing positioning	Father as "all-knowing" Insider/expert perspective on risk	Father construct "knowledge with child"/relates to acts/coping	"Not knowing" father—view of child and the world is obscured/ambiguous

5. Discussion

The overall findings across papers show that children and parents in conflicted postdivorce families construct needs and interests differently and attach different meanings to various phenomena and experiences. Using positioning theory and in dialog with frameworks from social construction and systemic theory, I have explored available subject positions for families in prolonged conflict and how the conflict might facilitate and restrict various subject positions for family members. Based on overarching themes, I have chosen to discuss the following topics: (1) the repositioning of children: from victims of conflict to agents that deal with conflict challenges, (2) prolonged postdivorce conflict as a disruptive positioning force, (3) acts of conflict as parents' agency, (4) the becoming of fathers in high conflict families, and (5) is coparenting an available position for parents in prolonged conflict? Finally, I discuss some methodological questions that the thesis actualizes as well as the thesis's implications for research and its contributions to the practice field.

5.1 Repositioning of children: From passive victims of conflict to agents that deal with the challenges of conflict

Throughout the papers, two parallel positionings of children seem to exist within a storyline of risk and victimization and within a storyline of being an agent that addresses the various challenges of conflict. Parents are other-positioning their children as victims of parents' conflict. However, children themselves talk about their efforts to reposition themselves as agents that deal with various challenges of conflict.

Parent positioning of children as victims is found to be connected to their view of the conflicted parenting dyad and their joint positioning of the other parent as a troublesome other (Papers I and II). Furthermore, as previously noted, systemic thinking dictates that the basic human relationship is a triad (e.g., parent dyad vs. child), not a dyad, in that when any two people get together, they influence and are

influenced by a third (cf. theory Chapter 2.2.2). The concept known as triangulation distinguishes systemic theory from other forms that theorize about social life in families (Dallos & Vetere, 2012). Thus, the significance of a systemic triangular perspective is that parents jointly construct storylines of children as victims of conflict while simultaneously positioning children as objects or manifestations of their opposite view in conflict (Papers II and III). Additionally, parents often have contrary storylines about each child–parent dyad with a triangular effect of how they are self-other positioning themselves as parents.

The triangular perspective applied in this thesis could be viewed as further development and integration of systemic thinking and positioning theory (Christensen, 2019). A systemic perspective contrasts with how positioning theory is usually applied because subject positions are often negotiated between two entities (parent vs. child, within couples, between) and as binary opposites (e.g., good–bad) (Harré et al., 2009). Additionally, children in two conflicting household families are often triangulated between their parents' hostile polarities (Paper I). One could within the binary framework's semantic polarities (Ugazio, 2013; Ugazio et al., 2020) propose that children in highly conflicted families are dominated by the semantics of alignment or loyalty (Dallos & Vetere, 2012; Karamat Ali, 2014). Additionally, oppositional positionings might result in an adverse state of conflict/anxiety, similar to a double bind or strange loop (Cronen et al., 1982), as discussed in Paper II, which is similar to how polarized positions render conflicted parents unable to coposition themselves as cooperative coparents.

Furthermore, when parents talk about their conflict or complain about the trouble, they also position (or triangulate) their child along storylines of risk. Parents' views of children reflect risk discourses about children as passive victims who become exposed to or inflamed in parental conflict (Mills et al., 2021). Consequently, when professionals listen to a storyline of bad parenting, it creates a third-order positioning of children. Professionals are triangulated with attentiveness to how and in what way

children are victimized. Victimizing storylines might position children as passive victims and exclude parallel storylines in which children are viewed as agents in a context of challenges.

As noted, I found that children portrayed themselves primarily as *agents that deal with conflict challenges.* Some children stressed the importance of family loyalty and connectedness, proclaiming that they are doing "equally well" with both parents and rejecting the idea that they like to be with one parent more than the other, leaving the impression of the importance of the stance of equilibrium in the family (Paper I).

Nevertheless, some children self-positioned themselves as victims after being caught in the middle between their parents. A dominant storyline of family conflict brought a general awareness that family conflict represented a disturbance in the family system and, in some children, a dread of not being able to keep the balance or of being pulled into the turmoil of the conflict. Different subpositions of keeping balance emerged as staying out of conflict, as being the responsible one, and of staying silent. Children typically took the subposition of staying out of conflict and staying silent, whereas adolescents typically took the position of being responsible. Some children describe the pressure of being pulled between parents' different expectations, making them uncertain. If they are unable to keep a balanced position, they are like the last pawn in a game of chess. Often, they are under constant threat from the divided wishes of parents that form a scissor grip around them. They feel unprotected and manipulated by their parents' polarized requests (Paper I). Marit illustrated this point saying, "It's like (...) they [parents]want two different things, … and I truly don't have any protection against it" (Paper 1, Page 111).

Thus, children are taking up positions across a multitude of different discourses about being a postdivorce child (i.e., competent agent child, dependable child in need of protection, child connected to two parents/households). The competent child is aware of the importance of dealing with conflict with an obligation of self-care and of "family care" with an obligation to remain connected to both parents/households.

However, children also depend on the need to stay connected and obtain the care and protection of parents (e.g., in need of parents that shield them from conflicts).

Our findings show that children and youth take up subject positions as agents in efforts to deal with conflict-related challenges on behalf of their selves and the family as a whole (Paper I). The findings illustrate that children construct family challenges in unique ways; even within the same family, siblings take up different subject positions in accordance with their dominant storylines about conflict-related challenges (Paper I). For instance, some children view that their main struggle is with troublesome parents, whereas others feel caught between their parents' conflicted positions.

Child positions as agents dealing with challenges contrast with how children are often portrayed as passive victims in the research literature (cf. Theoretical chapter). If professionals are other-positioning children as predominantly *vulnerable victims* of their own circumstances, doing so might create a risk of losing sight of children's agency. The view of children in parallel storylines positioned either as an agent or a victim aligns with research that suggests that children are both vulnerable and competent (Hart, 2009). Research emphasizes that children bring unique and important perspectives about their family environment (Campo et al., 2020; Helimäki et al., 2020; Smart, 2006; Steinbach & Augustijn, 2021).

I argue that for children who take up positions of resistance to deal with challenges, the risk also exists that these positions might be ignored or misunderstood by parents and professionals. Parents and professionals alike are more likely to be attentive to their own storyline of risk and challenges rather than children's storylines about challenges and how they take up positions dealing with challenges. This is in line with recent research on postdivorce families in Norwegian family counselling services, indicating that children and parents have different perceptions of children's conflict related challenges (Holt et al., 2021). Our research shows that parents interpret children's actions as part of their preferred conflict narrative (Papers I, II,

and III). Thus, children are triangulated within parents' two opposite understandings of children, which forms implicit and explicit expectations from parents that children should align with their other positioning of them. Likewise, professionals are often mindful about risk but are often confronted with parents who conflict with the other positioning of children, making it difficult to identify children's self-positioning regarding challenges (Paper I). The exclusion of children's perspectives, particularly those children whose life experiences have already subjugated them, needs to be recognized as the oppression of children (Smart, 2003).

Based on the findings, I argue that the various positions in dealing with conflict bring new insights to how children navigate conflict-related challenges and take up positions of resistance to threats on their wellbeing and sense of dignity (even though, in many ways, they have less positioning power than their parents). Application positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) and theories about how individuals act or take up positions to resist oppression (Wade, 1997) have helped us identify the repositioning of children as agents dealing with conflict challenges.

The findings indicate that children resist by efforts of *keeping balance* (avoid being caught in the middle) and by attempt to stay connected to both of their parents (Paper I). Children are also aware that the balance of the polarized family depends on their ability to maintain balance, which is comparable to research that emphasizes the importance of experiencing a sense of mastery and coherence regarding challenges (Masten, 2018; O'Hara, Sandler, Wolchik, Tein, et al., 2019; Walsh, 2016d). Our study indicated that some youths were unsuccessful in maintaining a balance and that they were blamed by their parents for the conflict. Children exposed to hostility or parental denigration of the other parent take up a position of *keeping distance* and, if possible, avoid contact with the parent that they view as troublesome. Children's wellbeing postdivorce depends on quality in parenting and in parent–child relationships (Steinbach & Augustijn, 2021). We argue that keeping distance from a troublesome parent is an act of self-care; this position is also sensitive to children

often being dependent on parents' initiatives to resolve difficulties in parent–child relations (Mills et al., 2021). Other children take up a position of *keeping on with life* to distance themselves from family challenges and focus on routines and life outside of family (Paper I). There is more to (family) life than parental conflicts, and children who take up the position of *keeping on with life* could be understood as reminders of that. Children in this position talked about the importance of managing it on their own, doing their daily activities, such as sports and other leisure activities, and keeping contact with friends and other important persons in their network. Not being overinvolved and leaving the conflict in the hands of parents is known as an adaptive coping response in the literature (Brummert Lennings & Bussey, 2017; O'Hara, Sandler, Wolchik, & Tein, 2019). This is especially true if the focus on life outside the family appraises conflict in ways that involve less blame of themselves or others (Grych et al., 1992). Keeping on with life (outside of family) and to reduce contact with their parents and to have increased reliance on peers and social life outside of family is common for adolescents. Keeping on with life could be seen as a meaning system in the child and family resilience framework that is adaptive (Walsh, 2016b). It gives youth a chance to find pathways of resilience in that they are able to distance themselves from conflict challenges and to allow for the development of healthy independence (Ungar, 2016). The focus on life outside of family and the ability to live one's life could also be understood in child (individual) resilience terms as mastery motivation, meaning that repeated success of being able to live one's life might lead to hope and a belief that one can successfully deal with the stressors in one's life (Camisasca et al., 2017; Masten, 2018). Rose (2021) argued (with reference to Paper I) that the position of "keeping on with life" is found among a divorce support group for Danish school children. Our study indicates that children's meaning-making from various dominant positions (keeping balance, keeping distance, keeping on with life) represents resistance against threats to the child's wellbeing, dignity, and being a child in a family (Paper I). However, it is important to note that efforts of resistance and "even resilience, may harbor both strengths as competences in overcoming challenges but also costs as traumas or relational strains

of distrust" (Stokkebekk et al., 2019, p. 117). Alternatively, as Smyth and Moloney (2019, p. 3) states, "whatever the coping responses, each is likely to come at an emotional and developmental cost."

This study brings a new conceptualization of children's dealing with conflict challenges from frameworks of resilience-oriented systemic theory, positioning theory, and response-based practice (Richardson, 2015; Wade, 1997). Children's subject positions in oppressive family circumstances are viewed as acts of resistance in need of future validation from authority figures (Paper I, p. 110). The conceptualization of resistance in dealing with oppressive challenges emphasizes the need for a social response to re-establish a sense of safety and dignity. This contrasts with theorizing, which has the main focus of successful mastery in dealing with challenges and, thus, eliciting future successful strategies. Although children are biopsychosocial agents with capabilities (Maturana & Varela, 1992), challenging events are from a social constructive perspective in need of joint understandings in the context of dialogs (McNamee et al., 2020). Acts of resistance that are validated retrospectively could establish storylines in which children are given opportunities to take up reflexive self-positions as agents and promote healthy narratives with a sense of coherence, thus promoting future wellbeing (Antonovsky & Sourani, 1988).

5.1 Prolonged postdivorce conflict as a disruptive positioning force

Prolonged postdivorce conflict emerged across papers as a disruptive positioning force in the family and as a threat to family members' agency. Across papers, I found that the meaning constructions of family members show that prolonged family conflict is disruptive to the social functioning of the family system within and across households.

This finding is in line with previous studies that show that the psychological burden in a family is not ongoing conflict in itself but, rather, how conflict is understood and

handled (Francia & Millear, 2015; Francia et al., 2019a). We found that parents in prolonged conflict construct “the troublesome other” parent as someone who hinders their preferred parenting position in contact with their child or lacks influence over their child’s wellbeing (or parenting practice) in the other home (Papers I and II). Based on positioning theory, a social life (in a family) depends on available positions that family members agree to take up (Harré, 2015). Discourses on engaging in postdivorce family life (Campo et al., 2020; Smart, 2004), with joint obligations of cooperativeness and conflict resolution, position parents as uncooperative (Paper II).

I argue that prolonged postdivorce conflicts could be viewed as a disruptive positioning force, meaning that unresolved family conflict threatens the preferred self and other positioning of family members. Parents want to be connected to their child and positively influence their wellbeing. Children want to stay out of conflict and stay connected to parents who are sensitive to their needs and are able to shield them from loyalty conflicts. For children to be drawn into conflict involves exposure to the anger and resentment that parents often feel toward the other parent (Paper III).

The finding that prolonged conflict is a disruptive positioning force at the family level is in line with a systemic view of postdivorce conflicts as a power struggle (Emery, 2011), not only in the parenting system but also in how family members navigate conflict-related challenges in their effort to meet different needs. When conflict is ongoing or chronic, many needs (social, identity, psychological) in a family are often hindered or challenged.

Although the focus in research is often on risk and levels of ill health, the focus in this thesis has been on meaning construction and the relational consequences of prolonged conflict. The use of positioning theory has emphasized the functioning of family life from the perspective of how prolonged conflict is positioning the family and restricts the position that is available to take up. Being exposed to these forms of relational disturbance is often stressful (Grych & Fincham, 1990) and oppressive to one’s sense of emotional security (Harold & Sellers, 2018). However, not being able

to take up one's preferred self-positioning as a family member also had a cost to selfhood and one's sense of dignity. Prolonged conflict is a disruptive positioning force in the sense that many children and parents are "closed off" or unable to take up their preferred subject positions in the family as a child, parent, or coparent. Most children prefer not to be caught up in parents' conflicts or be exposed to hostile parents who are hurt, sad, or angry (Rød et al., 2008). Thus, children are often closed off from a position in which they are emotionally secure or protected from the burden of ongoing interparental conflict or hostility (Warmuth et al., 2020). Coparents would have preferred that the other parents listened to their child-related concerns or that their coparent respected their boundaries and avoided intervening in their household sphere or criticizing their parenting practice (Papers II and III). Thus, coparents are closed off from the stability of trusting each other and from the ability to resolve differences and make joint decisions on behalf of their children (Paper II). In this sense, prolonged conflict *is fundamentally a threat to the social fabric in a family and to the becoming of child and parents in postdivorce families*.

The attention from this study on the destructiveness of subjects' positions that are "closed off" adds new knowledge to the complexities of prolonged conflicts (Papers II and III). Being stuck in unwanted conflict storylines could also be referred to as frozen narratives (Blow & Daniel, 2002). Being closed off and stuck perhaps also illuminates knowledge about how these relational conflicts often remain prolonged and unresolved in mediation or court (Gulbrandsen et al., 2018a). These ineffective efforts of "mapping and solving the conflict" are described by Høigilt and Bøe (2021, p. 198) as a "technical, intellectual defining-and-solving-the-problem-rationality. The authors further report that:

"the family counseling offices [in Norway] report that mediators usually experience working with these families as an area of failure. From the perspective of courts, legal processes often end up focusing on winning and losing with parents protecting their

territory and consequently the children's situation can become even worse." (Høigilt & Bøe, 2021, p. 189)

I argue that being stuck—being reminded of the unavailability of a desired subject position—is comparable to the destructiveness of being part of or exposed to intensified emotions of destructive conflict dynamics. Such understandings might broaden our scope of how prolonged conflict embeds the functioning of family life. This finding contrasts with how the destructiveness of conflict is often understood as stress from exposure to conflict dynamics (Arbel et al., 2016; Bergman et al., 2014; Davies et al., 2011; Sturge-Apple et al., 2012). According to stress theory, frequent exposure to conflict is explanatory for ill health and psychosocial consequences (Koss et al., 2013; Zemp et al., 2014). The findings across papers indicate that dealing with repeated cycles of concern, uncertainty, and frustration (Papers II and III) from not acquiring one's preferred position as a parent or coparent has its toll. Parents report how unpredictability and the actions (troubles) of the other parents are difficult to comprehend; consequently, obtaining a sense of coherence of family life or challenges is difficult (Sagy & Antonovsky, 1992; Walsh, 2016d). Moreover, the findings illuminate that family conflict often means that multiple relationships are challenged by the initial conflict among parents (Papers I, II, and III). Across all three papers, the findings show that meaning construction about conflict challenges (storylines) varied among siblings, between children and parents, and between households. This result can be understood as an indication that conflict challenges position family members differently and that family members construct meaning in the context of what they feel is at stake for them relationally. This is in line with research with a reciprocal and systemic understanding of conflict (Emery, 1988; Rowen & Emery, 2018). Another perspective is from the paradigm of bringforthism (cf. Chapter 3.1.2) that explains how family members perform individual agency and become capable of constructing distinctions and generating realities in their social interactions (Maturana et al., 1980). In contrast with a social construction that prioritizes language and relations, bringforthism posits cognizing biological

organisms in relationship with other living organisms as the foundation of meaning-making. Bringforthism gives priority to understanding how individual persons evolve and live. By extension, this biopsychosocial perspective might explain how children are able to take up positions to deal with conflict challenges (Maturana & Varela, 1992). In other words, they act "intuitively" to take initiative in more complex situations of responding to challenges (Tomm, 2020).

5.2 Acts of conflict as parents' agency

Throughout papers, acts of conflict were portrayed by parents themselves as efforts of parental agency. Although parents were other-positioning their coparent as *the troublesome other.* their speech acts were mostly from self-positioning as parents. This orientation contrasts with how parents' acts are often portrayed in the literature, in which conflict dynamics are framed as deriving from a prior history as a romantic couple (Barnes & Dowling, 1997). Moreover, the dominant storyline about parents in high conflict is divorce, often based on "outsider-expert understandings that classify parents enmeshed in 'high-conflict' disputes in polarised and individualised terms" (Treloar, 2018).

To view parents' acts as agency, that is, the impression across papers, contrasts with the theorizing that often views parents as ex-spouses or combatants without the ability for romantic decoupling. The process of decoupling is described as a range of different transitions, including emotional decoupling that occurs as two individuals engage in detaching psychologically and from socially derived definitions as a couple from each other; physical and geographical decoupling as former partners move to live separate and apart from each other; and legal decoupling that typically engages the legal system to bring about property division and child custody arrangements (Ashbourne et al., 2013).

Most parents spoke about themselves as parents who saw their acts in relation to concerns about their child. This is in line with other studies that have studied parents'

meaning-making (Francia et al., 2019a; Treloar, 2018, 2019). Parents did not frame their acts as conflict behavior; rather, they talked about them as efforts of parental agency. Across the papers, I found that what professionals often describe as conflict behavior or conflict patterns, such as withdrawal (unwillingness to be in contact with the other) and intrusiveness (getting involved in the other household against the will of the other parent), was understood by parents themselves as vital parenting efforts. From an insider perspective, "setting up a wall against the other parent" was talked about as essential to protect oneself, to save precious resources to function as a parent, and as a way to protect the child(ren). Additionally, efforts to "climb over the wall" and intervene in the other home were often discussed as efforts of parental care and as a way to reach out and safeguard their child.

Conflict between parents was motivated by the joint positioning of the *troublesome other parent*, which is seen as a threat to the child's wellbeing or one's position as a parent (Paper II). It was found across papers that parents typically position themselves and their children as victims of conflict and—in most cases—hold the other parent responsible for the conflict challenges. Parents most often described a polarized position, in which the *troublesome other parent* represents a threat for their child or their values as parents.

Our findings (Papers II and III) suggest that parents in prolonged conflict understand the negative effect of conflict on their position as a parent or concerns about their child's welfare. This is aligned with other studies of parents' perspectives (Francia et al., 2019a). However, the findings show that parents focus on the parenting role and that parents' agency (Papers II and III) is different from a view of family conflict as a continuum of power conflicts from being a romantic couple in the past (Emery, 2011). Our findings also contrast with how Smyth and Moloney (2017) describe entrenched conflict couples as characterized by *interparental hatred* in relation to the other parent. Interparental hatred includes a willingness to incur personal costs in harming the other parent. Even if the costs outweigh the perceived benefits, "an

individual consumed by hate may proceed with actions aimed at humiliation or destruction of the other" (Smyth & Moloney, 2017, p. 407). In contrast to the ontology of the interparental hatred perspective, our finding shows that most parents, with some exceptions, *viewed the troublesome other* from a position as concerned parents and from the perspective of what trouble the other parent caused as a parent regarding the wellbeing of their child or to their role as a parent. Most parents did not hate the other parent as a person; rather, they hated the effect the other parent had on their life. Many parents found it difficult to deal with hostility, but most were concerned about the effect that hostility had on their child.

When parents are entrenched in conflict, their behavior is often understood in the context of conflict dynamics and the potential negative effects it has on children, parents, and parenting (Mills et al., 2021). I found in Papers II and III that parents' experience of postdivorce conflict was partly embedded in their experience from taking part in different institutions to solve conflict. This is line with the literature, often with implicit assumptions that parents—as individual disputants—are responsible for their conflicts. Although others state that institutions on which we depend to resolve conflicts (mediation, court), not individuals, might also be causing and sustaining conflicts (Ney, 2015).

The learning point from how parents themselves view postdivorce conflict challenges is that parents first and foremost should be considered by professionals as parents rather than ex-couples.

5.3 Being a father in a high conflict postdivorce family

Post-separation fathering is described as "a complex relational and moral process, shaped deeply but not straightforwardly by gendered patterns of caring for children" (Philip, 2013, 2014). Contemporary ideas of fatherhood have shifted from being a breadwinner to a growing recognition of fathers' emotional connection and caregiving qualities (Koster et al., 2021). The literature on postdivorce conflict

reflects deep divides and intense debate in which gender equality in parenting and value fatherhood is often a central focus. Postdivorce fathers often view themselves as discriminated against as a parent because fathers (1) often have less access to their children than mothers after the separation, (2) have presumptions that fathers are treated as inferiors to mothers by the court and welfare services, and (3) have conflict-related emotions, such as anger, that are more likely to be portrayed as violence or aggressive transgressions when expressed by fathers (Alschech & Saini, 2019; Erera & Baum, 2009).

This thesis is, to the best of my knowledge, one of few explorations of how fathers position their child, their coparent, and their own agency as parents (Paper III). There was a tendency that non-residential fathers were, across papers, found themselves to be less influential in the life of their children than mothers. However, it was also the case that most fathers had concerns for their child's wellbeing (across custody solutions) that were related to inadequate care or intrusiveness from their mother and in conflict with their moral values or style of parenting.

However, some fathers referred to mothers in general as a hindrance or disturbance in their efforts to stay connected to their child. These fathers talked about their children from a father-right discourse. Consequently, fathers were other-positioning children as objects of rights, as rightfully belonging to them. This is in line with Birnbaum and Bala (2010), who argue that gender-based advocacy and gender based thinking play a role in "'socializing' parents after separation," thus contributing to a polarization of what is referred to by professionals as "high conflict." For example, the tendency among professionals and policy-makers is to view high-conflict divorce through the lens of gender (fathers vs. mothers) conflict (Smart, 2003; van Lawick & Visser, 2015). Postdivorce gender differences in parenting indicate that postdivorce mothers are generally more engaged in (different types of) parenting and that fathers often have parenting styles with low involvement (Koster et al., 2021). However, my

findings indicate that separated fathers want to be involved and often have perspectives on how to promote their welfare and their role in children's upbringing.

Fathers predominantly (across Papers II and III) saw their agency as parents in a positive light, which is similar to other self-report studies that focused on fathers' own evaluations of disclosures to children (Kang & Ganong, 2020). Fathers viewed their own disclosures in contrast to mothers as necessary and positive for children. However, some fathers described aggressive confrontations towards their ex-partner or parental denigration in front of their child. In some instances, fathers talked about parental denigration of mothers (or triangulation in conflict) as causing relational difficulties with their child. Furthermore, while disclosing detailed accounts of family violence, these episodes were by some fathers presented as justified anger towards the ex-partner rather than with focus on children as victims of family violence. This is in line with other studies that describe how parents in prolonged conflicts struggle to comprehend the negative effect of conflict related violence (Johnston et al., 2009).

Our explorations of father agency (Paper III) highlight fathers' own meaning-making of how they navigate concerns and threats to children. According to Davies, the central aspect in agency is not whether individuals can have or do not have agency but whether there is a choice that "provides the possibility of the individual positioning themselves as agent as one who chooses and carries through the chosen line of action" (Davies, 1990, p. 359). Subsequently, fathers have an obligation to carry through a line of action (perform agency) in response to how they perceive their children and their needs.

Additionally, across Papers II and III, many fathers position the mother predominantly in a malignant way—as a threat to the children and their safety. This is in contrast to a view of gendered differences in which mothers focus on threats to their children's welfare, whereas fathers predominantly focus on threats to their connectedness to their child (Scott & Emery, 2014). In relation to this, fathers are often portrayed as victims of mothers' gatekeeping (Nixon & Hadfield, 2018).

Maternal gatekeeping is the term used to refer to mothers' preference and attempts to restrict and exclude the father from childcare and involvement with children. Maternal perceptions of paternal competence, child welfare beliefs, parental relationship quality, and parental role battles and bargains are all strongly linked to different types of gatekeeping postdivorce (Trinder, 2008). Gate opening could be challenging for mothers because it requires balancing the tension between believing that father–child contact is important for their children and being concerned about their children's wellbeing within the father–child relationship (Nixon & Hadfield, 2018).

We found that fathers often viewed that mothers represented a danger to their child. Deconstructions of fathers' worldviews of dangers to their child revealed how fathers felt morally obligated to intervene as parents to engage in acts that could be understood as conflict-related behavior toward the other parent (Paper III). Fathers' storylines of dangers to children are illustrated as different landscapes or microcosmoses (Paper III). The application of microcosmoses or landscapes as storylines could be viewed as an extension of positioning theory to clarify the *viewpoints* on the dangers that surround children and fathers' agency (Törrönen, 2014). For instance, some fathers position children in a jungle, where they are surrounded by unescapable postdivorce threats from mothers intrusiveness or loyalty conflicts. In these cases, fathers take up a position as a jungle guide (parental agency) that teaches children survival skills (coping). Exploration of the "backstage knowledge" of fathers' agency invites knowledge that clarifies fathers' motives. This kind of knowledge is vital for family therapists, and fathers' concern about their children motivates them to act in a way that is often deemed irrational, aggressive, or a threat to the child's wellbeing. The presentation of the father's agency within different moral landscapes gives a new context to understand how parents are poisoning themselves as parents and to understand postdivorce children.

The self-presentation of father's contrasts gender stereotypes that dictate "that it's mothers who worry about child welfare." Our findings across papers indicated that postdivorce fathers (just as mothers) were predominantly focused on safeguarding the wellbeing of their child and the dangers that mothers represented. This contrasts with the literature and theorizing that categorize and present stereotypical gendered differences as binaries. For instance, maternal gatekeeping and paternal banking are often presented as a bidirectional force following divorce and separation (Moore, 2011). Paternal banking is related to former husbands' dominance and control over the mother through the restriction of child allowances. However, egalitarian relationships in which parents are equally invested in caring have less gate-closing, and fewer paternal banking mechanisms exist with dual earners (Moore, 2011).

5.4 Is coparenting an available position in prolonged conflict?

All papers point to parents' experiences of hostility and prevalent distrust, creating premises that make it exceedingly difficult for them to cooperate. The application of positioning theory revealed how parents embroiled in conflict, in parallel, ended up in forced other positioning as uncooperative parents (Paper II). In this stalemate position, one parent typically wants to monitor and influence the other, whereas the other builds a protective wall and resists contact.

Ample evidence exists in the literature on the benefits of effective parental cooperation and the negative consequences of conflict (Til Ogut et al., 2021; van Eldik et al., 2020). Thus, recommendations from researchers typically highlight the importance of effective parental communication and cooperation (Til Ogut et al., 2021). Based on such evidence, some researchers take up discourses of cooperation and parents' obligation to cooperate effectively and recommend that clinicians take up positions as educators; for instance, "The findings of this study may also be used by counselors and mediators to educate parents on how their actions are likely to

affect their offspring's wellbeing and to encourage parents to engage in cooperation and effective communication." (Til Ogut et al., 2021, p. 654)

In parallel, abundant evidence exists on how family therapists and other psychosocial and legal professionals strive (Paquin-Boudreau et al., 2021), often unsuccessfully, to promote a working cooperative relationship among parents in prolonged conflict (Gulbrandsen et al., 2018a; Gulbrandsen et al., 2018b). Although sufficient evidence exists for the difficulties of establishing a cooperative coparenting relation, most researchers and family therapists still promote the ideal of establishing a working cooperative coparenting relation (Emery, 2019; Emery et al., 2014; Lebow, 2019; Til Ogut et al., 2021).

However, to my knowledge, this thesis is one of the few research endeavors that explored the obvious mismatch(and dilemma) between how researchers, society, and welfare institutions promote the ideal of cooperative cooperating and the evidence that 10–15 percent of parents remain unsuccessful in resolving conflicts or in establishing a trustful coparenting relationship even after multiple efforts and involving aid from legal and psychosocial professionals. One way to pursue this avenue is to explore parallel storylines and self/other positioning of conflicted parents and ask about the coparenting position that is available for them (Paper II).

I found that parents in this study were pessimistic about being able to cooperate with the troublesome other (Papers II and III). Many conflicts came with a history of trauma from violations of trust (such as being a victim of violence vs being a victim of false allegations) and with recurring accusations toward each other of being a disloyal coparent or a dysfunctional parent. Research on the meaning-making of parents' past two years of conflict shows how pervasive mistrust and the dismissal of parental concerns make it difficult to obtain a sense of security and predictability (Francia et al., 2019a). Several studies report that the most common issues that maintain conflict are concerns over the other parent's ability to care for the child, differing parenting styles, and children with minimal or no contact with the other parent (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011; Gulbrandsen et al., 2018a). As described in this thesis,

society as a whole, science, policy-makers, and professionals in welfare and legal services coconstruct ideals (discourses) that position postdivorce parents as jointly responsible for cooperating successfully (Sclater & Piper, 2019). Research that produces evidence of destructiveness conflict often advocates for promotions of cooperative coparenting. The professional construct of "high conflict" implies a punctuation on destructive conflict dynamics and a dysfunctional parenting couple that are unable to meet society's norm of effective conflict resolution and joint cooperative coparenting.

I argue that forced self/other positioning as uncooperative makes joint coparenting an unavailable positioning and that doing so involves a responsibility for welfare services and family therapists to find new directions in how we aid postdivorce families in chronic conflict. Consequently, I contend that welfare institutions and family therapists should focus on preventing or minimizing conflict rather than promoting cooperativeness. Cooperation requires the willingness of both parents to be influenced by the other, which is not the case for parents in prolonged conflict. Therefore, it is important to promote parents' acceptance of their inability to intervene in each other's parenting practice with the risk of increasing conflict dynamics. An alternative to coparenting is parallel parenting, which involves a disengaged style of coparenting that is proactive to the risk of conflict escalation. Each parent takes responsibility for their own parenting practice and their relationship with their child without consulting or involving the other parent. Research indicates that repeated exposure to or enduring involvement conflict—not the level of conflict per se—is linked to ill health for children (Cummings & Davies, 2010).

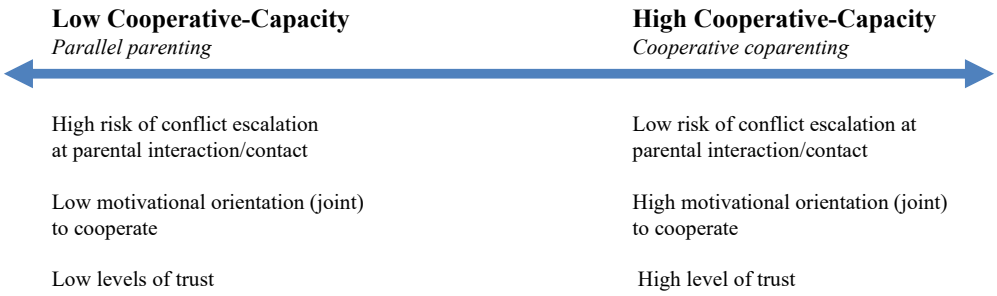
Parents in a prolonged conflict were typically found to be in a dilemma of needing to be of influence on behalf of their child on the one side and needing self-protection against intrusion from the coparent on the other side (Papers II and III). I argue that parents negotiate coparenting positions through motivational orientation (cf. 2.2. I) toward other-influence and self-protection (Apter, 2003). A balance between other influences (of child/coparent) and self-protection was found to be important for self-agency as a parent. Coparenting refers to a relationship that "requires mutual respect

and support between parents" with the ability to "manage their conflicts in a nonhostile way and communicate effectively regarding parenting" (Macie & Stolberg, 2003, p. 92). As noted, entrenched conflicts position coparents as unwilling to be influenced and/or influence each other. In circumstances in which coparenting is unavailable, equilibrium from efforts of stability and nonhostility is required from a systemic perspective. Likewise, positioning theory dictates subject positions without enmity (Harré & Moghaddam, 2013) in which "eruptions" of positional battles and aggressive conflict behaviors are avoided.

The findings across Papers II and III indicate that postdivorce parents need a framework that is sensitive to and within the boundaries of what I have coined as "*Continuum of Joint Cooperative Capacity in Postdivorce Coparenting* " (figure II). This contextual perspective, which is sensitive to relational abilities and boundaries of coparenting, contrasts with the global or moral presumptions that postdivorce parents should be able to function as a cooperative team in a business-like relation (Kelly, 2014). Most parenting couples have experiences of cooperativeness that could be illustrated on a continuum, typically ranging from being able to function as cooperative parenting teams (often the case prior to divorce) with a high level of motivation, low risk of conflict, and high level of trust (figure II). After a divorce, a small group of parents remains in conflict (Johnston & Roseby, 2009) after 2–3 years, and the combination of low motivation, high levels of distrust, and any interaction comes with a high risk of conflict. As the figure illustrates, parents in prolonged conflict have a low capacity of cooperativeness and should keep contact to a minimum because of the risk of conflict and coercive contact while having low levels of trust and a low level of joint motivational orientation to cooperate (figure II).

Figure II:

Continuum of Joint Cooperative Capacity in Postdivorce Coparenting



5.5 Methodological considerations

In this section, I discuss some methodological considerations with a focus on methodological strengths and limitations. The quality of the research project is previously discussed in the Methods chapter (cf. 3.7).

Paper I involved recruitment of children in difficult family circumstances with experiences of parents in a prolonged postdivorce conflict. The recruitment of child participants was more time-consuming and difficult than anticipated, even though I had support from therapist colleagues at the recruitment site. Also difficult was apprehending approval from the ethical committee (REK), and several parents were reluctant to give their approval. Interviews of the children needed the approval of both parents. These experiences correspond with previous experiences of recruitment from vulnerable groups (Fylkesnes, 2018). In the method chapter (cf. 3.8), I have discussed ethical considerations in conducting research with vulnerable children/youth. In this regard, this thesis contributes valuable research knowledge that involves ethical considerations and a design that involves the management of family risk (prolonged conflict, family violence) and buffering of unwarranted distress. The material is from in-depth interviews with nine participants aged from 9 to 16 years. The strength is that it is a clinical sample, with children from help-seeking and

distressed postdivorce families with parents having been in conflict for an average of six years post separation.

A possible weakness in Paper I is that an age gap exists; interviewees are 9 years or older; consequently, younger children are not represented. Younger children would probably contribute other perspectives on conflict-related challenges. However, children from 9 years or older were recruited because they were considered more able to provide reflexive accounts of family life within the chosen interview design. A strength of the chosen design was the combination of family involvement and multiple individual perspectives from separate interviews. Child participants knew that parents had been interviewed separately and that both parents encouraged/approved of their participation and their right to an individual perspective on family life. Most children in the interview setting were able to provide reflexive accounts of their experiences. Also, my experience was that the youngest children (ages 9–10) needed more time to adjust, with use of drawing and the support of an older sibling. The less rich accounts of family life might be related to the inexperience in talking about the topic (parental conflict) or that the interview design was a better fit with adolescents. Furthermore, research indicates that children's most frequent response to feeling caught between their parents' conflict is to avoid talking about it(Afifi et al., 2016).In hindsight, perhaps other types of interview approaches, such as lifeform interviews asking about children's everyday life experiences (Andenæs, 1991), would be a better fit with younger children.

In Paper II, I had rich data from 10 parents to present the subject positions and storylines of five parent couples. Ten in-depth interviews and the dyadic analytical design provided rich material to explore reflexive self/other positioning as coparents/parents. The strength of this paper is that each parent interview is analyzed and presented in context with the view of his or her copartner's parallel positioning. That readers are provided with detailed accounts of parent's storylines is also a

strength of the paper, meaning that they are provided with material to evaluate the trustworthiness of the analyses of parallel and joint positioning.

In Paper III, I studied 8 fathers' stories and their positioning of children (and their exporters) in postdivorce conflict and their view of parent agency. This paper provides rich and detailed accounts of father agency and how they view their child in the context of postdivorce conflict. The strength in the material and analysis is the use of microcosmos/landscapes to illuminate fathers' storylines about their perspectives of the dangers that surround them. I argue that the use of landscapes as a metaphor highlights fathers' emotional and cognitive representations of the postdivorce dangers that surround children. However, illuminating some aspects of the dangers might also cast shadows on other nuances of the father's account. Most analysis methodologies necessarily guide the researcher to seek patterns according to a framework that includes some aspects of the world and excludes others. For instance, a strict phenomenological approach provides this paper with other aspects, and perhaps is less colonizing in how fathers are represented. The application of landscape metaphors is on the middle in a continuum with the polarities of analytical rigor and analytical novelty/improvisation (Bøttcher et al., 2018, p. 33) However, these considerations of "analytical balance" were the subject of a discussion with the coauthors. My view is that, although it is innovative, the use of the microcosmos metaphor is applicable within the analytical framework and successfully deconstructs fathers' emotional and moral despair and view of agency related to the dangers that surround children.

The ontological and epistemological stance is from systemic or constructive paradigms. I have interpreted the material through the analytical lens from social construction and the discursive framework of positioning theory. To analyze subtle, interacting effects of context and to engage with participants to create new understandings are central to good quality in qualitative research (Smith, 2015). A strength with the use of theory-informed analyses (Bøttcher et al., 2018) is that the

chosen terminology and the chosen sources of theory open up to different sets of questions in relation to the material. I always sought to find concepts/theories that were a good fit with the development of the research questions and different research processes in each paper. A large part of the learning process was a time-consuming trial-and-error process, through which some theoretical concepts initially made sense (coping, resilience) but when applied in the analyzing process did not provide any aid in clarifying the complexity in the material. Positioning theory and discursive analytic approaches are valuable from the perspective that they are useful in deconstructing meaning-making in relation to power, self, and other positions. I found that using positioning theory provided me with a flexible apparatus of analysis that brought depth and a nuanced representation of the data. I found what I missed in other concepts: the attention to power imbalance, meaning construction, and how these are socially constructed. Another important aspect was the initial unfamiliarity with positioning theory. Learning to know a conceptual apparatus when applying it as a lens to the material brought a newness to the phenomenon; as a clinician, I already had preconceptualized in-depth knowledge about it. Arguably, limitations exist in the use of theory-informed lenses. If not reflected on, predetermined lenses might be related to the confirmation bias that one often finds what one seeks (e.g., in search of individual coping, one will find coping strategies rather than victimization and structural injustice).

When studying power and positioning in prolonged conflict, yet another level of positioning is to be addressed: that of the researcher (Päivinen & Holma, 2016). The present study was conducted by a male doctoral student and family therapist and coauthors from a Scandinavian or Euro-American cultural background. Despite the objective of reflexivity, reading the data was arguably limited to the cultural discourses of this interpretation. I was also aware that the research design asked questions about resources (coping/resilience) and my professional stance or inclination to seek resources as foreground rather than hardship. All papers are based on analyzing interview transcripts (conducted at one timepoint). Additionally, my

professional experience as a family therapist tells me that the self-presentation of family members changes and that some are unaccustomed and/or need a process to reveal or further dialogues to comprehend family challenges. Thus, a need exists to exercise caution when studying family life from verbal statements, taking into consideration the comprehensiveness and many layers of speech (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). This is especially true when the material is from a coconstructed interview setting. One should be cautioned that reflective talk about family life is different from, for example, family practices and natural conversations in a home. As a qualitative researcher, one should be mindful about the context in which the material is constructed. Brinkmann (2016) argued that interviewing must be considered a social practice that provides a specific context for knowledge production. One way to understand an interview context is how one is positioning the interviewee. I approached interviewees as teachers who are encouraged to talk about family life and "raise and explore issues that they find to be relevant and allow their voices to be heard" (Foley, 2012, p. 306). This interviewee subject position is often offered in the context of in-depth interviewing and provides the interviewee with much more control over the interview setting and themes.

Research is socially constructed. Although I was the first author of all of the papers, the coauthors made invaluable contributions throughout the research process. Every paper involved a process of joint discussions and decision making of how to best approach the material and in the process from analyzing themes to writing and submitting articles. A research process that involves several authors also involves different perspectives and shared reflexivity about research and is one of many aspects to ensure the quality of the research. Different positions provide different perspectives on how one is seeing the social world, which offers different knowledge on which to rely when actively coconstructing an analysis of a material. Thus, other readers and analysts could and presumably would read, interpret, and analyze the material and analyses in other ways and come to alternative interpretations of the results. Despite the possibility for alternative interpretations of the results, I consider

that our analyses of the three papers are thoroughly and properly conducted. Although an analysis is truly never finalized, I consider that we have delivered a well-founded analysis, as presented in the three papers.

5.6 Implications and conclusive reflections

This thesis has been an effort to deconstruct how children and parents take up subject positions to address conflict-related concerns and how destructive prolonged conflicts position psychosocial life in postdivorce families. The application of positioning theory in the thesis unveils how conflicted postdivorce families negotiate subject positions according to what they "ought" to do and by the forced positioning of others (in the context of conflict). Deconstruction of family meaning-making revealed that prolonged conflicts often threaten or hinder children and parents from taking up their preferred subject positions in the family. Thus, children and parents take up various positions to deal with conflict according to their dominant storylines of challenges. The attention from this study, with the use of positioning theory and on the destructiveness of preferred subjects' positions as child, parent, and coparent as "closed off," adds new knowledge on the complexities of prolonged conflicts. The findings show that a need exists to realize the potentially destructive impact of chronic conflict on the social functioning of children, parents, and the family as a whole to assist family members in prolonged postdivorce conflict. The insider perspective of children and parents in these families is important, which provides accounts that are complementary to the outsider perspective of researchers, policy-makers, and professionals. This thesis has added a new understanding of how various members of postdivorce families comprehend challenges from conflict and has made important contributions to theorizing about postdivorce families in prolonged conflict as a phenomenon, in addition to systemic thinking and positioning theory.

Furthermore, the thesis has been an effort to integrate different theoretical perspectives as a step to conceptualize and understand the complexities of families

embedded in prolonged conflict. Positioning theory adds systemic theory and thinking with and emphasizes how meaning systems of family members involve discursive storylines and forced and negotiated subject positions. The integrative perspective of systemic theory and positioning theory adds another relational level to positioning theory, where it is not only persons who negotiate, take up, or restrict positions. Correspondingly, family subsystems (family structures such as dyads and households) form meaning systems and boundaries that make certain subject positions available and restrict others. Additionally, understanding social life and children's positions in the family is not confined to reflexive self/other positioning of how parents view their child in relation to themselves or to self/other positioning of children within or between households. All meaning constructing entities take up positions not only within dyads but also by triangulation (e.g., child vs. parent dyad, parent vs. child–parent dyad).

In the thesis, I have promoted the idea that postdivorce parents have a "joint capacity of cooperation" and that low engagement (parallel parenting) between conflicted/uncooperative parents might reduce the risk of exposure to conflict. This follows the logic that the opposite of conflict exposure is not conflict resolution or cooperative parenting but simply protection against exposure or involvement in conflict. This view contrasts with the outsider perspective from researchers, which often is other-positioning postdivorce parents with "joint duties" of cooperation (that disregard inabilities of cooperation) and with joint responsibility for the entanglement of children in their hostile turmoil. As a result, it is easy to forget that conflicts in postdivorce families are to a large degree created and interlocked with conflicting discourses in society about postdivorce families, with obligations to meet the unique needs and wants of the subjective child versus upholding ideals of gender equality (shared custody) in parenthood. Postdivorce conflicts need to be understood in the context of how society—with the aid of welfare institutions—controls and promotes family transitions and coconstructs the distribution of roles and responsibilities in postdivorce families. Thus, the phenomena of prolonged and destructive postdivorce

conflicts are first and foremost a responsibility of society. Families with unresolved and hostile conflicts need the aid of society and a variety of professionals. This requires impartial mediators that can aid conflict resolutions and family therapists that are aligned with the functioning of the postdivorce family and that can strengthen the psychosocial life in each household. Prolonged conflict involves various risks of child maltreatment, such as family violence or child neglect. This calls for the aid of professionals with a mandate to perform risk assessments, that is, child welfare services and experts in court. However, families can only be helped if society and professionals understand that "conflicts are a property" (Christie, 1977) owned by families themselves, to paraphrase the criminologist Niels Christie. Christie's heed still resonates today on how conflicts both need to be "*nurtured as visible and see to it that professionals do not monopolize the handling of them*" (Christie, 1977, p. 1).

One way to *nurture conflict as visible* and to avoid *monopolizing the handling of conflict* is to use a framework that deconstructs agency and that is nonjudgmental and sensitive to the meaning-making and subject positions of all parties that own the conflict. Professionals have applied the term "high conflict" in situations in which they have been unsuccessful in "taming" parents' intense and prevailing conflicts. The inability to tame certain problems, give precise definitions, and solve complex psychosocial problems are known in the literature as *wicked problems* (Rittel & Webber, 1973). The term "wicked problem" describes a difficult, complex, and seemingly intractable issue and can refer to stigmatized conditions, such as family violence or prolonged conflict (Kelly et al., 2016). Professionals and researchers have categorized a subgroup of conflicted parents as "high conflict" in the hope of taming prolonged conflicts, often with individualistic characterizations of individuals and specific conflict patterns that are often at odds with a contextual and systemic understanding of interpersonal conflicts. Arguably, a shift from a systemic, nonjudgmental, and contextual framework of family conflict to a more individualistic and linear description of postdivorce challenges occurs. I have coined the term *fixed/rigid positioning* for the application of terminology that gives a narrow, linear,

and judgmental understanding of those involved in prolonged postdivorce conflict. The terms that act as fixed/rigid positioning often mimic diagnostic reasoning with a linear focus on cause and effect and are often applied without revealing a lack of research validation or ideological implications or foundations. For instance, children who resist or refuse postseparation parental contact with one parent are often interpreted as pathologic and unwanted child behavior. These child behaviors are often understood within a legal rights discourse as "violations" of parents' rights to have contact with and be equally invested in the upbringing of their child. Terms such as *hindrance*, *rejections*, or *refusal* of contact with parents are often understood as part of the nonscientific, ideology-based narrative of parental alienation (syndrome), in which the *rejected parent* is positioned *as a victim*, and the *preferred parent* (residential) is often *held responsible* for denigrations against the other parent and aligning with the child against the rejected parent. Children in this narrative are portrayed as victims who are easily manipulated. The application of terms such as parental rejection and alienation is *fixed/rigid positioning* because some conflict-related acts and subject positions are predetermined as pathological, whereas one parent is in a fixed/rigid position as guilty, and the other parent is positioned as an innocent victim. This *form of professional monopolizing of postdivorce conflict* is known in positioning theory as malignant/forced other-positioning, whereby professionals with positioning power distribute forced subject positions to family members. Additionally, labeling children as manipulated (or brainwashed) turns children into objects (without a voice), that is, at the mercy of how adults/professionals interpret their behavior. Fixed/rigid poisoning of postdivorce conflicts is destructive to both mediation and family therapy, which completely depend on the presence of a processual, nonjudgmental arena to aid families stuck in conflict.

Prolonged conflict is oppressive to one's preferred subject position in the family. The consequences of prolonged postdivorce conflict are complex and call for systemic perspectives, competences and interventions. Perspectives on psychosocial risks and

ill health need to be supplemented with perspectives on how to promote wellbeing and dignity. Positioning children as merely victims of prolonged conflict does not give good directions for understanding children—their constructions of conflict-related challenges or the policy measures and interventions that is needed to help strengthen children in these postdivorce family circumstances. Children in postdivorce conflict circumstances are at risk of being objectified as social belongings in equality-based discourses of parental rights or hindered in continued contact with both parents after separation, if there are relational difficulties between child-parents that remain unresolved . Children are often objectified in their parents' polarized views about their needs. Children need authorities, that is, professionals and parents, who can identify oppressive acts and transgressions from parents and validate children's acts of agency and positions of resistance to conflict-related challenges. I stress the importance of, and the need for, safeguarding a perspective of children as subjects, and a need exists for policy and lawmakers, judges, and family therapists who can identify and prevent other positioning of children as objects. This perspective is important for all behavioral and mental health services (i.e., school and child welfare agencies) that aid children and postdivorce families.

This thesis makes an important contribution to the knowledge base of services provided to postdivorce families. Furthermore, the thesis clarifies a need for research on the meaning-making of children and parents as service users and on how different welfare services position the postdivorce family with conflict-related challenges.

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Children and Youth Services Review 102 (2019) 108–119

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth

"Keeping balance", "Keeping distance" and "Keeping on with life": Child positions in divorced families with prolonged conflicts

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Child constructions of family life
Family therapy
Qualitative study
Family conflict
Positioning theory

ABSTRACT

A dominant storyline of divorced families in prolonged conflict is children portrayed as victims without agency. How does this fit with how children position themselves in prolonged post-divorce conflicts? In this qualitative study we pose the following research question; how do children position themselves to challenges in post-divorce family conflict, and how is family conflict positioning children? This paper draws on in-depth interviews with nine children (10-16) years old. Positioning theory is used as an analytic tool to explore child subject positions. Three dominant subject positions emerged in the analysis: keeping balance, keeping distance and keeping on with life. While our analyses show that prolonged conflict is oppressive to the family system, it is argued that each dominant position represents resistance against threats to the child's wellbeing, dignity and being a child in a family. Implications for child and family services with respect to separated families in prolonged conflict are discussed.

1. Introduction

In Norway, 25,000 children experience their parents' divorce and separation each year, and one of four children live in a family constellation other than with both of their parents (Statistics Norway, 2018). Although most families adjust successfully to the new family structure after 2–3 years of recovery from initial disruptions from the separation, it is estimated that 10–15% of separated households are characterized by parents in prolonged conflict (Hetherington, 2002; Mahrer, O'Hara, Sandler, & Wolchik, 2018; Thuen, 2004; Wiik, 2015). In Norway, all married and cohabiting parents with children under the age of 16 that separate are obligated to attend mandatory mediation, to write agreements on parental responsibilities and custody rights. Parents are also encouraged to give their children permission to participate in the mediation process (up to seven sessions), to voice their opinion (e.g. on their future living arrangements) or to promote psychosocial support during family transition (Thørnblad & Strandbu, 2018). However, although parents are encouraged to solve their issues in family mediation, a considerable number of custody disputes are brought to court. In 2014 and 2015, cases concerning custody and contact amounted to 16 per cent of all civil disputes in the Norwegian district courts (Bernt, 2018).

A dominant story in research is the negative effect of unresolved conflict on the children's wellbeing and psychosocial health (P. T. Davies et al., 2016; Harold & Sellers, 2018; Zemp, Bodenmann, & Mark Cummings, 2016). Such is the evidence of adversely effects on children's mental health outcomes that the diagnostic condition 'child affected by parental relationship distress (CAPRD)' is introduced into the DSM-5, noting the risk of children e.g. amidst of parent conflicts in divorce and/or unfair disparagement of one parent by another (Bernet, Wamboldt, & Narrow, 2016; Lorås, 2018). Prolonged conflict is more likely to be destructive post-divorce when one of the parents express their rage toward their former spouse by asking children to carry hostile messages, or by prohibiting mention of the other parent in their presence. Further, direct involvement of children in angry feuds on the phone or between parents in person increases the risk of children "feeling caught in the middle" (Afifi & McManus, 2010). These acts of hostility from parents are creating loyalty conflicts in their children and intolerable stress(Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). Child involvement in postdivorce conflict is more likely to happen in contact with each parent, than by direct exposure to their parents fights. Parents in prolonged conflict are prone to reveal negative information about the other parent to their adolescents (T. D. Afifi, McManus, Hutchinson, & Baker, 2007)in some cases due to lack in effective interpersonal skills (Amato & Rogers, 1997). Adolescents' perceptions of their parents' inappropriate disclosures is a stronger predictor of

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.04.021
Received 4 January 2019; Received in revised form 16 April 2019; Accepted 17 April 2019
Available online 22 April 2019

adolescents well-being than parents' perceptions of their own disclosures (T. D. Afifi et al., 2007).

The punctuation on risk, often portraying children within a victimizing discourse, positions children as passive victims of their parents in conflict. Other research endeavors have focused on children's ability to navigate these challenges and how they are able to draw on resources to withstand or cope with family conflict (Kerig, 2001; Miller, Lloyd, & Beard, 2017b). Some research endeavors have focused on the conflicted families' ability as a functioning system to be resilient—that is, with functioning parenting and good-quality child-parent relationships before and after separation (Ahrons, 2006; Amato, 2000; Chen & George, 2016; Masten, 2018; Miller, Lloyd, & Beard, 2017a; Walsh, 2016b). Although family conflict exposure is a risk for children, it has been argued that moderate conflict exposure followed by conflict resolution is an important part of family life and in children's development (P. T. Davies, Coe, Martin, Sturge-Apple, & Cummings, 2015). In this paper our attention is drawn to how family conflict is positioning children and how being a child means to take up available positions while navigating family life.

In navigating life in dual households, children can view their parent's relationship either as distant, unfriendly, conflictive or hostile and be aware of their parent's polarized positions in child-related matters such as child rearing, access rights or living arrangements (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Holt, 2016; Visser et al., 2017). Based on an evidence review of research on parental conflict, Harold and Sellers (2018, p. 378) argue that children's meaning making of parental conflict and the quality of their relationships to their parents is among the primary explanations of why some children exposed to family conflict experience significantly negative outcomes, whereas other children are resilient and experience little or no adverse effects. There are important age differences in children`s meaning making of conflict, and how they respond. In early adolescents to adolescents, cognitive changes enable them to increasingly think more abstractly and understand their own and others' perspectives, such that they can reflect on their positions in social contexts (Miller et al., 2017a). Enhanced understanding both increases the risk of exposure to conflict e.g. more involved in family decision making (conflict exposure), detect signs of hostility/distress in parent (self-blame). Moreover, more nuanced capabilities to reflect also enhance the coping repertoire (e.g., distraction, seeking understanding from others) and capabilities (Miller, Kliewer, & Partch, 2010). As with younger children, coping strategies of adolescents in post-divorce conflict is influenced by the presence of responsive parents that encourage social support.

Although prolonged conflict is threatening to the relational fabric of family life and children are in a pivot position as both risk bearers and informants, few research endeavors have to our knowledge explored children's constructions of life in these families. Children are often the center of attention in parental disputes; parents often claim to hold certain positions concerning their child, and these positions are part of a family discourse on what family members have "the right to" and what they "ought to" do (Harre & Slocum, 2003). Thus, when children talk about challenges in prolonged conflict families, their accounts of family life also entail knowledge of their capabilities in positioning themselves to address family challenges and of how they "ought to" position themselves as a child in a dual household family. Challenges or distress in postdivorce families could be characterized as ill-beings and an opposite construct to subjective wellbeing. Laumann-Billings and Emery (2000, p. 672) take up this point, and defines distress as; "subjective ill-beings that is; "negative emotions, evaluations of roles, and judgments of life satisfaction". Children's agency and meaning making is crucial to child adaptation in prolonged family conflict, there is little holistic and contextualized knowledge of how children construct and position themselves, with respect to the complexities of challenges in these family environments. In this study we pose the following research question; how do children position themselves to challenges in post-divorce family conflict, and how is family conflict positioning children?

2. Theory

2.1. Positioning theory

To better focus on children's agency and their constructions of life in prolonged family conflict, we draw on elements from positioning theory (Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009). According to R. Harré and Moghaddam (2003a), positioning theory is based on three main concepts: speech acts/acts, positions and storylines (the 'positioning triangle' in Harré and Moghaddam's words). The concept of "position" is a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of role (Goffman, 1971). According to positioning theory, people are not passively given roles in which they interact with others but rather actively negotiate subject positions, which involve notions of who we are and what we can do. (B. Davies & Harré, 1990) state that when talking about life experiences, e.g., when a child speaks about family life, parts and characters are assigned both to themselves and to other people. Family life consists of ongoing communication, of acts or speech acts that are viewed as socially meaningful performances by the parties involved. R. Harré and Moghaddam (2003b) states that;

> *"A position implicitly limits how much of what is logically possible for a given person to say and do and is properly a part of that person's repertoire of actions at a certain moment in a certain context* (R. Harré & Moghaddam, 2003a, p. 5)."

Positions involve reflexive positioning, in which the child positions himself and others (e.g., in talking about family life), and an interactive positioning, in which social episodes consist of people taking different positions. Positioning theory has often been adopted in studies of how conflict emerges and is maintained, ranging from conflicts involving clients and professionals up to conflicts between nations (Harré et al., 2009; Harre & Slocum, 2003; Jevne & Andenaes, 2017). Few studies have employed positioning theory on family conflict (Bruno, 2018; Jevne & Andenaes, 2017), and to the best of our knowledge, no studies have employed positioning theory in understanding child perspectives on family conflict.

In our use of positioning theory and in our understanding of positions, we apply premises from systemic family theory because family members position themselves not only to individuals in the family but also to relationships involving dyads, triads and the family system as a whole (Bateson, 2002; Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). Positioning theory within the metaframework of systemic theory, could be viewed as discursive proceedings based on different levels of positional negotiations, with mutual influence or feedback in the family system. One of the main tenets of the "cybernetic metaphor" in family systems theory are: the family system is motivated to maintain equilibrium or family homeostasis. Changes in one part of the family system must be followed by compensatory changes in other parts as an irreducible whole (Minuchin, 1974). Divorce is a transition to a binuclear family and the formations of two subsystems, that is separate but also interconnected to the larger family system (Minuchin, 1974; Walsh, 2010). An antecedent, like divorce, that activates family homeostatic mechanisms can be any type of causative change above the tolerable limit e.g. family conflict. We argue that in systemic theoretical perspective, prolonged family conflict across households could be viewed as antecedent positional meaning making, that is threatening or disturbs the processes of homeostasis, in developing boundaries and equilibrium in one or both households (Bateson, 2000; Kim & Rose, 2014; Minuchin, 1974).

In every social context, practice or situation there exists a 'realm of positions' in which people are located, and such positions are inescapably moral (Harré & Lagenhove, 1999, p. 6). They are moral in the sense of involving 'ought's' or moral obligation. Positions consist of rights to do certain things and act in specific ways and of duties to be taken up and acted upon in specific ways. In family life, different subject positions are negotiated, and how children understand the

situation can affect their perception of what subject positions are offered and available to them and whether they wish to claim or resist those positions. However, if one party possesses a superior position within a social context, certain positions might be imposed. Such uneven power relationships might be at stake for children in a family conflict. "Children's positions" refers to the identities made relevant through specific ways of talking and is a notion that emphasizes the location of the child in discourse (Avdi, Callaghan, Andenæs, & Macleod, 2015; Avdi & Georgaca, 2009).

Family life displays an order that can be described by norms and established patterns of development, and such patterns have come to be known as storylines, typically '*expressible in a loose cluster of narrative conventions*' (R. Harré & Moghaddam, 2003b). In a prolonged family conflict, family members can agree or disagree on what storyline is in play. One parent might view the family conflict as a "storyline of a fight for parent equality" and is ready to take up the position as the victim if he or she obtains fewer access rights to his or her child than does the other parent after separation (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011). This storyline is positioning the other parent as an "oppressor", as the one responsible for parent inequality, and the child is positioned "as an object/victim" of the parent's lack of equality between households. The other parent might resist the positioning as an oppressor and promote the storyline as "A fight for the child's rights of choice ", meaning that differences in parent access rights and living arrangements are a result of a child's own choices and thus positioning the child as an "independent agent", with both parents positioned as "neutral and supportive recipients" of the child's preferred choice. Consequently, in this storyline, equality between parents in living arrangements is not a justified focus. Children might find their positioning in both storylines problematic, in the former case as an "object" of a parent's decision making with 'no say' and in the latter case shouldering the burden of being "solely responsible" for their own living arrangements. Further, the two storylines represent two different discourses that is much debated in the field. One view is that divorce conflict is due to "unjust inequality" that is solved with the promotion equal parenting rights, and with shared custody as the norm. Another discourse is "welfare of the individual child"; that emphasize that custody rights and living arrangements should vary and promote the individual needs of the child (Lawick & Visser, 2015).

2.2. Concept of healthy resistance

In our understanding of child agency, we also draw on elements from Allan Wade's concept of healthy resistance to understand how children act and mobilize their inherent resources when faced with challenges from prolonged family conflict. The theoretical concept of "healthy resistance" emphasizes that "*whenever persons are badly treated, they resist*" (Wade, 1997). Healthy resistance gives attention to what people do when they meet violence or other forms of oppression, more so than on the consequence of how it makes them feel (Överlien, 2017; Wade, 1997). Richardson and Bonnah (2015) states that child responses to oppressive behavior (e.g. violence/parenting conflict) can provide information about how to aid children in attempts to promote healing, recovery and well-being. We argue that prolonged family conflict could be viewed as oppressive positioning to the functions and positions of adults and children in the family system, causing children to mobilize resources and take positions, and consequently acts to resist. The concept of healthy resistance is related to other resource-oriented theories such as child and family resilience (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Ungar, 2005; Masten, 2018; M. Ungar, 2001a; M. T. Ungar, 2001b; Walsh, 2016a) and salutogenesis (Antonovsky, 1979; Antonovsky & Sourani, 1988). Resource-oriented theories have in common that they try to explain how paths to good health and wellbeing are found in stressful and difficult life circumstances. Resilience, as a construct, acknowledge that some children and households struggle well, and gain competences from experiences of successfully mobilizing the necessary resources to overcome distress. Laumann-Billings and Emery (2000, p. 684) stresses that that resilience is not invulnerability, and that;" successful coping often is tinged by short-term and long-term distress." van Der Wal, Finkenauer, and Visser (2019) echoes this argument, and suggest that high-conflict divorce represents a risk for traumatic impact, and, at the same time, children demonstrate resilience. Healthy resistance, not only emphasize the importance of individual acts or responses of resistance. As in positioning theory, acts of individuals exist within a moral order of rights and duties. Children have rights to be cared for and parents have a duty to protect them from the turmoil of the conflict. The healing forces of resistance rest on the recognition, and positive social responses from other authorities' figures that recognize violations and oppressive acts from individuals with responsibilities. E.g. when a parents give unfair disparagement of one parent by another, in front of the child, it is important to recognize this as oppressive acts from a responsible adult, rather than framing it as a consequence of coparental conflict. Therapist is an authority figures, that is able to both recognize oppressional acts and to frame child responses as resistance, and in so doing gives social responses that promotes dignity, recognition and healing (Wade, 1997). Especially younger children needs authority figures, preferable the parent themselves, that is able to validate their hurts and that their responses as justified acts to protest against oppressive parenting behavior (C. Richardson & Bonnah, 2015; Wade, 1997).

3. Methodology

In this paper we explored children's constructions and meaning making of family life from the epistemological premise of social construction (Gergen, Lightfoot, & Sydow, 2004; Gergen & Ness, 2016). When people state a belief and or express an opinion in a social context, they are taking part in a conversation that has a purpose and in which all participants have a stake (Ness, 2011; Smith, 2015, p. 144). In other words, when family members tell their story about family challenges, it is important to view their story as a reflective performance or social action that reveals information about how they punctuate, construct and position themselves with respect to family life. Children's meanings are contextually produced; it thus follows that interviews must be viewed as co-constructed, in which the interviewer interacts with the informant and meaning is produced together (Backe-Hansen & Frønes, 2018; Saywitz, Camparo, & Romanoff, 2010). A given experience can reflect one of several possible accounts, and these might vary depending upon when and where they are produced (Åkerlund & Gottzén, 2017).

3.1. Recruitment of informants

Children (9–16 years old) were recruited from a family counseling service in Norway. The project was approved in advance by the Regional Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics in western Norway (Project 2016/1915). Information leaflets were distributed to participants of a child-inclusive resilience-oriented family therapy program (Strong Children in 2 homes) targeted at families in prolonged conflict with the following inclusion criteria:

- All families had a child 9 years or older.
- Parents had experienced more than 2 years of postseparation conflict or problems in coparenting.
- Parents had either child custody or access rights to their child.
- Parent's relationship was conflictive, in a deadlock, distressful and viewed as unsolvable for their child or parent.
- Prior history existed of postseparation counseling, mediation, court attendance concerning coparenting problems or family conflict.
- Parent was not currently part of a child protection investigation or taking part in family mediation or court proceedings.

Seventeen families were invited to be part of the study. Of these, both parents from five families gave their assent to let their child participate. Adolescents 16 years or older gave their written assent to participate, on their own behalf. Although parents gave their consent on their children`s behalf, the research protocol approved by ethical research committee emphasized that child participation was voluntary. Further, that first author would monitor, and terminate interviews if children showed signs of distress or reluctance to participate. In addition, first author had a meeting, prior to the interview, with each child with one parent present. Children and parents were then reminded that the study was voluntary, and that the child could end the interview at any time. All, children, except one, agreed to participate in the study.

3.2. Family demographics

The sample in this paper consists of interviews with nine informants (6 girls and 3 boys), from five families, conducted by the first author in 2017 and 2018. Four were early adolescents (ages 10-14) and five were adolescents (ages 15-16). All informants, except one, had siblings that also participated in the study. Children were informed that both parents participated as informants (findings planned published in future paper). On average their parents had lived six years in separate households. Household were from middle class background. In most households, one or both parents had a university college degree and one or both parents had a new cohabiting partner. At the time of the interview, most adolescents lived with one of their parents, while most early adolescents had shared custody arrangements spending equal time with both parents.

3.3. In-depth interviews with children at risk

Children in prolonged family conflict vary in their experiences of talking about family matters. Consequently, taking part in an interview exploring family life entails many considerations of how to facilitate a safe environment to conduct the interview. The first author was working as a family therapist at the place of recruitment as part of the duty work of a PhD scholarship but had no prior clinical involvement with the informants. The therapist's knowledge and experience provided vital insights into the phenomenon and context that were explored but could also represent preunderstandings that, if not reflected on, could hinder new insights (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; McLeod, 2011). Reflexivity and discussions with the co-authors and research group were important throughout the research process.

Informants were given a choice of interview setting, either in a neutral setting (office) or in a familiar setting in one of their household residences. Without exception, all informants chose to be interviewed at home after school hours. All children were interviewed individually (by the first author) to reduce the risk of being enmeshed in other family members' positions and views on the conflict. To ensure that the child informants felt safe during the interview, one of the parents participated in a conversation prior to the interview to inform the children that both parents had given their written consent for the child's participation and for the child to speak freely about family life. One of the parents was close by during the interview. The timing of the interview was before the onset of therapy, with the hope that the therapy process would contribute with additional support.

To trigger the telling of stories of family life, the interviewer emphasized the wish to know more about the informant's experience of family life. An interview guide approved by the ethical research committee (REK), directed the interviewers probes along with the following themes; a) descriptions of the family b) sources of well-being; in general, in family c) resources/qualities in the family d) family relationships e) child and family beliefs about challenges/coping f) child and family beliefs about support/needs g) future hopes i) child and family needs from counselling.

Informants were told that their parents were interviewed. Also, that siblings from the age of nine were invited with the intent that family involvement would empower children focus on their own perspective, knowing that; a) they had a relational permission to talk freely b) that all members would have a say. The interviewer took a position in a facilitative style, trying to emphasize and highlight informants' reflections in the conversation. Early adolescents were encouraged to draw pictures of their family households and family members. The interviewer was attentive to emotional and verbal expressions of informants during the interview to ensure that the child not only conceded to participate but also to be attentive to potential subjects that children might find disturbing or difficult. Participant's experiences of was assessed at the end of the interview, and difficult matters were brought to a closure. Each interview lasted from 30–70 minutes. A sound recording of each interview was later transcribed and supplemented with observation notes from the interview. Excerpts have been translated from Norwegian to English by the first author. To protect of the identity of participants, names of children and in some cases gender or kinship/roles of family members have been altered in the interview excerpts. Also, to hinder revealing identities' we applied age categories in the excerpts, informants that is 10-14 years are categorized as early adolescents (EA) and informants that is 15-16 years is referred to as adolescents (A).

3.4. Analysis

In analyzing the interview transcripts, we applied a constructive content and thematic-oriented approach supplemented with theory-informed analyses (Bøttcher, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2018; Smith, 2015; Willig, 2014).

First, all transcripts were read and reread without any attempts to analyze the text. The next analytical stage was conducted with the use of theory-informed analyses, with concepts from positioning theory (Bøttcher, 2018; Brinkmann, 2007, 2010; Harré et al., 2009; Schraube, 2015). In accordance with the research question, we focused our attention on children's constructions of challenges in the family that became apparent in the text. In reading over the interview transcripts, we used the concept of storyline as a "prism" to view the text (Bøttcher, 2018; Jevne, 2017; Jevne & Andenaes, 2017). Although the 'positioning triangle' can be entered empirically at any of the verticals; "position", "speech act" or "storyline" ("loose cluster of narrative conventions") the latter is a recommended entry (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003a, p. 9). (further details on positioning theory, theory section 2.3). In reading transcripts, we asked analytically, in what dominant themes of storylines do children construct challenges in the family? In coding themes of storylines across the interview transcripts, the answer emerged as three dominant storylines as follows: a) family in conflict, b) the troubling parent, and c) life—as more than family challenges. First author coded most of the material in themes, all co-authors contributed in reading segments of the transcript, and in the process of discussing, developing, revising themes of storylines and dominant positions.

In the last analytical step, we asked with attention to the research question, what type of dominant child position is present in each of the three storylines? In answering this question, three dominant positions emerged, one connected to each storyline. In each dominant position, subpositions were constructed. The dominant positions and subpositions are presented in the finding chapter with excerpts from the interviews. In analyzing, we coined the term dominant position, emphasizing that each dominant position could be viewed as a meta-position to variations of subpositions children take in prolonged conflict families (Harre & Slocum, 2003). We also note that children's subject positions must not be viewed as static; children are flexible in how they position themselves because they can draw on more than one contextual storyline. A dominant position can therefore entail elements of other positions or subpositions.

4. Findings: Three dominant subject positions

Overall, children's talk of family life was heterogeneous; some child informants described challenges that affected their life and wellbeing, whereas others talked about minor difficulties they were able to manage. Sibling respondents had in most cases different dominant subject positions, while in some cases they shared dominant positions but with different subpositions. Without exceptions siblings' stories of how it family challenges affected their life varied. Although the dominant positions children took varied, some of the positions were more typical for adolescents while other positions where typical of early adolescents. One dominant position emerged within each of the three dominant storylines: a) keeping balance (in the storyline of family conflict), b) keeping distance (in the storyline of the troubling parent) and c) keeping on with life with life (in the storyline of life—as more than family challenges).

In the following, each dominant position will be presented with subpositions and illustrated with excerpts from the interviews.

4.1. Keeping balance in the family

Keeping balance was the most common position because all informants described how conflict was or had been present in family life. Children described how one or both of their parents had difficulties with talking, meeting or trusting each other, of parents arguing in the open and of masked hostility. The dominant storyline of family conflict brought a general awareness that family conflict represented a disturbance in the family system, and in some children, a dread of not being able to keep the balance or of being pulled into the turmoil of the conflict. Different aspects or subpositions of keeping balance emerged as staying out of conflict, as being the responsible one, and of staying silent will be presented and illustrated with interview excerpts. Early adolescents typically took the subposition staying out of conflict and staying silent, while adolescents typically took the position of being the responsible one.

4.1.1. Staying out of conflict

The subposition of "staying out of conflict" as became apparent in Anne's (EA) account of how she become caught in her parents' conflict involving her older sister. Anne (EA) described how it is difficult to avoid getting caught in family conflicts:

> " […] But what it is, is that sometimes it is a little bit difficult. Cause' then it just like, if I talk with mum about something that's happened for instance with my big sister. Then it sounds quite OK, and when dad talks about it sounds very different, kind of. It is really difficult to choose who I …, who I shall team up with. Sometimes it's just like that … But usually when there something about sister then I say like, "Ok, so that's what's happened". And then I kind of, try to not be a part of it, so that I don't have to … kind of be mixed in, so that I have to … for example mum and my big sister agree and then they want to talk to daddy; and he say for example "No" or is against it. Then it's kind of; them against him and then I would rather not be caught up in it, cause then there is three against one, or two against […]"

Anne (EA) provides a fluent and assertive account of how she avoid taking sides in the conflicts. The importance of balance is emphasized in how she makes the conflict into a mathematical equation having an effect as though family members were positioned on a teeter totter swing; *Then it's kind of; them against him and then I would rather not be caught up in it, cause then there is three against one, or two against …".* She speaks fast, and the text comes across as a statement that she is fine as long as there is a balance. She notes that *sometimes it is a little bit difficult* and she points to *teaming up* as *really difficult*, indicating that it is not the conflict itself but the threat of having to choose a side that is difficult. Statements in the initial part of the interview stresses the importance of family loyalty and connectedness, with proclamations that she has it "*equally well*" with both her parents. When she was asked to elaborate on how being the youngest in one household and the oldest in the other affected her, she uses the opportunity to proclaim that it "*goes well"*, and to reject that "*she likes one place more than the other*", leaving the impression of how important the stance of equilibrium is in the family. Anne comments; *Yes! I think goes quite well. It is like that I have it equally well with them both. So, it's not that I, kind of, feel that I like one place more than the other.* She provides a positive and confident account of managing a balance between parents and others in the family. She is aware of threat of conflict that might cause tension in her family, but she is also confident in her ability to keep balance and stay out of trouble. In positioning themselves as staying out of conflict, children make efforts to avoid taking sides in family arguments. Children resist invitations to give their opinions on conflictual topics; they avoid tipping the balance in the family as a whole.

4.1.2. Being the one responsible

Being the responsible one is position where children struggle and often are unsuccessful in keeping a balanced position in the family. The latter might lead to feeling a heavy burden from being responsible for initiating conflict in relation to one of their parents or between parents. Marit (A) explains:

> *"… It is always me that is involved, because it is I that think something, or does something that they have to … It is always me causing the problems. Or something or another, No, not always but … It is often me that decides to do something that makes them disagree."*

Marit uses the phrase *decides to do* something that makes them disagree, leaving the effect of emphasizing how much she positions herself as the one responsible for her parents disagreeing about her. Other parts of the interview text leave the impression that she does not intend to initiate conflict, as the phrase "decides to" indicates, but that her parents blame her for their fights about matters concerning her. She identifies her own inability to be consistent while talking to her parents. When parents have polarized opinions, her changes of opinion are destabilizing, initiating disputes with her parents. Marit says, "[…] *I am trying to avoid it (initiating conflict), but sometimes then I forget things […] and […] Eh I am changing my opinion quite fast, yeah […]".*The pressure of being pulled between parents different expectations, makes her more uncertain. Marit feels unable to keep a balanced position; she is like the last pawn in a game of chess, under constant threat, and the divided wishes from her parent's forms a scissor grip around her. She feels unprotected and manipulated by her parents' polarized requests. Marit (A) reports:

> *"I am trying, but it is kind of, not that easy cause daddy is always complaining about that mum manage to manipulate me and everything. And he is managing to do the same when he has a go at it. So then I become very quickly affected by them.*
> *I: Yes, yes, yes. So you perceive that you are being pulled into different … Marit: Yes. Because it's like …, if they want two different things, but … and I really don't have any protection against it, then it's …"*

Morten (A) talks of how it has been difficult for his sister to adjust to their parents' separation, and how this have caused conflicts in the family. As Morten (A) explains,

> *"I know that …, (his sister) don't like changes so. It has been very apparent when we were going to change these furniture's (pointing at the sofa), then she refused to, more or less. She really didn't want to. So, I think is almost the same. That she didn't want that we …, that this (parents' separation) should happen. Because it is too much change for her."*
> *I: Ok*
> *M: To short time, kind of. So she have been quite cranky then.*

Morten (A) explains how his sister is the responsible one, for acting out and for finding changes challenging. In saying this he emphasizes

that his sister is responsible for her own behavior.

Being the responsible one is difficult, because there is often a risk of not being able to keep the balance. To be in this position is a constant burden, not being able to be consistent, may lead to ambivalence in what choices to make. All potential actions may initiate conflict, and accusation from a parents of being easily manipulated, of not being truthful or of aligning with the other parent. In having difficulties to adjust to parent's separation, others in the family might blame you for the challenges in the family.

4.1.3. Staying silent

During the interviews, it became apparent that some children found it difficult to talk about family life and of challenges in the family. The way they spoke left an impression that they were being invited into unknown territory, which made the interviewer tread carefully and avoid further probing questions. Early adolescents had in general, less experience of talking about family matters than their older siblings or adolescents. Some children reported that the ongoing conflicts between their parents were not something that they discussed with parents or other family members. Being silent was for them reflecting family members' silence about the conflict; keeping silent was how they acted to keep balance in the family.

In asking Trine (EA) about her parents' relationship, her response demonstrate how silence between parents resonates in silence about these challenges in the family. When drawing a family picture, Trine (EA) makes three short statements in the following order:

> *"[…] They don't really talk with each other […] I feel that they are angry at each other […] We don't really talk that much about it […]"*

Notes from the interview emphasize the impression that Trine felt uncomfortable and not accustomed to talking about family relationships or challenges in the family.

This impression is more implicit in the text, but Heidi (EA) provides some accounts of being in a silenced position in the family and of her inability to address family challenges without the help of professionals:

> *"[…] I found it difficult before when … I never talked to my mum or dad or anyone. So then we thought about talking to the public health nurse, and the she thought it would be a good idea to contact the family counseling office. […]"*

Recognizing the importance of her talking about the family, her mother sent her to the health nurse. She uses the word *never* and leaves the impression of not being able to talk to her mum, her dad *or anyone*.

Heidi (EA) further emphasizes the importance of her dad's involvement in talking about family challenges. She says,

> *"[…] And then we went to the family counseling office, but dad would not be part of it. And then we did not go there that much. But, and then I went to the health nurse and the family counseling office at the same time. Then it was a bit back and forth since dad didn't want to be a part of it. Because it would not be the same if dad was not part of it. Because then they only get one of the stories and that is kind of wrong. So then, but we found this solution. So that's how it came to be that we came here, really […]"*

In highlighting her father's absence in family counseling, she indicates the importance of his voice in talk about family challenges. Heidi feels that talk about family matters is a polyphonic family event; *"it's not the same if dad was not part of it*". It feels wrong being the only one to give reports of family challenges and thus being positioned to "break the silence". She stresses the importance of a balanced account about the family; in being the only interlocutor, she is afraid that the therapist will "*only get one of the stories and that is kind of wrong"*.

It became apparent that staying silent was a common subposition of keeping balance. This position was often a reflection of how other family members positioned themselves vis-à-vis family conflict. Not talking about family life could be part of the parents' strategy to protect children from family conflict, it might be because parents find it difficult to find balance between positive involvement and no involvement, or it could be too hurtful to talk about.

4.2. Keeping distance

Many children felt that their main concern in the family was challenges related to a troubling relationship with one of their parents. When asked about what changes she would make in the family if she had a magical wand, Margit (EA) said: *Dad. He should understand how it is to be us.* Within storyline of a troubling parent, children often described several challenging experiences. Accounts of challenges in relation to their parent varied, from lack of emotional support and insight to being triangulated into family conflict and of having conflicts. Some children found that their troubled relationship with the parent always had been difficult, whereas others talked of challenges that developed after parents' separation. Some children hoped for improvement in their relationship, whereas others had little or no hope of change. In managing a troubling parental relationship, most children took a dominant position of keeping distance. Because parents in conflict distrust each other, children were reliant on their troubling parent's ability to change behavior or to take the initiative to improve their relationship. Some children had tried to change their parent's behavior or solve their differences without success. Often finding themselves on their own in these efforts, most children took a position of keeping distance to reduce the negative effects of challenges they were facing. Different aspects or subpositions of keeping distance emerged as moving out/reducing contact or aligning with the other parent. The subposition of moving out was more typical of adolescents than early adolescents and this was also the case in aliening with one parent.

4.2.1. Moving out/reducing contact

Many adoloscent informants described troubling relationship with one of their parents that led them to moving out, living more permanently with the other parent and spending less time with the troubling parent. Most early adolescents did not mention living arrangement as something that they were involved in discussing. Charlotte (EA) indicated that her parents frequently disagreed about her living arrangements. Her mother wanted her to spend more time with her. The disagreement between her parents had become part of her conflict with her mother. Charlotte explains that when her older brother took the initiative to live permanently with their father, she saw this as an opportunity to advocate for the same living arrangement. She said that she wanted to spend less time with her mother, partly because she found that they had a difficult relationship but also because she found living with her dad easier in her daily life. Charlotte explains why she initiated changes in her living arrangements:

> *"[…] Yeah, or I think it is because mum and my brother quarreled a lot a while back. […] And then he wanted to stay and live with our Dad, and then I wanted to live more with dad also, kind of. Because then it was kind of permitted. And then it was more fun to live here, but then we ended up spending less time there and then we came out of touch, I felt, and then it has become worse, kind of. […] we argued a lot, or we disagreed a lot, because I wanted to be with dad and his family […]"*

Some informants indicate that their problematic relationship with one parent also extends to a parent's family of origin. They feel that the parent and his/her family of origin share the same position, siding with the parent against them. Others find the notion of an alienated parent difficult and strive to create balance; they feel a responsibility for not spending equal time with each parent. They are sensitive to parents' finding alienated positioning hurtful and are careful in how they respond to why their preferred arrangement is spending most of their time with the other parent. When experiencing one of the parents saying negative things about the other parent, children take a stance to defend the parent that is criticized. Some children solve this situation

by reducing contact with the "troubling" parent. They feel that one parent is positioning them (forcing them) to align with the other parent. Linda (A) describes what she found challenging when she spent more time with her dad:

> *It has been things like when mum and dad got a divorce, then dad said a lot of crap about mum to me. And a lot of things like that, and then I felt I had to protect mum again.*
>
> *I: "Right, right. And then you kind of felt caught in the middle then?"*
>
> *Linda: "Yes, I kind of felt that I was forced to choose mum rather than dad. […] And that really became an uncomfortable situation to be in. […]"*

Some children feel that one of their parents is unable to take responsibility for their own actions and feel that this capability is needed to re-establish a trustful relationship. Linda describes what she thinks of her needs in family counseling:

> *"I don't know, I do want to get a better relation to dad again. Because it feels bad not being there, feeling I cannot be there kind of. And I think that is bad."*

Although Linda feels bad about *having to reduce contact* and having no other choice than being in a position of keeping distance ("*I cannot be there kind of")*, she hopes that this situation might change and that her relationship to her dad might improve. Linda (A) is uncertain of his ability to understand the effect of his own actions on the family:

> *"[…] I only think we need to talk to each other, about what that is happened, but I don't really think he understands how the things he have done affects us as family […] […] I told him I don't think it's ok [to say mean things about mother]. Then he tried to put the blame on …, and kind of; yes, … So I don't feel he has taken the responsibility."*

One part of her hopes that her father is able take responsibility, whereas the other part remembers his inability to change and why reducing contact has been necessary in taking care of herself.

Morten (A) explains how he decided to spend more time living at his father's place and that a result was that his mother was angry with him. Thus, he had lost almost all contact with his younger sibling and his mother. He explained that he preferred to live with his father; when living with his mother, he felt that she was unable to discuss things with him. He felt that she was rigid. Morten explains:

> *"[…] She is difficult to talk to sometimes. So it's kind of difficult to discuss issues with her if she is opposed of something. It's kind of, I am right and yeah. She only views things from her side. […] So that is how it is, that is why I don't have that much contact now, because there was a lot of … kind of … it was very unpredictable. So then it became very tiresome, sometimes it was OK, but many times there was a lot of fights […]. "*

4.2.2. Aligning with a parent

When one parent criticizes the other, some children take a stand and defend the other parent, and they are aware that aligning with one parent means a *greater distance* to the *other. Charlotte (EA) describes how aligning with her dad led her mother to feel that everybody is against her:*

> *"[…] I think dad decided well [as a parent]. And that yes, and if mother goes against dad then I protect and defend dad. I do understand both sides, but the… we have talked about it, then we have, then I have mostly agreed with dad. […] And then it becomes a little bit like, that mum feels that everybody is against her. […] But it is kind of wrong that we should choose a side, as well […]"*

Charlotte describes how she finds it difficult to keep distance and that it feels wrong choosing a side and aligning with a parent.

4.3. Keeping on with life

The dominant position of keeping on with life emerged from the storyline of life as more than family challenges. Subpositions of keeping on with life emerged as managing on my own, doing my daily routines and obtaining the necessary support. Managing on my own and doing my own routines were typical of adolescents and children with an active life; doing activities on their own and obtaining the necessary support were more typical of adolescents. The subposition will be presented and illustrated with interview excerpts.

Children experienced family challenges as disturbances in storylines of family conflict or storylines of the troubling parent. However, in parallel with these storylines, there were also accounts within storylines of life as more than family challenges. This latter storyline could be described as personal positioning, which run in parallel with role-oriented storylines of moral positioning e.g. about family challenges. Harré and Langenhove (1991, p. 397) state that; "*the more a person's actions cannot be made intelligible by references to roles, the more prominent the personal positioning will be*".

Informants described aspects of life of importance to them, like friends, school, and leisure time activities. In personal positioning, there were also accounts of how children were managing everyday life and of their ability to buffer disturbances from family challenges. They described how they were actively engaged in everyday life and that they were involved in something that was meaningful to them. This helped them to obtain distance to family challenges and closeness to living their life. A good example is Geir (A), when asked what he could do about family challenges, he said; *There is nothing I can do. I just need to carry on.*

4.3.1. Managing it on my own

Ingrid (EA) is positioning herself as managing it on my own, with confidence in her ability to cope with family challenges. She states that she has no concerns about family life and that she has no need for counseling or additional support:

> *"I don't really have that much to talk about, in a way. I am great, and I don't really need it, it's not that much to talk about. There is nothing I want solved, that it is possible to solve 100%. So, it is not like I am walking around and think about it that I want to tell someone…"*

In saying "*There is nothing I want solved, that it is possible to solve 100%",* Ingrid confirms the presence of unsolvable family challenges and that she expects them to continue and be part of family life. In the context of unresolved family challenges, Ingrid argues, *I am great.* In stating that she is great, she protests against being positioned as a victim in need of additional help and support. She advocates for a recognition of being able to manage it on her own. She is downplaying the effect of family challenges and arguing that,*it's not that much to talk about.* By so doing, she calls for a third-order positioning, emphasizing that she positions herself in a storyline of life as more than family challenges.

Geir (A) described how it was important for him to be autonomous. He preferred not to involve parents or others in his inner thought and concerns about life. In reflecting about taking this position, he refers to his ability to function "outside" of family and his preference to handle life on his own. He explains that family members pressure him talk about himself and to conform to "the values of sharing your thought" in the household.

4.3.2. Doing my regular routines

Some children emphasized that they prioritized to focus on everyday life and in doing routines that was of importance to them. They talked about how school work and friends and participating in sports or leisure time activities was of great importance to their wellbeing. While some informants focused on the disruptions from family challenges, others spoke of the stability and continuity that was present in life. Tore

(A) explains how the focus on regular routines had been helpful to him during his parent's separation. He had no recollections of thinking that his parent's separation would change his life. Tore describes that he is used to his father's absence due to his work commitments, meaning that life continued as *kind of normal* and that he could continue with his daily routines living at home.Talking about family conflict he describes how his parent's separation reduced his exposure to conflict. In explaining what he does when faced with his parents fighting, Tore explains:

> *"I … Usually I do something with my friends […] So then I do it like this. If I am gaming with my friends, then I turn on "push and talk". […] Then I am not able to hear them, and I can continue playing […] Then it's kind of that I am not there, kind of. […]"*

In using the words *"it's kind of that I am not there"*, he is referring to his ability to shut out disturbances of his parents' quarrelling and to keep contact with life outside of family, when playing online games with his friends.

4.3.3. Obtaining the necessary support

Many children described how important it was to obtain the necessary support when needed. Some adolescents that struggled in relationships parent's found it helpful to obtain support from the other parent. In talking about conflict between parents, children often preferred talking to someone neutral. Some children had experience of talking to professionals, but few used their peers/friends as support. Although some children felt that talking about their concerns was helpful, many found it difficult to initiate conversations about family challenges. Ellinor (A) reports that she usually did not talk about her challenges, and that her mother was an exception. Ellinor (A), explains that it is important for her that the adult take the initiative, otherwise she does not talk about her concerns.

> *Ellinor says: "I talked a little with my mother, but nobody else really"*
> *I: "no, no, right"*
> *Ellinor: "So mummy knows about these things and I have talked to her about it also".*
> *I: "yes, so it's not something you have talked to friends about or anything like that?"*
> *Ellinor: "No, not really"*
> *I: "Why is that, I am just curious? Why do you think?"*
> *Ellinor: "I am kind of a closed person, if things is not mentioned… I don't really have any difficulties talking about it. But not if it not somehow put it on the agenda, then I don't initiate to discuss it."*

Morten (A) described how his dad gave him support when he was struggling in his relationship with his mother. He appreciate that his father who initiates talking to him, and that his father is present when he needs him, ready to give him advice. Morten says, *Yes, I do think about it on my own, and then I talk to my dad because we have a very good relationship, right […] about what he thinks I should do, and then we discuss it. […] We did talk a lot about things before, for a long time really. But now I am kind of empty. We did talk a lot about it before.*

Mona (EA) talks of obtaining support in handling her father. She thinks it is OK to talk about challenges in the family, but she is unsure whether it is helpful. She talks to friends and her mother about her difficult relationship with her father. Mona says,

> *"[…] I have talked a little with friends. About dad, that he is very difficult. […] But I haven't talked a lot. […] And then I have talked to mum about it. […] And then I talked to a psychotherapist. […] I do like to talk about it, but I don't know if it helps. […]"*

Hilde (EA) found it helpful to talk to other people than her mother and father about family challenges. At first, she found it difficult to talk, but now she recommends others to talk to someone neutral. She says; *Talk about it, and often with someone that is not your mum or dad.*

5. Discussion

In this section, we discuss the implications of three dominant subject positions; keeping balance, keeping distance, keeping on with life. Moreover, how these positions are connected to notions of moral obligations of self and expectations from self and others. Furthermore, we adress how prolonged conflict is oppressive to the family system, and we argue that children take positions of healthy resistance to address family challenges. Finally, we discribe limitations in our study and provide suggestions to professionals working with children and their families in prolonged conflict.

5.1. Dominant subject positions of children

Child positions emerged as autobiographical positions in family talk as linguistic distinctions between who children positioned as speaker (first person) and who was positioned as others (third person) as participants in the story. Furthermore, child positions also emerged as subject positions.

In subject position of keeping balance children primarily positioned themselves as first person (I), often referring to their parents or their relationship (dyad) and family households in the third person. In subject position of keeping distance, first person was often we/us, referring to the child and one parent as the *speaker* talking about their opinions about the other parent. This indicates that children formed alliances and had support from one of their parents. Talk about the troubling parent often involved indirect positioning (Harrè & Moghaddam, 2004, p. 6), with use of unfavorable characterological traits to position the other parent as a troubling/dysfunctional parent, e.g., "*she unable to understand*". In subject position of keeping on with life children talked in the first person but often involved many participants (friends, family, and professionals) from multiple contexts in life.

5.1.1. Keeping balance

Children's reflective talk about family life revealed a sensitivity to the quality of their parents' relationship and revealed how they perceive their parents' positioning themselves toward each other, e.g., whether parents talk as though they are friends or show signs of anger or hostility. Child sensitivity to the quality of the parental dyad is consistent with other research (P. T. Davies et al., 2015; P. T. Davies et al., 2016; Ness et al., 2014).

Children in two households talked of hearing one parent speak ill of the other and of being wary of what information they could reveal from one household to the other. The divided loyalties this situation produces may have adverse social and psychological consequences for some children, whereas others find means of keeping balance (Afifi & McManus, 2010; Dallos, Lakus, Cahart, & McKenzie, 2016). Inherent in the position of keeping balance is an understanding of coparental conflict as a potential threat to the stability of the family and their own wellbeing. Furthermore, the position of keeping balance holds and resonates with several perspectives; first, it emphasizes that coparental conflict is a family conflict involving children and not a dyadic enclosed phenomenon of parents.

Second, it suggests that a child is attentive to his or her triangular position in the family, to the need for a balanced position to stay out of conflict and to the need not to jeopardize the relationship with either parent or the relationship between them. This point embraces a systemic theory premise that says that when any two people interact, their interactions are influenced by their respective relationships with the same third person (Bateson, 2000). Thus, a child's attachment representations are shaped not only by the relationship with each parent but also by the relationship between them (Dallos & Vetere, 2012).

Feeling caught between their parents' conflict and polarized interest can give children two options: keeping a balanced and "neutral" position or to take a position closer to one of the parents and consequently facing the risk of moving further away from the other. We argue that

taking the position of keeping balance in the family could be viewed as an act of resistance to relational threats from family conflict. This resembles the three options Watts (2008) describes children can take in ongoing parental conflicts, a) stand their grown and "tell-it-like-it is" b) duck beneath the conflict-"tell either parent what they want to hear", C) quietly turn inwards- "shut down, and try to be invisible"(Smyth & Moloney, 2019).

Although keeping a balanced position is difficult, we argue that doing so in many cases would be a preferred choice for children in situations in which they have strong connections with both parents or when the parents represent secure attachment figures (Bowlby, 1969). However, safe and secure attachment could also make a situation less threatening for a child, e.g., to change living arrangements and to spend more time with one parent than with the other. Children can have greater affinity with one parent than the other; they can prefer to live with one parent without having a dislike for the other. In other cases, there is an alignment of a child with one parent due to minimal parent involvement prior to separation or poor parenting (Sheehan, 2018)

From a positioning theory perspective, speech acts and subject positions are part of a moral domain; thus, children navigate and position themselves within discourses of what children and parents "ought to do" (Harré, 2016). These "oughts" can reflect how children might blame themselves when parents argue about matters involving themselves. Parents are often unable to take the position of "responsibility for the conflict"; thus, the child takes this position because the destabilizing conflict suggests that someone in the family system "ought to be responsible". Positions should be interpreted as part of the discourses of family life. Harré (2016, p. 542) states that social action consists of *(…) attempts to conform to norms or sometimes to resist them.*

5.1.2. Keeping distance

When children perceive parents' behavior or their relationship as problematic, children often take the dominant position keeping distance. The child can feel that the contact with a parent is distressing but at the same time find it difficult to reject the troubling parent. In some instances, adolescent informants reported that oppressive parent behavior such as negative disclosers, bitterness and resentment about the other parent made reduced contact (moving out) necessary to protect themselves. This point resonates with other studies that report that potentially alienating parenting or denigrating one's coparent appears to boomerang and hurt the parent's own relationship with the children rather than distance children from the co-parent (Rowen & Emery, 2018). Adolescents took up a position that enabled them to reject their oppressive parent, while there younger siblings were not in the same position to do so. Adolescents' stories indicate that their younger siblings also were exposed to bitterness and resentment from one of their parents about the other. Although, it could also be that adolescents "feelings of being caught" (Afifi & McManus, 2010) was different than those of their younger sibling. Adolescents might feel the pressure to voice their opinion, whereas those younger was less inclined to feel these expectations. Clearly, to early adolescents certain positions of keeping distance was not readily available. They're choices of resistance, were often to align with their oppressive parent or to keep a balanced position between their parents eg. a silenced position.

The rejected parent might blame the other parent for the youth's rejection, thus possibly intensifying the conflict. Adolescents might perceive this social response from the rejected parent as hurtful and/or as not taking their concerns seriously, which could cause further distance. Youths can also form cross-generational coalitions that in some cases can result in parental alienation, with one parent against the other (Sheehan, 2018). However, postseparated family life can give children a new opportunity to reflect on the quality of family relationships. Children are on their own with each parent, which can also lead to a questioning and challenging of their relationship with their parent (Berman, 2015).

5.1.3. Keeping on with life

As a response to family challenges, this change of focus could be viewed as an adaptive resistance strategy applicable to adolescents. While younger children often is dependent on their parents to pursuit activities outside home, adolescents are often more independent in "stepping out" of family life. However, early adolescents that were involved in many leisure activities seemed also to take up this position. Thus, children that is not active in leisure activities, could take up this position when they focus on regular routines as school work and in seeking support from the other parent. Adolescents reported that they often obtained support from one of their parents if they had challenges in life.

This position can promote positive social response from parents because it can be viewed as a normal early/adolescent position of aligning more with life with friends than with family. To focus on friends and avoid family conflict exposure also resonates as a protective factor and positive coping behavior (Miller et al., 2017a; O'Hara, 2018). Taking a position "outside" of family could also involve negative social responses because parents could feel rejected, possibly increasing relational tension between child and parent. Such a choice could also increase conflict between parents with respect to how to understand this autonomous position. When their youth stay out of sight can also entail difficulties for parents in detecting challenges and a need of support. Adolescents in this position might long for more connectedness with their parents and family but feel that they have no choice other than to step outside of family.

5.2. Moral obligations and expectations of children in prolonged family conflict

In storylines connected to family challenges, children positioned themselves as agents with moral obligations to stay connected to family relationships. Moreover, with inherent expectations of parents as responsive providers of wellbeing, stability and security. In personal storylines of life as more than family challenges, adolescents felt a moral obligation of self-agency in providing wellbeing inside and outside of family life. The various storylines embrace notions of family as providing connectedness and security and that children are both (1) dependent upon family resources and (2) responsible social actors (Hollekim, Anderssen, & Daniel, 2016; Mayall, 2002) who navigate family challenges and stay connected and supported. Emerging discourses of the child as a responsible agent further reflect what Kaganas and Diduck (2004, p. 959) suggest, that is, that *"the 'good' child of separation or divorce is responsible for safeguarding his or her own welfare. […]"* The storylines of family challenges reflect that children take part in a blending of paradigms in which the children are dependable, in need of family connectedness and are autonomous agent/social actors in many arenas of life. In the traditional paradigm, children of separation are the vulnerable child and the passive victim of his or her parents' choices. However, in the modern paradigm, the separated child bears the responsibility for promoting his or her own welfare by helping to build the 'good' postseparation family in which he or she will be safe (Kaganas & Diduck, 2004). However, child agency is not an autonomous process (Berman, 2018) but rather a process that demonstrates the systemic premise of family interdependence, or as Neale and Flowerdew (2007) suggest, it is something that always occurs in a relational context, e.g., as part of ongoing coconstruction of family relationships.

5.3. Child positions as resistance to family challenges

Family conflict is a threat to children's sense of safety and security in child-parent relationships and the family system (Cummings, Koss, & Davies, 2015; P. T. Davies, Cummings, & Winter, 2004). Our analyses show that children took different position to challenges in the family. Early adolescents and those older typically took up different positions,

this might indicate that the positioning from family conflict as threats varies with age. Another possibility is that perceptions of challenges and of available positions to take up is somewhat different between age groups. In general adolescents are expected to be more independent, and in being closer to adulthood they are also more mature to make decisions on their own.

We argue that each dominant position represents an act of resistance to challenges related to family conflict, to their dignity and to being a child in family. Adolescent has typically more capabilities and possibilities to take up certain positions to challenges of family conflict than those younger. This may also enhance their capabilities of resistance.

Resistance such as moving out or reducing contact with a parent often elicited negative responses from "the troubling parent" and recognition and approval from the other parent. Moreover, adolescents often received positive social responses from one of their parents. One of their parents was often understanding when an adolescent had experienced oppressive acts from the other parent. Further parents often recognized that moving out from the other parents was necessary to promote their own wellbeing.

The concept of healthy resistance resembles Antonovsky and Sourani (1988) concept of "generalized resistance resources" in promoting joint recognition of difficulties and of contingency in pursuit of wellbeing. This concept also resonates with the view in positioning theory that people have a (…) *tendency to retreat from harmful situations and move towards those more favorable to our survival* (Harré, 2016, p. 543). Children can take the position of keeping balance to promote stability and connectedness when facing family conflict, or they can just try to keep on with life. Resisting and repositioning themselves might not be sufficient to promote or to harbor sustainable wellbeing. As mentioned earlier well-being, even resilience, may harbor both strengths as competences in overcoming challenges, but also costs as traumas or relational strains of distrust. Children can, however, become recognized for efforts in keeping balance or to stay connected to family, adding positive social responses of self-worth that are health promoting.

5.4. Limitations

There were several limitations to the study that merit discussion, qualitative methodology may give insights of phenomenon's, but it is not suitable to generalize findings. Clearly, the sample of children is sufficient but small, a larger sample could give further indications e.g. if child positions in family conflict vary across genders or in younger children. Although many considerations were made to ensure that child informants felt safety in the interview e.g. relational permission from their parents. Early adolescents may still feel a loyalty conflicts that hindered them to disclose descriptions of family life. First author, being as clinician and interviewer, may give important insights but it could also give preconceptions that limited the scope in in research.

5.5. Conclusion and implication for practice

The findings of the dominant positions of keeping balance, keeping distance and keeping on with life calls for more awareness of child positions and the positioning of children in prolonged family conflict. Our study indicates that adolescents have more capabilities of certain positions than early adolescents. Early adolescents are often on their own in keeping balance in their family, they are loyal and join family silence about challenges. Adolescents more often feel the burden of in being positioned as the one responsible. Adolescents often take up a position of keeping distance while managing their relationship to a "troubling" parent. Parallel to this children take up a positon of keeping on with life and thus resist the challenges in the family. Additional research is needed on how parents view the positioning of children, themselves as parents and as adults in situations of prolonged family conflict.

Family therapist and other professionals often refer to separated families in prolonged conflict as 'high conflict' families. The concept of 'high conflict' family has been criticized for its ambiguity (Friedman, 2004). More importantly, it is a construction that derives from adult perspectives among professionals striving to help parents who find coparenting exceedingly difficult. Parents often advocate on behalf of their child, and their polarized assumptions on how the child is positioned in the family, are often part of the conflict cycle itself (Jevne & Andenaes, 2017). We warn professionals against an "adult-biased" view of the dyadic family conflict and of fixation on the conflict level, e.g., of a "measurement gaze" on levels of conflict, consequently risking distorting children's positions, perspectives and experience in these families (James, Marples, Rantalaiho, & Haugen, 2010).

We urge professionals to assist families to reduce child exposure to hostility and unresolved conflicts. However, endless attempts to solve prolonged coparental conflicts, with "more of the same" interventions (Watzlawick et al., 1967) could embed the conflict further. System theory emphasize that change could be promoted in the family, from changes in any of the family relations. Our study shows that child "exposure" to post divorcé conflict, is located to a large degree in each household and in their contact with the individual parent. The use of positioning theory might help professionals to take a within-perspective from the child position. Consequently, in prolonged conflict families, more efforts should be made to help each parent to buffer risk and promote resilience in their child e.g. in resilience oriented services like "Strong children in 2 homes".

Separated families in prolonged conflict need services that involve children and recognize children's positions of resistance to family conflict. Children need professionals that is able to deconstruct conflict as behaviors and point to oppressive parenting behaviors (e.g. unfair disparagement of one parent by another) as the responsibility of individual parents. Moreover, children need professionals that validate child responses as resistance to oppressive parenting behaviors and to family conflict. Social responses from authorities such as professionals in child and family services could promote healthy resistance and enhance child's wellbeing and feelings of dignity. Further, professional need to see the child as part of a complex family system that imbedded in conflict. This calls for systemic knowledge and methods to intervene on both family level(Lorås, 2018; Lorås, Bertrando, & Ness, 2017) and on individual level (Mæhle, 2003). We suggest that family therapist and other professionals take a position as "a stabilizing third" to promote safety in the family, to give children and parents aid in dealing with relational difficulties within each household system. Moreover, parents need aid in being responsive to child concerns and in taking steps to strengthen child-parent relationships.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This study was financially supported by The Office for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufetat). This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Acknowledgements

We are especially grateful for the contributions from child participants to this study. Thank you is also extended to family therapists and their leader Ragnar Solbjør at Bergen and Vicinity family counselling office for their support and dedication in their work. We are also very grateful for the inspirational work from "Strong Children in 2 Homes"

project and their help in recruiting informants; Ingeborg Huglen, Waldo Hidalgo and Melanie Young.

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Received: 30 April 2020 | Accepted: 20 November 2020

DOI: 10.1111/jmft.12474

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

JMFT Journal of Marital and Family Therapy

"The troublesome other and I": Parallel stories of separated parents in prolonged conflicts

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Abstract

This qualitative study aims to explore how noncohabiting parenting couples in prolonged conflict construct the other parent and themselves. Ten parents from five parent couples were interviewed. A dyadic analytical design was used, where parent's stories of conflict were analyzed in parallel with their co-parent. Drawing on positioning theory, self-identity as parents emerged as implicit counter positions in storylines, which construct the co-parent as "*the troublesome other*." Two typologies of conflicted storylines were prominent in the findings: *storylines of violations of trust*, positioning the co-parents in relation to traumatic events in the past and, *storylines of who is bad*, positioning the co-parent as either a disloyal co-parent or a dysfunctional parent. The findings indicate that prolonged conflicts made it impossible to find available positions for cooperation. We argue that family therapists should aid each household toward promoting child and family resilience rather than continued efforts to solve chronic conflicts.

INTRODUCTION

Prolonged conflicts among parents after separation and divorce bear witness to the complexities and challenges that are inherent in the mutual interdependency of co-parenting (Kelly, 2007). After the dissolution of their marriage, parents are expected to heal their wounds, find new positions as parents,

build new alliances as parenting colleagues and as robust and effective teams, and coordinate and share the responsibility of their children's upbringing (Emery et al., 1991). The increased expectations of parenthood (Hollekim et al., 2016), combined with a shift toward gender equality in parenting after separation and divorce (Braver & Lamb, 2018), have elevated the reliance, complexity, and pressure on co-parenthood (Mahrer et al., 2018).

Although most parents can resolve their differences, it is estimated that 10%–15% of parents have prolonged conflicts 2 years after separation and that 9%–18% remain in high to moderate conflict 6 years after divorce (Hetherington, 2002). Additionally, while the trajectories of most separated co-parents show a reduction in the level of conflict, a subgroup of high conflict parents is identified by intensified or ongoing chronic conflicts (Drapeau et al., 2009). These divorced couples are often referred to by the level and continuance of the conflict and are considered as being in entrenched, enduring or high conflict (Anderson et al., 2010), or conflicts with interparental hatred (Smyth & Moloney, 2019). In this article, we focus on noncohabiting parents in prolonged conflict. In using the term prolonged, we are emphasizing that the focus is on parent couples who prevail in distressful conflicts past 2 years of separation and divorce and who have been unsuccessful in resolving conflicts or co-parenting difficulties from attending counseling, mediation, or court-ordered services.

Parents in prolonged conflicts often position themselves as victims because their experience of high conflict comprises pervasive mistrust (Rød et al., 2013). The needs and wants of co-parents in prolonged conflicts are often mutually exclusive. For example, while one parent wants to stay connected to obtain influence in the other household and to receive reassurance on child-related concerns, the other parent wants to set up a wall to stay protected from intrusiveness and critique. Parents who have their concerns about their child dismissed or who are exposed to hostile criticism *by the other co-parent* often, as a result, hold an opinion of their co-parent as unworthy of their consideration or respect (Francia et al., 2019).

According to the level of engagement and the level of conflict, the postdivorce literature often describes three typologies of co-parenting: *conflicted*, *cooperative*, and *parallel* (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987). Conflicted co-parents have a high level of engagement and a high level of conflict. Cooperative parents are considered to be the "co-parenting ideal" due to their low levels of conflict and high levels of supportive engagements, with the ability to problem solve and make joint decisions (Emery, 1999). Parallel co-parents have minimal interaction between households and a low level of conflict. Additionally, they have a low level of engagement, not because their interactions are cooperative but because they minimize and avoid interactions (Sullivan, 2008). Parallel parenting is the most prevalent co-parenting situation postdivorce, comprising at least 40% of co-parenting types after divorce (Hetherington, 2002).

Despite numerous efforts from professionals in resolving disputes, some parenting couples present destructive, enduring, and escalating conflicts, which are highlighted in the context of therapy, mediation, or court proceedings (Smyth & Moloney, 2019). Although some parent couples remain in conflict, the discourse of cooperative parenthood is often dominant in the professional system, with the belief that cooperative co-parenting is a necessity of successful postseparation parenting (Sullivan, 2008). Thus, family therapists often parallel the position of the family mediator in connoting separated parents as *co-parents* while aiding conflicted families (Lebow & Rekart, 2007). The relationship between the parents takes *frontstage*, while the functioning of each household, the parenting struggles, and the quality of child–parent relations are placed *backstage*, to use Goffman (1971) terms. The latter are important factors that are found to buffer risk and promote healthy adaptation and resilience in conflicted families (Becher et al., 2019). Some scholars criticize the assumption that conflict resolution and the aim of cooperative co-parenting are the only adaptive responses to improving family adjustment in the context of postdivorce parental conflicts (Nielsen, 2018; Stokkebekk et al., 2019; Sullivan, 2008). Interventions that promote cooperative parenting and that keep the level of engagement high also tend to keep the level of conflict high (Sullivan, 2008). It is the frequent exposure to or ongoing involvement

in conflict, not the level of conflict per se, that is linked to worse outcomes for children (Cummings & Davies, 2010). High conflict parents vary in their ability to shield their children, and both children and parents vary in how they cope with family conflict (Stokkebekk et al., 2019).

This study answers the call for more knowledge of how parents past 2 years postseparation construct and position themselves in prolonged conflict (Francia et al., 2019; Smyth & Moloney, 2019). Additionally, such insights could aid family therapists in conceptualizing what co-parenting modality is best suited for the parents and, at the same time, support parents in prolonged conflicts and their families. Against the background of prolonged parental conflict, positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) formed the theoretical framework of this study. Positioning and other concepts from positioning theory have proven to be useful in deconstructing meaning making in the context of social conflicts (Harré & Slocum, 2003).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Positioning theory is a framework from social and discursive psychology that looks at the normative frames within which people live their lives, in relation to the "rights" and "duties" that people feel bound by when they interact (Davies & Harré, 1990). Positioning theory consists of a triad of interacting concepts, *positions of self and others*, *story lines*, and *speech acts*. Discursive storylines could be regarded as established norms and patterns of development in social life that are "expressible in a loose cluster of narrative conventions" (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003, p. 6). Constructions of being a parent involve reflexive positioning, which is inherent in parental talk about family life. Tan and Moghaddam (1995, p. 389) define reflexive positioning as "*a process by which one intentionally or unintentionally positions oneself in unfolding personal stories told to oneself*." People vary in their "positioning power"; some self-positioning could be deliberate or forced by others (persons/institutions), and the positioning of others could also be deliberate or enforced (Davies & Harré, 1990). Conflicted parents often use strategic positioning in talking to a third party (e.g., a family therapist) to "win the moral high ground." Thus, making sure that what one's opponents (the other parent) says or does is interpreted according to a story line that is suited to one's own case. For example, if one parent takes up a position as a *child's advocate/spokesperson*, then the other parent might try to resist this strategy, seeing it as an attack on the preferred position as *an equal parent*. The child advocate position might belong to a storyline of "welfare of the child," addressing the child's needs as the primary parental obligation, and thus, child knowledge becomes a positioning skill and viable power asset. The position of an equal parent might be to assert that he or she is part of a gendered storyline of equal parenting rights, whereas unequal child custody rights is presented as evidence of discriminatory parenting practice. Thus, while one parent might address concerns about a child's welfare and lack of parenting skills, the other parent might raise concerns about custody sabotage. Talking about the other parent also involves speech acts that could be heard as either pleading (a need for protection) or abusing (hostile accusation about the other). Thus, speech acts refer to when an utterance or action could have different effects depending on how it is interpreted. The multiple conflict storylines at play in prolonged postdivorce conflict cases often position the family therapist as a judge who is forced to rule, to give legitimacy to equally important and viable concerns in a family.

Conflicted co-parents can feel forced into subject positions by their co-parent, and their ability to do counter positioning is reflected in how they are able to frame their own actions and the actions of the co-parent within preferred discursive storylines. The lack of deliberate choice is often what makes a conflict irresolvable. Contesting the storyline that is unfolding and having the power to dismiss the positioning of others by upholding a dominant storyline are referred to as second-order positioning (Harré & Lagenhove, 1999).

The initial positions that are offered or enforced in a social situation are referred to as first-order positioning. In some cases, positioning sets up a complementary or antagonistic pattern of rights and duties. A parent is positioned as having the right and duty "to be a caregiver," while children are positioned as "obliged to accept being cared for." In other cases, positioning sets up a complementary or antagonistic group of moral and psychological attributes. Someone can be positioned as "untrustworthy and of evil intent." Another can be positioned as "kind and trustworthy."

Positioning theory describes two forms of social conflicts, in which people in conflict (1) share a story but, by adopting contrary positions, use that storyline to nourish a conflict, or they (2) have adopted irreconcilable storylines in which "*there is no discursive bridge from one to the other*" (Harré & Slocum, 2003, p. 112). For example, parents might agree in positioning their child as a victim of a parental conflict. Thus, they would also enforce their parental authority ("In the name of the child") as a way to elevate their own legitimate position in the conflict (Johnston & Roseby, 2009). However, parents often portray irreconcilable storylines *of how and who is to blame* for their child's distress. The aim of the current study is to gain insight into how noncohabiting couples in prolonged conflict construct and position themselves and the other parent in parallel stories about their relationship. The following research questions are explored:

1. What storylines emerge when separated couples in prolonged conflicts talk about their co-parent relationship?
2. What positions of the self and the other are constructed in talking about the conflicted co-parenting relationship?
3. What does it mean for the duty of parenthood, when separated parents are in prolonged conflict?

METHODS

Qualitative design

This study is a qualitative study that aims to explore parent constructions of family life from the epistemological premise of a constructive research paradigm (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In this study, which aims to study meaning making among separated parent couples in prolonged conflict, a qualitative design with explorative individual interviews was chosen. In addition, a dyadic analytical framework was applied, which combines insights on how each parent in a prolonged conflict position themselves and the other parent, in the context of parallel stories about their relationship. The benefit of individual interviews in a dyadic analytical (parallel) framework is that one can combine the reflective insights of individuals (reflective positioning) with triangulated knowledge of relational positioning about the other parent. Another alternative could be interviewing couples together or recording sessions of couple's therapy, where interactional self/other positioning would be evident in their dialogue. However, a drawback with this design would be that the reflective insights of the parents (their story of self/other positioning in conflict) could be less visible.

Research ethics

Ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by the Regional Committee for Medical and Health Ethics in Norway (Project #2016/1915). For the protection of the participant's identity, names have been altered, and the number of siblings, the description of gender, or the age of the children are not

described in the analysis. The first author was working as a family therapist at the place of recruitment as part of the duties for a PhD scholarship but had no prior clinical involvement with the participants.

Recruitment of participants

Parents were recruited from a resilience-oriented family therapy program hosted by a family counseling agency in Norway, with the aim of strengthening children and their separated parents in prolonged conflicts. Parents were admitted to the program with the following inclusion criteria: (1) parents have experienced conflicts or problems in co-parenting for more than 2 years postseparation; being (2) unsuccessful in resolving their postdivorce conflict or co-parenting difficulties in attending court, therapy, or mediation services; and (3) one or both parents view their current co-parenting relationship as conflictual, in a deadlock, distressful, and/or unsolvable. Seventeen parents gave their consent to be part of the study and were interviewed during 2017 and 2018. The interviews were conducted after admission to and before the outset of therapy by the first author either at the participants' (by their own choice) home or in the family counseling office. Parents were interviewed alone, and each interview lasted 60–90 min. A semi-structured interview guide was applied with open-ended questions, such as (1) descriptions of the family, (2) living arrangements, (3) informants' views on interparental relations and other family relations, (4) views of needs from family counseling services, and (5) family strengths and future hopes for family life. Each interview was audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

For the purpose of this study, only interviews in which both parents (in each parenting dyad) participated were used in this study. Thus, the final sample in this article consists of 10 individual interviews from five separated parenting couples (five fathers and five mothers). On average, parents had lived 6 years in separate households. Households were from a middle-class background. One or both parents had a university college degree, and one or both parents had a new cohabiting partner. The five separated couples had 10 biological children (eight girls and two boys), with the average age of 13 (11–16). At the time of the interview, seven children lived with one of their parents (four with their fathers and three with their mothers), seeing the other parent every other weekend or less, while three children had shared custody arrangements, spending equal time with both parents.

Data analysis

This study explores the reflexive positions of five divorced parent couples in prolonged conflict. In analyzing the interview transcripts, we applied a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) supplemented with a discursive analysis of social conflicts from a positioning theory perspective.

First, all transcripts were read and reread without any attempts to analyze the text. In the next analytical stage, we focused our attention on the parents' storylines, which became apparent in the text. In reading the transcripts, we analytically asked *what dominant storylines emerge when parents talk about their co-parent*. For example, Brian's dominant storyline emerged as "the betrayal and the destruction of a nuclear family man." In his narrative, speech acts about the other parent came through as resentments ("she had no right to split the family"), which positioned his ex-partner as an evil agent that is responsible for inflicting harm. Thus, he portrays himself as a victim of divorce, and his preferred social identity as a nuclear family man becomes evident. The dominant storylines that appear in each transcript were coded in parallel as a father and mother storyline, in each of the five parental couples.

In the last analytical step, we asked: *what I-positions do parents take up in their talk about their co-parent*, *and how do they position their co-parent?* Further we noted who in the storylines did and did not have "positioning power," as suggested by Harré and Slocum (2003, p. 114), to gain insight into how some of the conflict storylines become more dominant and challenge parental cooperation. This final step offers insight that is useful in discussing what it means for parenthood when separated parents are in prolonged conflict.

FINDINGS: CONFLICT STORYLINES AS "TALES OF THE TROUBLESOME OTHER AND I"

We will first present five parallel storylines (Table 1) that emerged when we analyzed 10 interviews from five parenting couples in prolonged conflict. The storylines are presented with excerpts from the interview, with the parent's talk about their relationship with their co-parent, and with accounts of how they positioned themselves and their co-parent. For the protection of the participants' identity, we have altered participant names. Further, we have not provided any information regarding the number of siblings, the description of personality, gender, or the ages of the children. We have also made sure to not include any sensitive health/medical information about the participants' children. Second, we will describe our finding of an overarching storyline or a specific mode of reflexive positioning called "tales of the troublesome other and I," which appeared across different storylines. Finally, we will present two typologies of conflict storylines and their connected positions.

John and Mary's storylines

John's storyline of "being falsely accused"

John talks of how he has been wrongfully accused of violence. He positions the other parent as an "ex" and "adversary" that is instrumental and strategic in all her dealings with him. His talk is an accusation. In his narrative, Mary planned to divorce him to gain access to their house and legal custody of their child. He portrays her as untrustworthy and having mental health difficulties, and in so doing, he is portraying himself as sane and trustworthy. In his view, Mary is wrongfully positioning him as

TABLE 1 Parallel storylines of the troublesome other and I

Parental couples	Fathers' storyline	Mothers' storyline
John and Mary	"*Being falsely accused*"	"*Being a victim of violence*"
Stig and Mette	"*The invasive female manipulator*"	"*The angry father in a home far, far away*"
Brian and Karen	"*The betrayal and destruction of a nuclear family man*"	"*The bitter ex-husband who blames me for everything*"
Adam and Hilde	"*Not being accepted as a separated father*"	"*Motherhood as being responsible and fatherhood on trial*"
Roger and Margaret	"*The drained father who refuses to build more bridges between mother and child*"	"*The father's coup and the dismantling of a mother in being told, ignored and kept in the dark*"

conflictive. He describes that "if we have conflict, then she has an advantage she can use, and if they succeed to label you as high conflict, one might lose access to the child." In making this statement, he thinks of the situation as a female gender strategy in that "if they have conflict, then they might minimize child access, and sometimes it becomes a conflict game, even if there are no conflicts. One could say that conflict is misused or that someone WANTS a conflict." In this description, he places himself as being under attack and her as having an advantage in that she has strategically labeled them as being in high conflict.

Mary's storyline of "being a victim of violence"

Mary describes her difficulties in rebuilding trust and to establish a co-parenting relation with someone whom she claims was abusive. She explains that she is unable to meet her ex-partner in person. Mary is unsure how to describe their relationship; she could explain their difficulties in many ways. Nevertheless, she feels that conflict could be a good and relevant description. The conflict started "sometime before we divorced." In describing how the conflict affects her life, she uses reflexive positioning, asking herself questions such as: "How is it to live with it? You could say it makes an impact on my whole life." She describes how she is always on alert: "I am worried that the conflict might appear over little things, right?" She talks of a "large overhanging conflict" that is leading to "small conflicts." Also, she is referring to a "we" when she talks about to the conflict. Consequently, she finds that the conflict belongs to them as a parenting couple.

Stig and Mette's storylines

Stig's storyline of "the invasive female manipulator"

Stig explains how his ex-partner is invasive and demanding and that it makes him shut down all contact with her. In his mind, this is causing the conflict and is the reason why there is almost no cooperation. He talks about how his ex-partner betrayed him and ended the marriage, after meeting someone else. Instead of being humble, during their separation, he felt she was demanding. In his opinion, she had no right to make demands or to be involved in his life after ending their marriage. In his talk, his ex-partner is portrayed as a malignant intruder who is trying to enforce her will on him, making it necessary for him to protect himself. He explains; "I got e-mails several times a week, several e-mails a day, and related to what? She wanted me to buy extra-skim milk instead of skim milk, because it was healthier for the children!." In making this statement, he argues for gender equality as a parent, stating: "I am just as much a father as you are a mother." He also describes his resistance to what he describes to be false claims of him being "bitter." He explains how he feels that it is the other way around: "In her mind then, I am very bitter and I will not let go, but the truth is, it is vice versa: she's not letting me go! Because she is trying to control how I shall be towards the children."

Mette's storyline of "the angry father in a home far, far away"

Mette describes in a neutral tone that they rarely talk and that it has become gradually more difficult to cooperate. The children found it difficult when their father moved, she explains. This step caused difficulties in their daily life, such as taking part in sports activities after school. She talks from the

I-position as a mother, explaining how it is for the children. She explains that their children's living arrangements and the choice of school district are a large part of their conflict. "*It is easier to be in this house*," she argues from a mother's position, describing the two different homes, that is, the home she resides in is "easy," and the house of her ex-husband as stressful with many siblings. She also describes how "her child disappeared," spending much time traveling between two households, and that she got help from professionals to obtain the father's permission to change the living arrangements. This made her ex-partner accuse her of manipulating the children to live more permanently at her house, and "this had made it worse." Mette talks about how her life is stressful, knowing that the children are exposed to their father's anger and the denigration of her as untrustworthy and manipulative. In saying this, she also declares "we know that if someone talks negatively about someone you love, then it is hurtful." Nevertheless, she feels most vulnerable in not knowing, pointing to his refusal to cooperate and inability to see her in person. She thinks that he is bitter and angry because she left him and says that "he only blames me; he takes no responsibility. He is saying that I break all our agreements and I see it as the opposite. I get many accusations, and I try to respond quietly." She positions him as an aggressor, and in "being quiet" she sees herself as a peacekeeper who avoids fueling the conflict.

Brian and Karen's storyline

Brian's storyline of "the betrayal and destruction of a nuclear family man"

Brian talks about how he always experienced his relationship with his ex-partner as difficult, both before and after the divorce. While describing his current relationship with his ex-partner, he explicitly dismisses her from being part of how he sees the world, saying: "she does not exist anymore!." He emphasizes his need to protect himself from any contact with her. He portrays how difficult it has been for him, even many years after their divorce and that his psychologist has advised him to avoid contact with his ex-partner as a strategy of self-care. He describes that his wife's decision "to split the family" was very difficult for him and the children. He talks about his preferred identity as a nuclear family man, even many years after the divorce.

As he recollects, he always had some concerns about their relationship, and this have made him depressed. He describes how is worst fear came true, that is, that she had never loved him and that "she confirmed" that she had never loved him. In his trauma narrative, he gives a layered account of betrayals. He talks about the sacrifices he has made to keep the family together; "I took all the blame; it was my depression and my anxiety that was to blame." When he talks about his efforts to save the marriage, he is positioning himself as a martyr. He strategically "blamed himself" for wrongdoings but he felt left out in that "we never talked about us." He talks about how he has always loved the feeling of being part of a nuclear family. Being abandoned by his wife and being alone in making sacrifices "for the greater good of the family," he feels entitled to a position as a victim with the right to blame his ex-partner.

Karen's storyline of "the bitter ex-husband who blames me for everything"

Karen reports that she has always found her relationship with her ex-husband to be difficult. She always felt that she had to be the strong and responsible one in the relationship. In making this statement, she is positioning the other parent as weak and as irresponsible. She talks about how depression

and mood swings affected him, their relationship, and family life. She reports that he had a difficult time adjusting to their divorce; this difficulty had a negative impact on their co-parent relationship and the well-being of their children. She describes how some of the children have felt sorry for their father, blaming her for leaving him. Others have found it difficult to listen to him talk negatively about her. As a result, there have been relational difficulties between the children and their parents, especially with their father.

In her opinion, their separation became difficult because he was unwilling to end the relationship. In this consideration, she is referring to herself as the agent who decided to end the relationship. She describes that he turned up at her apartment at all hours; "he tried with all means possible to make me reconsider. So, I had to reject him repeatedly, reject him and reject him, before he kind of understood that I was serious." She talks about him being threatening, angry, and feeling sorry for himself. Then, she explains that there was a shift, after which he refused any contact with her. She receives some text messages with hostile accusations, and she reports that when they meet each other on the street, he ignores her and "treats her as air." She describes it as difficult, but it is worst when the children are present. She explains, "I can cope with it, but I don't like it when he does it while the children are there." In making this statement, she is positioning herself as a protective mother.

Adam and Hilde's storyline

Adam's storyline of "not being accepted as a separated father"

Adam is positioning his ex-partner as a winner and himself as a loser. He frames his ex-partner as a winner since she has taken over the family home. In his view, he has lost contact with his children due to their affinity to their family home, making them resist overnight stays with him in his new apartment. He feels that her ex-partner has done nothing to support his efforts to be with his children. He explains how she is "telling them that it is OK to stay with their grandparents instead of trying to convince them to come to my place and to be with me so that I actually can be a father." He feels powerless, because his ex-partner is better capable in communicating with the children and about custody matters in family mediation. His major concern is being lonely and left out from contact with the children.

He feels that his ex is the dominant parent who takes advantage of him by expecting him to be the caretaker of their children in their former home. He explains how this has made him "put his foot down," telling her: "I can't spend time in a house I don't live in anymore, cook and do the dishes […] in addition to paying full custody." He feels that his ex-partner is exploiting him, positioning him as a family servant. Even though he is paying a full child allowance, she expects him to take care of their children in their former home.

Hilde's storyline of "motherhood as being responsible and fatherhood on trial"

Hilde talks about a couple therapist they were seeing had great concerns about their conflict level, while they were married. She explains that her ex-partner's "relational incompetence" always have caused difficulties both in their marriage and in his relationships with the children. In her opinion, their teenagers' unwillingness to stay at their father's apartment after separation is the result of him not recognizing that they need time to adjust. In explaining how he failed this trial of fatherhood, Hilde positions herself as an expert witness to his expected failures "in being too impatient" or in

"not handling their expected rejections," while also claiming to wish him success. In the storyline "of fatherhood on trial," she positions herself as an outside spectator. In contrast, she stresses that her competence as a mother parallels their father's incompetence. She feels that she is *all on her own* as a parent and that he is unwilling to take on his share of responsibilities, using "full payments of child allowance" as an excuse.

Hilde talks about how she still cares about her ex-partner, although he "chooses to be angry and hostile" toward her. In talking about "choosing to," she is referring to his reaction as (de-contextualized) individual choices rather than something that is related to her actions or the nature of their relationship. Further, she describes that, "if you have children together. Then you really care about each other! […] Or one should at least expect so. That is at least something I expect. I really care about him!" She explains that she has tried to convince him many times, "but he thinks I am trying to make fun of him or something (laughter)." Thus, in trying to take up a position as *a caring co-parent*, she is referring to a moral duty of parents to care about each other. Moreover, in saying that "one should at least expect so", she confirms the presence of her ex's dismissal of her position as being caring. However, she justifies her right in being recognized as caring since co-parents "ought" to care about each other. Moreover, in laughing, she is displaying a stance that she finds his protest ridiculous. Thus, that she finds Adams protest of her self-appointed position as being caring toward him as invalid.

Roger and Margaret's storyline

Roger's storyline of "the drained father who refuses to build more bridges between mother and child"

Roger talks about how he decided to divorce and that he expected troubles. They agreed to a shared custody arrangement, but that after a while, the children wanted to spend more time with him. He then felt that he got all of the caretaking responsibilities and that the conflicts with his ex-partner and between her and the children were having a toll on him. In talking about his ex-partner's need of extra support, he is making a case of her being a burden. He describes performing a "needless tasks" to support the mother in spending time with the children. In saying that he is "taking her abilities to consideration," he is positioning her as a "handicapped parent" who has inabilities that require his compensation. In making this statement, he is positioning himself as a capable parent and the mother as incapable, as follows: "It is the little things that are missing. There is a relation that is missing, what should I say, to see your children in a proper way as a mother."

He describes that his ex-partner often calls him to complain, telling him about all his wrongdoings. He stresses the need to protect himself from her complaints and that he, as a full-time father, is unable to continue supporting her. Making a case for being a full-time father, he explains how he does not have any tolerance of her critiques. In making this statement, he implies that she has no right to complain, since he has more responsibility and is "more of a parent" than she is. Being the only "full-time parent," he dismisses her right to information, about the children describing it as a burden. He stresses that he is not hindering contact, that she is welcome to see the children in their former home: "I have suggested that she can be here regularly, on fixed days during the week, to give them a ride to sport activities and such. But that is always difficult, it always involves troubles." He demonstrates his willingness to involve her as a parent, presenting his suggestions to share the burden of childcare in his residence as an invitation.

Margaret's storyline: "the father-coup and the dismantling of a mother in being told, ignored, and kept in the dark"

Margaret talks about her difficulty in establishing a working cooperative relation. She describes that she prefers to talk and believes it is necessary to discuss things as parents to find agreements. She finds that instead of being invited to discuss as co-parents, she has been bombarded by e-mails.

She talks about how her ex-husband has a strategy of not involving her in decision-making regarding the children and that holding back information is part of this concern. She explains as follows: "I am put totally in the dark and I perceive that… sometimes I think that he is holding back information from me on purpose." Furthermore, she describes how he is taking advantage of "child–mother" conflicts to take sides with the children against her. She has tried to tell her ex-partner to stop ignoring her as a parent. Telling him that it is wrong "that you as a father talk to the children and then on account of what they say, you make decisions of how it is going to be, and in the best case scenario, I am informed." She feels that her ex-partner is obstructing her access to first-hand information and that he takes the position of a *child's advocate*. She feels that he is taking advantage of his newfound position, making an alliance with the children against her. The effect is that her parental authority is dismantled, and the right of joint decision-making on behalf of the children is no longer bestowed on her as a mother. In her opinion, he has violated their past agreements and laid the foundations of drastic changes in the children's living arrangement. Although they have equal custody rights in the written agreement, the children live with their father. She describes it as very stressful not knowing if the children will turn up and follow the custody agreements.

Conflict storylines as "tales of the troublesome other and I"

Across the five parallel storylines, an overarching dominant storyline emerges. We named this specific mode of talk or overarching conflict storyline as "tales of the Troublesome Other and I." This overarching conflict storyline is to position the other parent as the aggressor and oneself as a victim. In talk about the conflicted relationship, most parents are positioning their co-parent as "the troublesome other," and the "I-positions" of the parents often appear implicit as counter positions. This approach is a form of deliberate positioning of "the troublesome other" as an agent, and self-presentation of "I as parent" needs deconstruction. Thus, "in taking a stance about another's behavior, people also 'dramatize' themselves" (Harré & Langenhove, 1991, p. 403).

Two typologies of dominant storylines about the troublesome other appeared across parents' stories as *traumatic violations of trust* and as *irreconcilable storylines of who is bad*. In the storylines of traumatic violations of trust, there is viewing the troublesome other from traumatic events in the past. In these storylines, the focus is on traumatic events (e.g., trauma from family breakups or episodes of abuse/false accusations) that position the other parent as the violator and oneself as a legitimate victim. Here, cultural imaginary about the importance of the nuclear family is used (e.g., in Stig and Mette's storyline), to highlight the destructive effect of family break ups or in highlighting criminal acts (e.g., accusations of family violence or accusations of being falsely accused in Stig and Mette's storylines), which endorses the status as a legitimate victim. In *irreconcilable storylines of who is bad*, there is positioning the troublesome other as either a disloyal co-parent or a dysfunctional parent. For example, in Adam's storyline, he portrays himself as a victim of a disloyal co-parent (Hilde) who refuses to support his efforts as a separated father. Hilde is positioning Adam as a bad parent, who does not pass the test of fatherhood. Roger portrays Margaret as a "handicap" that represents a burden both to him and to their children. Margaret talks about the dismantling effect on motherhood "in being told,

ignored and kept in the dark" by her co-parent. In these storylines, "I as a parent" is self-positioned as a good parent or as being hindered or denied cooperative co-parenting by the troublesome other. Further, parents were positioning themselves as predominantly willing or unwilling to take part in cooperative co-parenting with the effect of a forced positioning as an uncooperative parenting couple (see Table 2). Parents with the dominant self-representations as willing to cooperate talked about how the troublesome other made joint parenting impossible with acts of hostility, denigration, and sabotage. However, often in a parallel storyline, a predominantly unwilling parent was reluctant to engage in joint co-parenting, due to the need for self-protection from intrusiveness and critique. The result was then a forced positioning as a non-cooperative couple.

However, in contrast to talk where the troublesome other is presented as sole responsible for the conflict dynamic, some other positioning was more nuanced and less hostile (e.g., Mary's storyline). Although Mary took up a position as a victim of violence (positioning her ex-husband as abusive), she also referred to a conflicted relationship in which both parents were responsible. Talking about the conflict, she is referring to a "we", which confirms that the conflict belongs to them as a parenting couple.

DISCUSSION

Our findings show that conflicted parents are positioning their co-parent as the troublesome other where the counter position of I as a parent is implicit. Positioning theory was found to be useful in deconstructing self-positions of parents in prolonged conflict. We will discuss how different typologies of storylines of conflict might create barriers in repositioning the couple to a cooperative co-parenthood. Further, we will discuss the duty of parenthood and the risk of colonizing families in entrenched conflicts with professional ideals of co-parenthood.

The troublesome other and I

Our findings draw attention to the circumstance that in conflicted co-parenthood, *the troublesome other* is both *a means* and *a hindrance* in performing the duty of parenting and to the becoming of *I as a parent*. The other parent is *a means* because being able to influence the other parent is one way to perform one's duty to care for the well-being of the child. Further, being a parent in a conflicted co-parenthood creates a hindrance in performing one's duty with the joint efforts of the other parent. It then follows that the act of influencing the other parent becomes a burden to the other parent. Moreover, when conflicted parents import expectations and hopes from the discourse of cooperativeness, the lack of responsiveness from the other becomes a stressful burden.

TABLE 2 Self/other matrix of willingness to cooperativeness

	Parent 1	Parent 2
Self-positioning	Willing	Unwilling
Rights	To influence the other and/or to receive support in parenting.	To self-independence in parenting
Obligations to the other	Nonhostility	Nonintrusiveness and critique
Other-positioning	Being positioned by the other as noncooperative parents	Positioning the other as noncooperative parents

Positioning the self as a legitimized victim of traumatic events caused by the troublesome other gives validation to the need for protection, and hence, what we coin as the term *traumatic violations of trust* becomes a barrier to parental cooperativeness. Being violated and deprived of an opportunity for reconciliation and forgiveness make it difficult to change positions since doing so would involve the threat of delegitimizing past violations and the loss of holding onto the right of being hurt as a justified victim (Elizabeth, 2019). In addition, traumatic violations of trust make it difficult to reestablish trust. Francia et al. (2019) found in a systematic review of parents in high conflict that pervasive mistrust is evident within these co-parent relationships. Holiday (1988) states that some level of trust must be present, as a moral condition, to be able to communicate.

Our study shows that parents vary in their abilities to obtain "positioning power" and to negotiate family circumstances, and their vulnerabilities from being in prolonged conflict are often divergent. Some parents are unevenly positioned in relation to their child, and their repertoire of positioning power is influenced by their respective relationship to the child (Dallos & Vetere, 2012), for example, one parent could have an advantage in having more access to their children than the other. In spending more time with the child, "the empowered" parent might take up a position as a "the only legitimate child representative" or a "knowledgeable/expert parent" versus "the isolated/unskilled" parent (Jevne, 2017). This barrier of *positional inequality of power* is in line with the moral conditions of justice that must be present to be able to communicate (Holiday (1988), that is, if we demand to be listened to, we must recognize the other's right to be listened to. Hence, Holiday (1988) also claims that a language's convention must be established through common reverence for social procedures; it cannot be established through force or power. Asymmetric and conflicted parent relationships can result in one disempowered parent who is more dependent on the other. The disempowered parent could feel pressured to be submissive, combined with a lack of trust. Being disempowered as an unequal, feeling disrespected, and being unable to reposition oneself could fuel anger and resentment that ignite conflict dynamics (Elizabeth, 2019).

Inherent in some storylines is an *ambiguity of co-parental interests*, which becomes a barrier to cooperative co-parenting. Some parents (i.e., Brian and Karen's storyline) report a wish to be protected from the involvement of the troublesome other, and at the same time, they wish to be involved and engaged in joint child decision-making across households. Thus, parents find it stressful to obtain confusing messages from the other parent, with wishes to be left alone and to be involved. This circumstance could create a "troublesome paradox" or a "double-bind" that makes it difficult to communicate (Cronen et al., 1982). Bateson (2000) argues that communication involves reflexivity about two levels of meaning: a "relational" level and a "content" level, and a paradox occurs when the two levels are "confused." Thus, *I as a parent* can perceive mixed messages from the other as confusing; does that mean that they wish to be involved (with the meta-message of cooperation) or that they wish to be left alone (with the meta-message of disengagement)? The first connotation of the message involves a risk of being accused of intrusiveness, and the latter involves a risk of being accused of sabotaging the joint decision-making. Cronen et al. (1982, p. 18) argues that double-binds (or "paradoxical loops" in the author's vocabulary) only become problematic if people (and their systems) lack some stable conceptions "from which to examine and operate upon the dilemmas of interpretation and action." Thus, when parents are part of conflict patterns in which every action that involves "the troublesome other" might reinforce the conflict, it remains a double-bind when it is understood within the frame of an interparental problem. Family therapists must recognize the stalemate positioning of uncooperative parents (see Table 2). Clearly, a family therapist can show parents the futility of invasiveness in trying to "peek over" or "tear down the wall," only to find that the wall is further reinforced by the other parent, and how this is part of a conflict cycle (Cottyn, 2009). We argue that a "solution" requires a second-order change of meaning making (Watzlawick et al., 1974). A second-order change

occurs when there is a qualitative shift in how the family system operates or a shift in the frame such that the body of rules that govern the structure of that system itself changes, for example, reframing "how one understands a problem." Rather than trying to increase the parents' abilities to cooperate, the goal might be to fundamentally alter what it means to function in a two-household family. From a clinical perspective, the therapist could work with each household separately to help them redefine what being an adoptive and resilient separated household is (Stokkebekk et al., 2019). Reframed in this fashion, family conflict could be interpreted as a psychosocial threat (risk) to the functioning of a two-household family rather than a dyadic interparental problem in need of resolving. Redefining the risk from prolonged conflict as a "chronic psychosocial threat" places the emphasis of meaning making and coping on each separate household (e.g., child and family resilience).

The primary duty "in the being and becoming" of a parent

Our study indicates that parents in prolonged conflict are closed off from a storyline of cooperative co-parenthood. In consequence, there are no available positions of cooperativeness to take up. Clearly, cooperation requires the willingness to influence and to be influenced by the other. Hence, we argue that the primary duty of parents is not co-parenthood. Rather, the parents' duty is simply to provide parenting. This approach follows the argument that there is a need to emphasize the parental duty to give and the entitlement of children to receive loving care (Sclater & Piper, 2019). Consequently, recognizing the duty of parenthood also involves acknowledging autonomous parenting in both households. Accordingly, accepting the inability to intervene in each other's parenting practice or in the family life of each separate household is an important premise to avoid fueling the conflict dynamics further. In cases where children are at risk of child abuse and neglect, appropriate authorities should be notified (e.g., child protection services) for further assessment.

It could be argued that family therapists are dominated by a discourse of cooperative co-parenting, where the establishment of a co-parenting team is preconditioned as a generalized necessity to successful separated family adjustment (Sclater & Piper, 2019). Hence, in promoting the ideal of cooperative co-parenting, practitioners are at risk of taking a colonizing position in separated families with prolonged conflicts (Rober & Seltzer, 2010). Taking a colonizing position means using one's power as a practitioner to import concepts that are foreign or insensitive to customs, resources, and capabilities in the family (Rober & Seltzer, 2010). The promotion of cooperative engagement might engulf the conflict further and thus become a solution that causes the problem (Watzlawick et al., 1967). An alternative to cooperative co-parenthood is a "conflict managed" and resilience-oriented parallel co-parenting model that recognizes the coexistence of two self-governed and autonomous households (Amato et al., 2011). Parallel parenting involves a disengaged style of co-parenting that is sensitive and proactive to the risk of conflict escalation between conflicted parents. In contrast to cooperative co-parenthood, parallel parenting does not involve the expected right to be involved in the ongoing matters of the other household. Each parent takes responsibility for their own parenting practice and their relationship with their child without consulting or involving the other parent. Thus, communication between parents is kept to a minimum. Successful parallel parenting requires a clear, detailed parenting agreement that is up to date and evaluated regularly. Apart from the legal responsibilities of parents and child custody arrangements, the agreements should also be specific about having an adequate child-focused information exchange (only appropriate child-focused content and the chosen modality by e-mail, by text, by phone), with orders that specify contact and that specify that when joint decision-making is required, it will occur. For example, parents might disagree on medical treatments; one parent might withhold the passport of a child, or the parents might disagree on the choice

of school for the child, and so on. The agreements should also state how and when parents should solve issues with the help of a third party. In some instances, this aspect involves mediation, a parent coordinator, or legal procedures. We recommend that family therapists request that parents have an appropriate and up to date parenting plan before intake.

A parallel parenting model that applies to a child and family resilience framework could be a promising reorientation for family therapists in aiding these families (Walsh, 2016). Child involvement (McIntosh & Chisholm, 2008) in family therapy could strengthen a child's ability to cope, and parallel interventions in each household could promote quality in parenting and child–parent relations (Sandler et al., 2017). We suggest that family therapists should shift the focus from solving co-parental relationship problems to help each parent in a prolonged conflict to buffer the risk and promote resilience in their child. This approach is in line with research that indicates that parent–youth relationships might not be affected by divorced parents engaging in conflictual co-parenting and that recommending alternative forms of co-parenting (e.g., parallel) could better meet the needs of parents and youth (Beckmeyer et al., 2019). Kelly (2007) argues that children appear to thrive with parents who engage in conflict-free parallel parenting if they have adequate parenting in both homes and well-articulated parenting agreements.

Strengths and imitations of the study

An assessment of the strengths and limitations in a qualitative study should be conducted in the context of any relevant validity procedures employed. The study applied validity procedures, as suggested by Creswell and Miller (2000, p. 126), which fitted the constructivist paradigm assumptions of the researchers. First, *thick*, *rich description* from dyadic analysis of five parallel storylines provides an ample opportunity to show the complexities and to assess the (face value) credibility of the presented findings. Second, the first author's background as an experienced family therapist, with a *prolonged engagement in the field of study*, can add credibility from vital insights. However, such preconceptions from a therapist could also "cloud" and limit new outlooks on the phenomenon, which is crucial in an explorative research design. Consequently, to enhance the quality in the exploratory research process, efforts were made to increase the awareness of possible preconceptions and alternative constructions. Thus, the development of analytical themes and findings was critically assessed and contested by coauthors of varied professional backgrounds and an affiliated interdisciplinary research group. Finally, efforts on *disconfirming evidence* were conducted in presenting alternative storylines and findings (e.g., Mary's storyline).

Questions for further research

It would be interesting in future research to explore how parents who are embedded in conflict position their children to acquire more knowledge of how their self-positioning as parents is related to their understanding of the children.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This study is funded by the Office for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufetat), Norway.

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How to cite this article: Stokkebekk J, Iversen A, Hollekim R, Ness O. "The troublesome other and I": Parallel stories of separated parents in prolonged conflicts. *J Marital Fam Ther*. 2021;47:52–68. https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12474

Appendix

REK
REGIONALE KOMITEER FOR MEDISINSK OG HELSEFAGLIG FORSKNINGSETIKK

Region:	Saksbehandler:	Telefon:	Vår dato:	Vår referanse:
REK vest	Camilla Gjerstad	55978499	01.03.2017	2016/1915/REK vest
			Deres dato: 23.01.2017	

Vår referanse må oppgis ved alle henvendelser

Jan Stokkebekk
Universitetet i Bergen

2016/1915 Styrke barn i høykonfliktfamilier-barn og foreldres erfaringer fra et familieterapeutisk tilbud

Vi viser til klage på avslag av ovennevnte forskningsprosjekt. Klagen ble behandlet av Regional komité for medisinsk og helsefaglig forskningsetikk (REK vest) i møtet 09.02.2017. Vurderingen er gjort med hjemmel i helseforskningsloven § 10, jf. forskningsetikkloven § 4.

Ny forskningsansvarlig: Universitetet i Bergen
Prosjektleder: Jan Stokkebekk

Prosjektomtale
Målet med denne kvalitative studien er å få ny kunnskap om hva som kan bidra til endring og styrking av barn i risiko når foreldre er i høykonflikt. Studien tar utgangspunkt i et nytt familieterapeutisk tilbud «Sterke barn i 2 hjem». Man vil intervjue 8 familier ved oppstart og etter 6 måneder av terapiforløpet. Studien vil undersøke hvordan foreldre og barn i alderen 9-18 år opplever det å leve i en familie med høykonflikt.

Prosjektet ble avslått 11.11.16
Komiteen avslo prosjektet med følgende begrunnelse (forkortet versjon):

- *Rekruttering av en sårbar gruppe.* Det er krevende å rekruttere barn til en studie der foreldrene er i høykonflikt. Selv om foreldrene samtykker til at barna skal kunne snakke åpent uten frykt for represalier, vil det være vanskelig å hindre at barna utsettes for press fra foreldrene om å få vite hva de har svart. Barn kan komme i lojalitetskonflikt i slike situasjoner. Komiteen savner en refleksjon av problemstillingen.
- *Rolleforståelse og overlapp mellom forskning og terapi.* Studien framstår som en uklar blanding av et terapeutisk tilbud og et forskningsintervju. Familien samtykker både til behandling og deltakelse i studien. Komiteen mener at protokollen bør ha et tydeligere skille mellom forskning og behandling. Komiteen er bekymret for nærheten mellom behandler- og forskerrollen og savner søkers refleksjoner rundt dette.
- *Valg av forskningsdesign.* Komiteen anbefaler at søker formulerer enklere problemstillinger der forskningsspørsmålene er mer spisset. Ingen medarbeidere er oppgitt i søknaden, men komiteen anbefaler likevel at studien bør organiseres i samarbeid med en forskergruppe.

Klage

- *Rekruttering av en sårbar gruppe*. Prosjektleder mener at den terapeutiske settingen, intervjuformen og innholdet bidrar til å forebygge at barnet føler seg presset. Ressursfokuset i intervjuet vil kunne

motvirke at barnet kommer i en lojalitetskonflikt. Det er utarbeidet en revidert protokoll. Det er planlagt at en av foreldrene vil delta i begynnelsen av intervjuet. Barna blir informert om at de kan avbryte intervjuet, eller ta en pause for å kontakte foreldrene.

- *Rolleforståelse og overlapp mellom forskning og terapi.* Den reviderte protokollen har et klarere skille mellom forskning og behandling. Skillet tydeliggjøres ved rekruttering til studien der familiene kan avstå fra å delta i studien uten at dette vil påvirke terapitilbudet. Prosjektleder vil ikke være terapeut for familiene i studien.
- *Valg av forskningsdesign.* Prosjektleder er nå del av forskningsgruppen Barnevern, likestilling og Inkludering ved HEMIL-senteret og ble i desember 2016 tatt opp ved phd-utdanning ved psykologisk fakultet, UIB. Forskergruppen peker på at forskning viser et behov for dybdekunnskap om resiliensprosesser i høykonfliktfamilier ved hjelp av eksplorerende forskningsdesign. Prosjektleder har likevel etter råd fra REK vest spisset problemstillingen i den reviderte protokollen.
- *Forskningsansvarlig:* Prosjektleder oppgir at Universitetet i Bergen er forskningsansvarlig for studien, ikke Barne-, ungdoms- og familieetaten.

Vurdering av klagen
Komiteen imøtekommer klagen og omgjør vedtaket. Prosjektleder har gitt en utfyllende redegjørelse og viser gode refleksjoner. REK vest ber om at barn over 16 år samtykker selv, men har ellers ingen merknader til den reviderte protokollen.
Studien godkjennes. Tillatelsen gjelder til prosjektslutt 01.09.2020. Ved prosjektslutt skal data slettes eller anonymiseres.

Vilkår

- REK vest ber om at barn over 16 år samtykker selv.

Vedtak
REK vest tar klagen til følge. REK vest godkjenner prosjektet på betingelse av at ovennevnte vilkår tas til følge.

Sluttmelding og søknad om prosjektendring
Prosjektleder skal sende sluttmelding til REK vest på eget skjema senest seks måneder ett prosjektslutt, jf. hfl. § 12. Prosjektleder skal sende søknad om prosjektendring til REK vest dersom det skal gjøres vesentlige endringer er i forhold til de opplysninger som er gitt i søknaden, jf. hfl. § 11.

Klageadgang
Du kan klage på komiteens vedtak, jf. forvaltningsloven § 28 flg. Klagen sendes til REK vest. Klagefristen er tre uker fra du mottar dette brevet. Dersom vedtaket opprettholdes av REK vest, sendes klagen videre til Den nasjonale forskningsetiske komité for medisin og helsefag for endelig vurdering.

Med vennlig hilsen

Marit Grønning
Prof. Dr.med
Komiteleder

Camilla Gjerstad
rådgiver

Kopi til: postmottak@uib.no

FORESPØRSEL OM DELTAKELSE I FORSKNINGSPROSJEKTET

STYRKING AV BARN I HØYKONFLIKTFAMILIER

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt. Målsetning med dette forskningsprosjektet er å få økt kunnskap om hvordan familiekontoret kan bidra til å styrke barn og foreldre, til tross for foreldres samarbeidsvansker og konflikt. Vi trenger derfor mer prosesskunnskap om hva ulike familier, foreldre og barn gjør, for å få et godt liv og håndtere vansker som følge av at foreldre er i konflikt.

Åtte familier (foreldre og barn) som benytter familieterapitilbudet "Sterke barn i to hjem" (SB2H) ved Bergen og omland familiekontor (BOF) får tilbud om å delta i forskningsprosjektet. Universitetet i Bergen er ansvarlig virksomhet for undersøkelsen og stipendiat i familieterapi/doktorgradskandidat Jan Stokkebekk er prosjektleder.

HVA INNEBÆRER PROSJEKTET?

Du vil bli innkalt til intervju, etter avtale med prosjektleder Jan Stokkebekk. Intervju vil vare i ca. 1 time. Du vil bli intervjuet ved to anledninger; ved oppstart av "Sterke barn i 2 hjem" og ca. 6 måneder senere.

Vi vil også be om samtykke fra begge foreldre til at felles barn i alderen 9-18 år deltar i forskningsprosjektet. Hvis det er planlagt at barna tar aktiv del av SB2H, og begge foreldre samtykker, vil vi avtale intervjutidspunkt for barnet med foreldre. Barn som deltar vil bli intervjuet alene eller sammen med søsken, ved oppstart av SB2H og 6 måneder senere.

Barn/ungdom kan velge om intervjuet skal skje på familiekontoret eller hjemme. Barn vil bli intervjuet i ca. 45-60 minutt, avhengig av alder. En av dere voksne vil være i nærheten når barnet intervjues. I forbindelse med intervju vil forelder si til barnet, med forsker som vitne, at barnet kan snakke fritt uten at dere foreldre etterspør/krever å få vite hva som sies i intervjuet.

Lydopptak blir benyttet i intervju, som blir transkribert og anvendt som datamateriale i forskning. Lydopptak blir slettet når forskningen er ferdigstilt.

MULIGE FORDELER OG ULEMPER

Det er ingen kjent risiko knyttet til deltagelse i intervju. Barn og foreldre kan oppleve mindre ubehag og/eller at det kjennes godt å snakke med en uavhengig forsker om hvordan de håndterer å leve i en familie, når foreldre har samarbeidsvansker/er i konflikt. Da dere deltar i SB2H, for å bli styrket som familie, vurderes det at forskningsintervjuet i liten grad innebærer noen risiko eller belastninger. I SB2H vil dere kunne ta opp tema som har med å leve i en familie med konflikt, og få nødvendig støtte og hjelp. Forsker kan bistå med å rekvirere en avtale hos deres familieterapeuter om nødvendig

FRIVILLIG DELTAKELSE OG MULIGHET FOR Å TREKKE SITT SAMTYKKE

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Dersom du ønsker å delta, undertegner du samtykkeerklæringen på siste side. Du kan når som helst og uten å oppgi noen grunn trekke ditt samtykke. Dette vil ikke få konsekvenser for din videre behandling. Dersom du trekker deg fra prosjektet, kan du kreve å få slettet innsamlede prøver og opplysninger, med mindre opplysningene allerede er inngått i analyser eller brukt i vitenskapelige publikasjoner. Dersom du senere ønsker å trekke deg eller har spørsmål til prosjektet, kan du kontakte prosjektleder Jan Stokkebekk på e-post; jan.stokkebekk@uib.no .Oppgi tlf. så kontakter prosjektleder deg.

HVA SKJER MED INFORMASJONEN OM DEG?

Informasjonen som registreres om deg skal kun brukes slik som beskrevet i hensikten med studien. Du har rett til innsyn i hvilke opplysninger som er registrert om deg og rett til å få korrigert eventuelle feil i de opplysningene som er registrert.

Alle opplysningene vil bli behandlet uten navn og fødselsnummer eller andre direkte gjenkjennende opplysninger. En kode knytter deg til dine opplysninger gjennom en navneliste.

Prosjektleder har ansvar for den daglige driften av forskningsprosjektet og at opplysninger om deg blir behandlet på en sikker måte. Informasjon om deg vil bli anonymisert eller slettet senest fem år etter prosjektslutt.

GODKJENNING

Prosjektet er godkjent av Regional komite for medisinsk og helsefaglig forskningsetikk, [sett inn saksnr. hos REK (20xx/yyy)].

SAMTYKKE TIL DELTAKELSE I PROSJEKTET

JEG ER VILLIG TIL Å DELTA I PROSJEKTET

Sted og dato | Deltakers signatur

Deltakers navn med trykte bokstaver

[Samtykke av foresatte til at barn mellom 9-18 deltar i undersøkelsen og blir intervjuet;]

Som foresatte til_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ ___ __ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ (Fullt navn) samtykker vi til at hun/han kan delta i prosjektet, og at barnet kan snakke fritt med forsker, uten av vi som foreldre krever opplysninger fra barnet.

Sted og dato | Foresattes signatur

Foresattes navn med trykte bokstaver

Sted og dato | Foresattes signatur

Foresattes navn med trykte bokstaver

Jeg bekrefter å ha gitt informasjon om prosjektet.

Sted og dato | Signatur

Rolle i prosjektet

STYRKE BARN I HØYKONFLIKTFAMILIER

HVA ER HJELPSOMT FOR BARN, NÅR MAMMA OG PAPPA SYNES AT DET ER VANSKELIG Å SAMARBEIDE?

HVORFOR BLIR DU SPURT OM Å VÆRE MED?

Hei, jeg heter Jan og er forsker. Jeg forsker for å vite mer om hvordan familiekontoret kan hjelpe barn/ungdom og foreldre, når foreldre synes det er vanskelig å samarbeide. Vi vet at mange barn/ungdom gjør noe for å få det bedre, hvis de merker at mamma og pappa er mye uenige, er sinte på hverandre eller sier stygge ting om hverandre. Kanskje du har noen tanker om hva du gjør som hjelper deg? Eller om noe dere gjør i familien din som hjelper deg? Eller kanskje noe du gjør med venner eller andre?

Jeg vet at du har en mamma og pappa som bor i hvert sitt hjem, og som synes det er vanskelig å samarbeide. Du er eksperten på hvordan det er for deg å vokse opp i din familie, og hva du og andre gjør for at du skal ha det bra, dette ønsker jeg å lære mer om av deg.

HVA VIL SKJE OM DU DELTAR?

Det er helt frivillig å snakke med meg som er forsker. Både du, mamma og pappa må være enig om at jeg kan snakke med deg to ganger for å kunne delta.

Du kan velge om du vil snakke med meg på familiekontoret eller hjemme. Jeg lager avtaler med mamma eller pappa om når jeg skal snakke med deg. Mamma eller pappa blir med i første del av samtalen, og sier at de er enige om at du kan snakke fritt, og at de ikke vil kreve å få vite noe om hva vi snakker om. Så snakker vi to sammen. Jeg vil intervjue deg og spørre deg om å tegne. Mamma eller pappa vil være i nærheten mens vi snakker sammen. (Enten på venterommet på familiekontoret, eller hjemme om det er der vi snakker sammen). Jeg vil gjerne snakke med deg i ca. 1 time, og du kan selvfølgelig ta pause og snakke med mamma eller pappa hvis du vil.

Jeg skal også intervjue mamma og pappa, og andre foreldre og barn som kommer på familiekontoret. Det du forteller meg, vil ingen andre få vite at det er du som har sagt.

HVA VIL SKJE OM DU IKKE DELTAR

Det er helt frivillig å snakke med meg som er forsker. Hvis du ikke ønsker å snakke med meg er det helt i orden, da sier du ifra til mamma eller pappa. Det går helt fint å avslutte intervjuet, når som helst, mens vi snakker sammen.

Intervjuguide (semi-strukturert) for forelder. Intervju 1.

Første intervju (før oppstart SB2H)
Hovedmål for intervju; er å få tykke beskrivelser hvordan forelder erfarer barns livskvalitet, deres mestring og beskyttelse mot vansker i forhold til foreldrekonflikt? Videre hvordan foreldre mestrer foreldrekonflikten, og deres bidrag til resiliens for barn og familie. Videre om foreldres forventninger til SB2H

Tema	"Spørsmålsbank" i forhold til tema (Bare ideer til spørsmål-ikke meningen at alle spørsmål skal stilles)
Relasjon til den andre forelder	Hvordan vil du beskrive ditt forhold (samarbeidsrelasjon) til den andre forelder.
Samarbeid om hva? (samarbeidene vs. parallelt foreldreskap)	Hva ønsker du å samarbeide om?
Forelders teori om hvorfor samarbeidet ikke fungerer eller forsøk på løsning ikke har lykkes.	Hva har du gjort for å etablere et bedre samarbeid, hvilke løsninger har du forsøkt. Hva har dere lykkes med, hva har dere ikke og hvilke tanker har du om dette?
Endringsteori/Aksept av utfordring/manglende foreldresamarbeid(resiliens)	Hvilke tanker har du om viktighet av foreldresamarbeid i forhold til barns livskvalitet? Mulighet for at samarbeid bedrer seg?
Innvirkning av konflikt på voksen/forelder	Hvordan påvirker foreldrekonflikten/samarbeidsvanskene deg som voksen og forelder?
Betydning av foreldresamarbeid/livskvalitet	Hvordan virker foreldresamarbeidet inn på din livskvalitet?
Mestring/resiliens voksen	Hva gjør du for å mestre konflikten som voksen og forelder? Hva gjør du får håndtere det, og for å få det bedre?
Kontinuum av mestring	Hva er lett å håndtere, (hva er mindre lett)?
Påvirkning av foreldrekonflikt barn/ungdom	Hvordan vurderer du at barnet/ungdom blir påvirket av foreldrekonflikten?
Samarbeid om å redusere risiko av konflikt	Hvordan vurderer du foreldresamarbeidet med hensyn til å skjerme barnet/ungdom fra foreldrekonflikt?

Barns mestring Forelders bidrag til å støtte barn/ungdom	Hva gjør barnet ditt for å håndtere/mestre eventuelle utfordringer med foreldrekonflikten? Hvilke strategier/tanker har du om hva ditt bidrag er for at støtte barnet/ungdom.
Relasjon foreldre-barn	Hvordan vil du beskrive relasjonen mellom deg og ditt barn. Snakker dere om hvordan dere har det sammen(relasjonen)? Tar du eller barnet opp tema relatert til hvordan dere har det sammen? Har du tatt initiativ til samtaler om hvordan dere har det sammen?
Kommunikasjon (resiliens) Emosjonell åpenhet (resliens) Tydelig kommunikasjon (resiliens)	Hvordan snakker du og ditt barn sammen? Snakker dere om følelser/ følelsesmessige opplevelser? Snakker dere tydelig til hverandre? (husholdet)?
Oppfattelse av familie styrker Oppfattelse av å stå sammen om utfordringer felles løsninger. Individ/felleskap (resiliens)	Hva er styrkene (+) til familien ditt barn er en del av. Hvordan håndterer familien utfordringer generelt? Hva løses i fellesskap, i hvert enkelt hjem eller som enkeltpersoner?
Barn/ungdoms opplevelse av livskvalitet Familiestruktur /trivsel boform Hvordan det er å bo i familie med 2 hjem Likhet/ulikhet mellom hjem	Hvordan har barnet/ungdommen din det? Hva er viktig for barnet/ungdommen din for at han/henne skal ha det bra? Hva er viktig for at hun/henne skal ha det bra i familie/m. venner/på skole? Hvordan er det for barnet å bo/være litt hos mamma og litt hos pappa? Noe som er kjekt for barnet med å bo i to hjem? Hva er forskjellig for barnet ved å bo hos mor eller far?
Kvalitet på relasjoner	Hvilke forhold (relasjon) har barnet til mamma, pappa, søsken
Kommunikasjon om emosjoner (resiliens) Snakke om egne følelser	Snakker dere om hva dere føler i familien(om dere er trist, lei, sint, glad)Hvordan er det for deg å snakke med barn/ungdom om følelser ? Hvordan opplever du det er for barnet å snakke om følelser? Noen følelser som er lett/vanskelig for barnet å snakke om/gi utrykk for?

Perspektiver på utfordringer, motgang(resiliens) i livet Foreldres tanker om barn, sårbar/aktør.	Hvilke perspektiv har din familie på vansker/utfordringer, er det en bør en unngå det eller møte og løse det ? Hva tenker du i forhold til ditt barn/ungdom angående dette
Barns mestring av utfordringer i livet Barns vurdering av utfordringer/behov for hjelp	Om barnet opplever noe som vanskelig pleier han/henne å forsøke å løse det selv? Når tenker du at barnet kan løse det selv, og når må barnet få hjelp av andre?
Opplevd tilgjengelig støtte av barnet Hvem barnet søker sosial støtte/ mestring Barns erfaring fra om sosial støtte/ hjelper	Hvis barnet opplever noe som vanskelig, hvem er det barnet vil gå til for hjelp? Veit du om noen eksempler når barnet har bedt om hjelp? Hos deg eller andre i familien, venner, skole/øvrig nettverk. Har barnet opplevelser av ar det hjelper å henvende seg for få støtte? På hvilken måte ble det bedre.
Appraisals/oppfattelse av foreldres relasjon. Problem løsning (resiliens) Kunnskap om foreldrekonflikt/løsninger Barns tanker/følelser/handlinger – om foreldres relasjon. Barns mestringsstrategier Tanker om effektive mestringsstrategier	Hvordan tenker du at barnet opplever ditt forhold til den andre forelder? Snakker dere om ev. Utfordringer som barnet har. Hva foreslår du som løsning for barnet? Veit barnet noe om hva dere er uenige om, eller når dere finner løsninger? Er dette noe barnet tenker på (mye-lite)? Hvordan påvirker det barnet i forhold til tanker/følelser/handlinger? Hva gjør barnet for å få det bedre (hvis det er vanskelig). Hva virker, hva gjør det bedre for barnet?
Foreldre informert barn/ungdom (Resiliens) Forventninger til deltagelse Hva barn mener familie trenger hjelp til. Håp om endring/forventninger til terapi.	Har informert barnet om at du/dere skal snakke med noen på familiekontoret? Hvordan vil det være for barnet og deg å snakke med familieterapeuter –om å få det bedre i familien. Hva tenker du at barnet/ familien trenger hjelp til? Tror at du at familieterapeutene vil kunne

	hjelpe dere? Hva håper du vil endre seg til det bedre?
Endringsteori.	Hva tror du skal til/må skje for at du og familien får det bedre ?
Håp (om resiliens) til tross for foreldrekonflikt.	Tror du at du at familiekontoret kan hjelpe deg og din familie til å få det bra, selv om dere foreldre fortsetter å streve med å samarbeidet?
Resiliensorientert endringsteori/håp.	Hva trenger ditt barn, du og din familie" for å bli sterke nok"/ha det bra" uavhengig av om foreldresamarbeidet er vanskelig?

Intervjuguide, intervju nr.1 (semi-strukturert) for barn/ungdom

Første intervju (før oppstart SB2H)
Hovedmål for intervju; er å få tykke beskrivelser av hvordan barn/ungdom erfarer egen livskvalitet, mestring og resiliens i en familie hvor foreldre er i konflikt. Videre om barnets opplevelse av behov for hjelp, håp om endring i deltagelse i familieterapi.

Tema	**"Spørsmålsbank" i forhold til tema** **(Bare ideer til spørsmål-ikke ment at alle skal benyttes)**
Oppfattelse av familie Oppfattelse av å stå sammen om opplevelser/utfordringer	Kan du fortelle meg om din familie, hvem er del av familien (tegne familien/bruk av brikker-tavle) ? Hva er din familie god til (styrker + på tavlen)? Hva løser dere sammen som familie, i hvert enkelt hushold? Hva må du passe på selv? Hvordan er det?
Livskvalitet Familiestruktur Hvordan det er å bo i familie med 2 hjem	Hva er viktig for deg for at du skal ha det bra? Hva er viktig for at du skal ha det bra i din familie/m. venner/på skole? Hvordan har du det nå? Hvordan er det for deg å bo/være litt hos mamma og litt hos pappa? Beskriv. Noe som er kjekt med å bo to steder, noe som ikke er så kjekt?
Kvalitet på relasjoner	Hvordan har du det i forhold til mamma, pappa, søsken? (tegning-grønne/røde hjerter)
Kommunikasjon om emosjoner (resiliens) Snakke om egne følelser	Snakker dere om hva dere føler i familien(om dere er trist, lei, sint, glad m. m), hos mamma og pappa? Hvordan er det? Hvordan synes du det er å snakke om egne følelser? Noen følelser som er lett/vanskelig å snakke om?
Egen mestring av utfordringer i livet Vurdering av utfordringer/behov for hjelp	Om du opplever noe som vanskelig pleier du å forsøke å løse det selv? Når tenker du at du kan løse det selv, og når må du få hjelp av andre?
Perspektiver på utfordringer, motgang(resiliens) i livet Barns opplevelse om foreldre i forhold til	Hvilke perspektiv har din familie på vansker/utfordringer, bør en unngå det eller møte og løse det? Hva opplever du mamma og pappa mener; at du bør skjermes fra det som er vanskelig eller at det er noe

vansker/utfordringer.(mestring)	du må forholde deg til og løse?
Opplevd tilgjengelig støtte Hvem barnet søker sosial støtte/ mestring Erfaring fra om sosial støtte/ hjelper	Hvis du opplever noe som vanskelig, hvem er det du kan gå til for hjelp? Har du noen eksempler når du har bedt om hjelp? Hos mamma eller pappa? Venner? Andre? Fikk du hjelp til det du trengte? På hvilken måte ble det bedre.
Appraisals/oppfattelse av foreldres relasjon- konflikt Oppfattelse av foreldres samspill /relasjon. Innsikt i foreldres vansker/kommunikasjon. Tanker/følelser/handlinger –om foreldres relasjon. Mestringsstrategier Tanker om effektive mestringsstrategier	Hvordan opplever du at mamma og pappa har det i forhold til hverandre/samarbeider? Veit du hva de er uenige om? Veit du hvordan de forsøker å løse uenighet? Klarer de å løse det? Er dette noe du tenker på (mye-lite)? Hvordan påvirker det deg i forhold til tanker/følelser/handlinger? Hva gjør du for å få det bedre (hvis det er vanskelig). Hva virker, hva gjør det bedre?
Opplevelse av foreldrekonflikt Mestrings-strategier ved konflikt.	Mange barn opplever at mamma eller pappa av og til er uenige, sinte på hverandre, og eller sier stygge ting om hverandre. Har du opplevd det? Hvordan oppleves det ev. for deg? Hva gjør du da for å få det bedre?
Håp, tanker om foreldres mulighet til å forstå (mentalisere). Foreldrestøtte (utviklingsstøtte) til barn ved konflikt i foreldredyade. Foreldre gir proaktive løsninger på utfordringer(resiliens) Håp om endring/løsninger/felleskap om løsninger (resiliens)	Tror du mamma/pappa vet hvordan det er for deg, om de er sinte, sier stygge ting om hverandre? Snakker mamma og pappa med deg om hvordan du har det i forhold til at dette? Sier mamma og pappa noe om hvordan du skal forholde deg til at de er uenige eller sinte på hverandre? Hva foreslår de hva dere skal gjøre som familie (hushold), eller at du selv skal gjøre? Tenker du at det vil endre seg, på hvilken måte ev.?
Om hva foreldre har informert om terapi Forventninger til familieterapi	Har mamma/pappa fortalt at du/dere skal snakke med noen på familiekontoret? Hvordan vil det være å snakke med en familieterapeut – om å få det bedre i familien?

Hva barn mener familie trenger hjelp til	Hva tenker du at din familie trenger hjelp til?
Håp om endring	Tror at du at familieterapeutene vil kunne hjelpe dere? Hva håper du vil endre seg til det bedre?
Endringsteori	Hva tror du skal til/må skje for at du og familien får det bedre.
Håp (om resiliens) til tross for foreldrekonflikt	Tror du at du at familiekontoret kan hjelpe deg og din familie til å få det bra, selv om mamma og pappa synes det er vanskelig å samarbeide? På hvilken måte da?

Doctoral Theses at The Faculty of Psychology, University of Bergen

1980	Allen, Hugh M., Dr. philos.	Parent-offspring interactions in willow grouse (Lagopus L. Lagopus).
1981	Myhrer, Trond, Dr. philos.	Behavioral Studies after selective disruption of hippocampal inputs in albino rats.
1982	Svebak, Sven, Dr. philos.	The significance of motivation for task-induced tonic physiological changes.
1983	Myhre, Grete, Dr. philos.	The Biopsychology of behavior in captive Willow ptarmigan.
	Eide, Rolf, Dr. philos.	PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS AND INDICES OF HEALTH RISKS. The relationship of psychosocial conditions to subjective complaints, arterial blood pressure, serum cholesterol, serum triglycerides and urinary catecholamines in middle aged populations in Western Norway.
	Værnes, Ragnar J., Dr. philos.	Neuropsychological effects of diving.
1984	Kolstad, Arnulf, Dr. philos.	Til diskusjonen om sammenhengen mellom sosiale forhold og psykiske strukturer. En epidemiologisk undersøkelse blant barn og unge.
	Løberg, Tor, Dr. philos.	Neuropsychological assessment in alcohol dependence.
1985	Hellesnes, Tore, Dr. philos.	Læring og problemløsning. En studie av den perseptuelle analysens betydning for verbal læring.
	Håland, Wenche, Dr. philos.	Psykoterapi: relasjon, utviklingsprosess og effekt.
1986	Hagtvet, Knut A., Dr. philos.	The construct of test anxiety: Conceptual and methodological issues.
	Jellestad, Finn K., Dr. philos.	Effects of neuron specific amygdala lesions on fear-motivated behavior in rats.
1987	Aarø, Leif E., Dr. philos.	Health behaviour and sosioeconomic Status. A survey among the adult population in Norway.
	Underlid, Kjell, Dr. philos.	Arbeidsløyse i psykososialt perspektiv.
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1990	Flaten, Magne A., Dr. psychol.	The role of habituation and learning in reflex modification.
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	Endresen, Inger M., Dr. philos.	Psychoimmuniological stress markers in working life.
	Faleide, Asbjørn O., Dr. philos.	Asthma and allergy in childhood. Psychosocial and psychotherapeutic problems.
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	Thuen, Frode, Dr. psychol.	Accident-related behaviour among children and young adolescents: Prediction and prevention.
	Solheim, Ragnar, Dr. philos.	Spesifikke lærevansker. Diskrepanskriteriet anvendt i seleksjonsmetodikk.
	Johnsen, Bjørn Helge, Dr. psychol.	Brain assymetry and facial emotional expressions: Conditioning experiments.
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	Eid, Jarle, Dr. psychol.	Early predictors of PTSD symptom reporting; The significance of contextual and individual factors.
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	Roald, Ingvild K., Dr. philos.	Building of concepts. A study of Physics concepts of Norwegian deaf students.
H	Fekadu, Zelalem W., Dr. philos.	Predicting contraceptive use and intention among a sample of adolescent girls. An application of the theory of planned behaviour in Ethiopian context.
	Melesse, Fantu, Dr. philos.	The more intelligent and sensitive child (MISC) mediational intervention in an Ethiopian context: An evaluation study.
	Råheim, Målfrid, Dr. philos.	Kvinners kroppserfaring og livssammenheng. En fenomenologisk – hermeneutisk studie av friske kvinner og kvinner med kroniske muskelsmerter.
	Engelsen, Birthe Kari, Dr. psychol.	Measurement of the eating problem construct.
	Lau, Bjørn, Dr. philos.	Weight and eating concerns in adolescence.
2002 V	Ihlebæk, Camilla, Dr. philos.	Epidemiological studies of subjective health complaints.
	Rosén, Gunnar O. R., Dr. philos.	The phantom limb experience. Models for understanding and treatment of pain with hypnosis.

	Høines, Marit Johnsen, Dr. philos.	Fleksible språkrom. Matematikklæring som tekstutvikling.
	Anthun, Roald Andor, Dr. philos.	School psychology service quality. Consumer appraisal, quality dimensions, and collaborative improvement potential
	Pallesen, Ståle, Dr. psychol.	Insomnia in the elderly. Epidemiology, psychological characteristics and treatment.
	Midthassel, Unni Vere, Dr. philos.	Teacher involvement in school development activity. A study of teachers in Norwegian compulsory schools
	Kallestad, Jan Helge, Dr. philos.	Teachers, schools and implementation of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program.
H	Ofte, Sonja Helgesen, Dr. psychol.	Right-left discrimination in adults and children.
	Netland, Marit, Dr. psychol.	Exposure to political violence. The need to estimate our estimations.
	Diseth, Åge, Dr. psychol.	Approaches to learning: Validity and prediction of academic performance.
	Bjuland, Raymond, Dr. philos.	Problem solving in geometry. Reasoning processes of student teachers working in small groups: A dialogical approach.
2003 V	Arefjord, Kjersti, Dr. psychol.	After the myocardial infarction – the wives' view. Short- and long-term adjustment in wives of myocardial infarction patients.
	Ingjaldsson, Jón Þorvaldur, Dr. psychol.	Unconscious Processes and Vagal Activity in Alcohol Dependency.
	Holden, Børge, Dr. philos.	Følger av atferdsanalytiske forklaringer for atferdsanalysens tilnærming til utforming av behandling.
	Holsen, Ingrid, Dr. philos.	Depressed mood from adolescence to 'emerging adulthood'. Course and longitudinal influences of body image and parent-adolescent relationship.
	Hammar, Åsa Karin, Dr. psychol.	Major depression and cognitive dysfunction- An experimental study of the cognitive effort hypothesis.
	Sprugevica, Ieva, Dr. philos.	The impact of enabling skills on early reading acquisition.
	Gabrielsen, Egil, Dr. philos.	LESE FOR LIVET. Lesekompetansen i den norske voksenbefolkningen sett i lys av visjonen om en enhetsskole.
H	Hansen, Anita Lill, Dr. psychol.	The influence of heart rate variability in the regulation of attentional and memory processes.
	Dyregrov, Kari, Dr. philos.	The loss of child by suicide, SIDS, and accidents: Consequences, needs and provisions of help.
2004 V	Torsheim, Torbjørn, Dr. psychol.	Student role strain and subjective health complaints: Individual, contextual, and longitudinal perspectives.
	Haugland, Bente Storm Mowatt Dr. psychol.	Parental alcohol abuse. Family functioning and child adjustment.

	Milde, Anne Marita, Dr. psychol.	Ulcerative colitis and the role of stress. Animal studies of psychobiological factors in relationship to experimentally induced colitis.
	Stornes, Tor, Dr. philos.	Socio-moral behaviour in sport. An investigation of perceptions of sportspersonship in handball related to important factors of socio-moral influence.
	Mæhle, Magne, Dr. philos.	Re-inventing the child in family therapy: An investigation of the relevance and applicability of theory and research in child development for family therapy involving children.
	Kobbeltvedt, Therese, Dr. psychol.	Risk and feelings: A field approach.
2004 H	Thomsen, Tormod, Dr. psychol.	Localization of attention in the brain.
	Løberg, Else-Marie, Dr. psychol.	Functional laterality and attention modulation in schizophrenia: Effects of clinical variables.
	Kyrkjebø, Jane Mikkelsen, Dr. philos.	Learning to improve: Integrating continuous quality improvement learning into nursing education.
	Laumann, Karin, Dr. psychol.	Restorative and stress-reducing effects of natural environments: Experiencal, behavioural and cardiovascular indices.
	Holgersen, Helge, PhD	Mellom oss - Essay i relasjonell psykoanalyse.
2005 V	Hetland, Hilde, Dr. psychol.	Leading to the extraordinary? Antecedents and outcomes of transformational leadership.
	Iversen, Anette Christine, Dr. philos.	Social differences in health behaviour: the motivational role of perceived control and coping.
2005 H	Mathisen, Gro Ellen, PhD	Climates for creativity and innovation: Definitions, measurement, predictors and consequences.
	Sævi, Tone, Dr. philos.	Seeing disability pedagogically – The lived experience of disability in the pedagogical encounter.
	Wiium, Nora, PhD	Intrapersonal factors, family and school norms: combined and interactive influence on adolescent smoking behaviour.
	Kanagaratnam, Pushpa, PhD	Subjective and objective correlates of Posttraumatic Stress in immigrants/refugees exposed to political violence.
	Larsen, Torill M. B. , PhD	Evaluating principals` and teachers` implementation of Second Step. A case study of four Norwegian primary schools.
	Bancila, Delia, PhD	Psychosocial stress and distress among Romanian adolescents and adults.
2006 V	Hillestad, Torgeir Martin, Dr. philos.	Normalitet og avvik. Forutsetninger for et objektivt psykopatologisk avviksbegrep. En psykologisk, sosial, erkjennelsesteoretisk og teorihistorisk framstilling.
	Nordanger, Dag Øystein, Dr. psychol.	Psychosocial discourses and responses to political violence in post-war Tigray, Ethiopia.

	Rimol, Lars Morten, PhD	Behavioral and fMRI studies of auditory laterality and speech sound processing.
	Krumsvik, Rune Johan, Dr. philos.	ICT in the school. ICT-initiated school development in lower secondary school.
	Norman, Elisabeth, Dr. psychol.	Gut feelings and unconscious thought: An exploration of fringe consiousness in implicit cognition.
	Israel, K Pravin, Dr. psychol.	Parent involvement in the mental health care of children and adolescents. Emperical studies from clinical care setting.
	Glasø, Lars, PhD	Affects and emotional regulation in leader-subordinate relationships.
	Knutsen, Ketil, Dr. philos.	HISTORIER UNGDOM LEVER – En studie av hvordan ungdommer bruker historie for å gjøre livet meningsfullt.
	Matthiesen, Stig Berge, PhD	Bullying at work. Antecedents and outcomes.
2006 H	Gramstad, Arne, PhD	Neuropsychological assessment of cognitive and emotional functioning in patients with epilepsy.
	Bendixen, Mons, PhD	Antisocial behaviour in early adolescence: Methodological and substantive issues.
	Mrumbi, Khalifa Maulid, PhD	Parental illness and loss to HIV/AIDS as experienced by AIDS orphans aged between 12-17 years from Temeke District, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: A study of the children's psychosocial health and coping responses.
	Hetland, Jørn, Dr. psychol.	The nature of subjective health complaints in adolescence: Dimensionality, stability, and psychosocial predictors
	Kakoko, Deodatus Conatus Vitalis, PhD	Voluntary HIV counselling and testing service uptake among primary school teachers in Mwanza, Tanzania: assessment of socio-demographic, psychosocial and socio-cognitive aspects
	Mykletun, Arnstein, Dr. psychol.	Mortality and work-related disability as long-term consequences of anxiety and depression: Historical cohort designs based on the HUNT-2 study
	Sivertsen, Børge, PhD	Insomnia in older adults. Consequences, assessment and treatment.
2007 V	Singhammer, John, Dr. philos.	Social conditions from before birth to early adulthood – the influence on health and health behaviour
	Janvin, Carmen Ani Cristea, PhD	Cognitive impairment in patients with Parkinson's disease: profiles and implications for prognosis
	Braarud, Hanne Cecilie, Dr.psychol.	Infant regulation of distress: A longitudinal study of transactions between mothers and infants
	Tveito, Torill Helene, PhD	Sick Leave and Subjective Health Complaints
	Magnussen, Liv Heide, PhD	Returning disability pensioners with back pain to work

	Thuen, Elin Marie, Dr.philos.	Learning environment, students' coping styles and emotional and behavioural problems. A study of Norwegian secondary school students.
	Solberg, Ole Asbjørn, PhD	Peacekeeping warriors – A longitudinal study of Norwegian peacekeepers in Kosovo
2007 H	Søreide, Gunn Elisabeth, Dr.philos.	Narrative construction of teacher identity
	Svensen, Erling, PhD	WORK & HEALTH. Cognitive Activation Theory of Stress applied in an organisational setting.
	Øverland, Simon Nygaard, PhD	Mental health and impairment in disability benefits. Studies applying linkages between health surveys and administrative registries.
	Eichele, Tom, PhD	Electrophysiological and Hemodynamic Correlates of Expectancy in Target Processing
	Børhaug, Kjetil, Dr.philos.	Oppseding til demokrati. Ein studie av politisk oppseding i norsk skule.
	Eikeland, Thorleif, Dr.philos.	Om å vokse opp på barnehjem og på sykehus. En undersøkelse av barnehjemsbarns opplevelser på barnehjem sammenholdt med sanatoriebarns beskrivelse av langvarige sykehusopphold – og et forsøk på forklaring.
	Wadel, Carl Cato, Dr.philos.	Medarbeidersamhandling og medarbeiderledelse i en lagbasert organisasjon
	Vinje, Hege Forbech, PhD	Thriving despite adversity: Job engagement and self-care among community nurses
	Noort, Maurits van den, PhD	Working memory capacity and foreign language acquisition
2008 V	Breivik, Kyrre, Dr.psychol.	The Adjustment of Children and Adolescents in Different Post-Divorce Family Structures. A Norwegian Study of Risks and Mechanisms.
	Johnsen, Grethe E., PhD	Memory impairment in patients with posttraumatic stress disorder
	Sætrevik, Bjørn, PhD	Cognitive Control in Auditory Processing
	Carvalhosa, Susana Fonseca, PhD	Prevention of bullying in schools: an ecological model
2008 H	Brønnick, Kolbjørn Selvåg	Attentional dysfunction in dementia associated with Parkinson's disease.
	Posserud, Maj-Britt Rocio	Epidemiology of autism spectrum disorders
	Haug, Ellen	Multilevel correlates of physical activity in the school setting
	Skjerve, Arvid	Assessing mild dementia – a study of brief cognitive tests.

	Kjønniksen, Lise	The association between adolescent experiences in physical activity and leisure time physical activity in adulthood: a ten year longitudinal study
	Gundersen, Hilde	The effects of alcohol and expectancy on brain function
	Omvik, Siri	Insomnia – a night and day problem
2009 V	Molde, Helge	Pathological gambling: prevalence, mechanisms and treatment outcome.
	Foss, Else	Den omsorgsfulle væremåte. En studie av voksnes væremåte i forhold til barn i barnehagen.
	Westrheim, Kariane	Education in a Political Context: A study of Konwledge Processes and Learning Sites in the PKK.
	Wehling, Eike	Cognitive and olfactory changes in aging
	Wangberg, Silje C.	Internet based interventions to support health behaviours: The role of self-efficacy.
	Nielsen, Morten B.	Methodological issues in research on workplace bullying. Operationalisations, measurements and samples.
	Sandu, Anca Larisa	MRI measures of brain volume and cortical complexity in clinical groups and during development.
	Guribye, Eugene	Refugees and mental health interventions
	Sørensen, Lin	Emotional problems in inattentive children – effects on cognitive control functions.
	Tjomsland, Hege E.	Health promotion with teachers. Evaluation of the Norwegian Network of Health Promoting Schools: Quantitative and qualitative analyses of predisposing, reinforcing and enabling conditions related to teacher participation and program sustainability.
	Helleve, Ingrid	Productive interactions in ICT supported communities of learners
2009 H	Skorpen, Aina Øye, Christine	Dagliglivet i en psykiatrisk institusjon: En analyse av miljøterapeutiske praksiser
	Andreassen, Cecilie Schou	WORKAHOLISM – Antecedents and Outcomes
	Stang, Ingun	Being in the same boat: An empowerment intervention in breast cancer self-help groups
	Sequeira, Sarah Dorothee Dos Santos	The effects of background noise on asymmetrical speech perception
	Kleiven, Jo, dr.philos.	The Lillehammer scales: Measuring common motives for vacation and leisure behavior
	Jónsdóttir, Guðrún	Dubito ergo sum? Ni jenter møter naturfaglig kunnskap.
	Hove, Oddbjørn	Mental health disorders in adults with intellectual disabilities - Methods of assessment and prevalence of mental health disorders and problem behaviour
	Wageningen, Heidi Karin van	The role of glutamate on brain function

	Bjørkvik, Jofrid	God nok? Selvaktelse og interpersonlig fungering hos pasienter innen psykisk helsevern: Forholdet til diagnoser, symptomer og behandlingsutbytte
	Andersson, Martin	A study of attention control in children and elderly using a forced-attention dichotic listening paradigm
	Almås, Aslaug Grov	Teachers in the Digital Network Society: Visions and Realities. A study of teachers' experiences with the use of ICT in teaching and learning.
	Ulvik, Marit	Lærerutdanning som danning? Tre stemmer i diskusjonen
2010 V	Skår, Randi	Læringsprosesser i sykepleieres profesjonsutøvelse. En studie av sykepleieres læringserfaringer.
	Roald, Knut	Kvalitetsvurdering som organisasjonslæring mellom skole og skoleeigar
	Lunde, Linn-Heidi	Chronic pain in older adults. Consequences, assessment and treatment.
	Danielsen, Anne Grete	Perceived psychosocial support, students' self-reported academic initiative and perceived life satisfaction
	Hysing, Mari	Mental health in children with chronic illness
	Olsen, Olav Kjellevold	Are good leaders moral leaders? The relationship between effective military operational leadership and morals
	Riese, Hanne	Friendship and learning. Entrepreneurship education through mini-enterprises.
	Holthe, Asle	Evaluating the implementation of the Norwegian guidelines for healthy school meals: A case study involving three secondary schools
H	Hauge, Lars Johan	Environmental antecedents of workplace bullying: A multi-design approach
	Bjørkelo, Brita	Whistleblowing at work: Antecedents and consequences
	Reme, Silje Endresen	Common Complaints – Common Cure? Psychiatric comorbidity and predictors of treatment outcome in low back pain and irritable bowel syndrome
	Helland, Wenche Andersen	Communication difficulties in children identified with psychiatric problems
	Beneventi, Harald	Neuronal correlates of working memory in dyslexia
	Thygesen, Elin	Subjective health and coping in care-dependent old persons living at home
	Aanes, Mette Marthinussen	Poor social relationships as a threat to belongingness needs. Interpersonal stress and subjective health complaints: Mediating and moderating factors.
	Anker, Morten Gustav	Client directed outcome informed couple therapy

	Bull, Torill	Combining employment and child care: The subjective well-being of single women in Scandinavia and in Southern Europe
	Viig, Nina Grieg	Tilrettelegging for læreres deltakelse i helsefremmende arbeid. En kvalitativ og kvantitativ analyse av sammenhengen mellom organisatoriske forhold og læreres deltakelse i utvikling og implementering av Europeisk Nettverk av Helsefremmende Skoler i Norge
	Wolff, Katharina	To know or not to know? Attitudes towards receiving genetic information among patients and the general public.
	Ogden, Terje, dr.philos.	Familiebasert behandling av alvorlige atferdsproblemer blant barn og ungdom. Evaluering og implementering av evidensbaserte behandlingsprogrammer i Norge.
	Solberg, Mona Elin	Self-reported bullying and victimisation at school: Prevalence, overlap and psychosocial adjustment.
2011 V	Bye, Hege Høivik	Self-presentation in job interviews. Individual and cultural differences in applicant self-presentation during job interviews and hiring managers' evaluation
	Notelaers, Guy	Workplace bullying. A risk control perspective.
	Moltu, Christian	Being a therapist in difficult therapeutic impasses. A hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of skilled psychotherapists' experiences, needs, and strategies in difficult therapies ending well.
	Myrseth, Helga	Pathological Gambling - Treatment and Personality Factors
	Schanche, Elisabeth	From self-criticism to self-compassion. An empirical investigation of hypothesized change prosesses in the Affect Phobia Treatment Model of short-term dynamic psychotherapy for patients with Cluster C personality disorders.
	Våpenstad, Eystein Victor, dr.philos.	Det tempererte nærvær. En teoretisk undersøkelse av psykoterapautens subjektivitet i psykoanalyse og psykoanalytisk psykoterapi.
	Haukebø, Kristin	Cognitive, behavioral and neural correlates of dental and intra-oral injection phobia. Results from one treatment and one fMRI study of randomized, controlled design.
	Harris, Anette	Adaptation and health in extreme and isolated environments. From 78°N to 75°S.
	Bjørknes, Ragnhild	Parent Management Training-Oregon Model: intervention effects on maternal practice and child behavior in ethnic minority families
	Mamen, Asgeir	Aspects of using physical training in patients with substance dependence and additional mental distress
	Espevik, Roar	Expert teams: Do shared mental models of team members make a difference
	Haara, Frode Olav	Unveiling teachers' reasons for choosing practical activities in mathematics teaching

2011 H	Hauge, Hans Abraham	How can employee empowerment be made conducive to both employee health and organisation performance? An empirical investigation of a tailor-made approach to organisation learning in a municipal public service organisation.
	Melkevik, Ole Rogstad	Screen-based sedentary behaviours: pastimes for the poor, inactive and overweight? A cross-national survey of children and adolescents in 39 countries.
	Vøllestad, Jon	Mindfulness-based treatment for anxiety disorders. A quantitative review of the evidence, results from a randomized controlled trial, and a qualitative exploration of patient experiences.
	Tolo, Astrid	Hvordan blir lærerkompetanse konstruert? En kvalitativ studie av PPU-studenters kunnskapsutvikling.
	Saus, Evelyn-Rose	Training effectiveness: Situation awareness training in simulators
	Nordgreen, Tine	Internet-based self-help for social anxiety disorder and panic disorder. Factors associated with effect and use of self-help.
	Munkvold, Linda Helen	Oppositional Defiant Disorder: Informant discrepancies, gender differences, co-occuring mental health problems and neurocognitive function.
	Christiansen, Øivin	Når barn plasseres utenfor hjemmet: beslutninger, forløp og relasjoner. Under barnevernets (ved)tak.
	Brunborg, Geir Scott	Conditionability and Reinforcement Sensitivity in Gambling Behaviour
	Hystad, Sigurd William	Measuring Psychological Resiliency: Validation of an Adapted Norwegian Hardiness Scale
2012 V	Roness, Dag	Hvorfor bli lærer? Motivasjon for utdanning og utøving.
	Fjermestad, Krister Westlye	The therapeutic alliance in cognitive behavioural therapy for youth anxiety disorders
	Jenssen, Eirik Sørnes	Tilpasset opplæring i norsk skole: politikeres, skoleledereres og læreres handlingsvalg
	Saksvik-Lehouillier, Ingvild	Shift work tolerance and adaptation to shift work among offshore workers and nurses
	Johansen, Venke Frederike	Når det intime blir offentlig. Om kvinners åpenhet om brystkreft og om markedsføring av brystkreftsaken.
	Herheim, Rune	Pupils collaborating in pairs at a computer in mathematics learning: investigating verbal communication patterns and qualities
	Vie, Tina Løkke	Cognitive appraisal, emotions and subjective health complaints among victims of workplace bullying: A stress-theoretical approach
	Jones, Lise Øen	Effects of reading skills, spelling skills and accompanying efficacy beliefs on participation in education. A study in Norwegian prisons.

2012 H	Danielsen, Yngvild Sørebø	Childhood obesity – characteristics and treatment. Psychological perspectives.
	Horverak, Jøri Gytre	Sense or sensibility in hiring processes. Interviewee and interviewer characteristics as antecedents of immigrant applicants' employment probabilities. An experimental approach.
	Jøsendal, Ola	Development and evaluation of BE smokeFREE, a school-based smoking prevention program
	Osnes, Berge	Temporal and Posterior Frontal Involvement in Auditory Speech Perception
	Drageset, Sigrunn	Psychological distress, coping and social support in the diagnostic and preoperative phase of breast cancer
	Aasland, Merethe Schanke	Destructive leadership: Conceptualization, measurement, prevalence and outcomes
	Bakibinga, Pauline	The experience of job engagement and self-care among Ugandan nurses and midwives
	Skogen, Jens Christoffer	Foetal and early origins of old age health. Linkage between birth records and the old age cohort of the Hordaland Health Study (HUSK)
	Leversen, Ingrid	Adolescents' leisure activity participation and their life satisfaction: The role of demographic characteristics and psychological processes
	Hanss, Daniel	Explaining sustainable consumption: Findings from cross-sectional and intervention approaches
	Rød, Per Arne	Barn i klem mellom foreldrekonflikter og samfunnsmessig beskyttelse
2013 V	Mentzoni, Rune Aune	Structural Characteristics in Gambling
	Knudsen, Ann Kristin	Long-term sickness absence and disability pension award as consequences of common mental disorders. Epidemiological studies using a population-based health survey and official ill health benefit registries.
	Strand, Mari	Emotional information processing in recurrent MDD
	Veseth, Marius	Recovery in bipolar disorder. A reflexive-collaborative exploration of the lived experiences of healing and growth when battling a severe mental illness
	Mæland, Silje	Sick leave for patients with severe subjective health complaints. Challenges in general practice.
	Mjaaland, Thera	At the frontiers of change? Women and girls' pursuit of education in north-western Tigray, Ethiopia
	Odéen, Magnus	Coping at work. The role of knowledge and coping expectancies in health and sick leave.
	Hynninen, Kia Minna Johanna	Anxiety, depression and sleep disturbance in chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Associations, prevalence and effect of psychological treatment.
	Flo, Elisabeth	Sleep and health in shift working nurses

	Aasen, Elin Margrethe	From paternalism to patient participation? The older patients undergoing hemodialysis, their next of kin and the nurses: a discursive perspective on perception of patient participation in dialysis units
	Ekornås, Belinda	Emotional and Behavioural Problems in Children: Self-perception, peer relationships, and motor abilities
	Corbin, J. Hope	North-South Partnerships for Health: Key Factors for Partnership Success from the Perspective of the KIWAKKUKI
	Birkeland, Marianne Skogbrott	Development of global self-esteem: The transition from adolescence to adulthood
2013 H	Gianella-Malca, Camila	Challenges in Implementing the Colombian Constitutional Court's Health-Care System Ruling of 2008
	Hovland, Anders	Panic disorder – Treatment outcomes and psychophysiological concomitants
	Mortensen, Øystein	The transition to parenthood – Couple relationships put to the test
	Årdal, Guro	Major Depressive Disorder – a Ten Year Follow-up Study. Inhibition, Information Processing and Health Related Quality of Life
	Johansen, Rino Bandlitz	The impact of military identity on performance in the Norwegian armed forces
	Bøe, Tormod	Socioeconomic Status and Mental Health in Children and Adolescents
2014 V	Nordmo, Ivar	Gjennom nåløyet – studenters læringserfaringer i psykologutdanningen
	Dovran, Anders	Childhood Trauma and Mental Health Problems in Adult Life
	Hegelstad, Wenche ten Velden	Early Detection and Intervention in Psychosis: A Long-Term Perspective
	Urheim, Ragnar	Forståelse av pasientaggresjon og forklaringer på nedgang i voldsrate ved Regional sikkerhetsavdeling, Sandviken sykehus
	Kinn, Liv Grethe	Round-Trips to Work. Qualitative studies of how persons with severe mental illness experience work integration.
	Rød, Anne Marie Kinn	Consequences of social defeat stress for behaviour and sleep. Short-term and long-term assessments in rats.
	Nygård, Merethe	Schizophrenia – Cognitive Function, Brain Abnormalities, and Cannabis Use
	Tjora, Tore	Smoking from adolescence through adulthood: the role of family, friends, depression and socioeconomic status. Predictors of smoking from age 13 to 30 in the "The Norwegian Longitudinal Health Behaviour Study" (NLHB)
	Vangsnes, Vigdis	The Dramaturgy and Didactics of Computer Gaming. A Study of a Medium in the Educational Context of Kindergartens.

	Nordahl, Kristin Berg	Early Father-Child Interaction in a Father-Friendly Context: Gender Differences, Child Outcomes, and Protective Factors related to Fathers' Parenting Behaviors with One-year-olds
2014 H	Sandvik, Asle Makoto	Psychopathy – the heterogenety of the construct
	Skotheim, Siv	Maternal emotional distress and early mother-infant interaction: Psychological, social and nutritional contributions
	Halleland, Helene Barone	Executive Functioning in adult Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). From basic mechanisms to functional outcome.
	Halvorsen, Kirsti Vindal	Partnerskap i lærerutdanning, sett fra et økologisk perspektiv
	Solbue, Vibeke	Dialogen som visker ut kategorier. En studie av hvilke erfaringer innvandrerungdommer og norskfødte med innvandrerforeldre har med videregående skole. Hva forteller ungdommenes erfaringer om videregående skoles håndtering av etniske ulikheter?
	Kvalevaag, Anne Lise	Fathers' mental health and child development. The predictive value of fathers' psychological distress during pregnancy for the social, emotional and behavioural development of their children
	Sandal, Ann Karin	Ungdom og utdanningsval. Om elevar sine opplevingar av val og overgangsprosessar.
	Haug, Thomas	Predictors and moderators of treatment outcome from high- and low-intensity cognitive behavioral therapy for anxiety disorders. Association between patient and process factors, and the outcome from guided self-help, stepped care, and face-to-face cognitive behavioral therapy.
	Sjølie, Hege	Experiences of Members of a Crisis Resolution Home Treatment Team. Personal history, professional role and emotional support in a CRHT team.
	Falkenberg, Liv Eggset	Neuronal underpinnings of healthy and dysfunctional cognitive control
	Mrdalj, Jelena	The early life condition. Importance for sleep, circadian rhythmicity, behaviour and response to later life challenges
	Hesjedal, Elisabeth	Tverrprofesjonelt samarbeid mellom skule og barnevern: Kva kan støtte utsette barn og unge?
2015 V	Hauken, May Aasebø	«*The cancer treatment was only half the work!»* A Mixed-Method Study of Rehabilitation among Young Adult Cancer Survivors
	Ryland, Hilde Katrin	Social functioning and mental health in children: the influence of chronic illness and intellectual function
	Rønsen, Anne Kristin	Vurdering som profesjonskompetanse. Refleksjonsbasert utvikling av læreres kompetanse i formativ vurdering

	Hoff, Helge Andreas	Thinking about Symptoms of Psychopathy in Norway: Content Validation of the Comprehensive Assessment of Psychopathic Personality (CAPP) Model in a Norwegian Setting
	Schmid, Marit Therese	Executive Functioning in recurrent- and first episode Major Depressive Disorder. Longitudinal studies
	Sand, Liv	Body Image Distortion and Eating Disturbances in Children and Adolescents
	Matanda, Dennis Juma	Child physical growth and care practices in Kenya: Evidence from Demographic and Health Surveys
	Amugsi, Dickson Abanimi	Child care practices, resources for care, and nutritional outcomes in Ghana: Findings from Demographic and Health Surveys
	Jakobsen, Hilde	The good beating: Social norms supporting men's partner violence in Tanzania
	Sagoe, Dominic	Nonmedical anabolic-androgenic steroid use: Prevalence, attitudes, and social perception
	Eide, Helene Marie Kjærgård	Narrating the relationship between leadership and learning outcomes. A study of public narratives in the Norwegian educational sector.
2015 H	Wubs, Annegreet Gera	Intimate partner violence among adolescents in South Africa and Tanzania
	Hjelmervik, Helene Susanne	Sex and sex-hormonal effects on brain organization of fronto-parietal networks
	Dahl, Berit Misund	The meaning of professional identity in public health nursing
	Røykenes, Kari	Testangst hos sykepleierstudenter: «Alternativ behandling»
	Bless, Josef Johann	The smartphone as a research tool in psychology. Assessment of language lateralization and training of auditory attention.
	Løvvik, Camilla Margrethe Sigvaldsen	Common mental disorders and work participation – the role of return-to-work expectations
	Lehmann, Stine	Mental Disorders in Foster Children: A Study of Prevalence, Comorbidity, and Risk Factors
	Knapstad, Marit	Psychological factors in long-term sickness absence: the role of shame and social support. Epidemiological studies based on the Health Assets Project.
2016 V	Kvestad, Ingrid	Biological risks and neurodevelopment in young North Indian children
	Sælør, Knut Tore	Hinderløyper, halmstrå og hengende snører. En kvalitativ studie av håp innenfor psykisk helse- og rusfeltet.
	Mellingen, Sonja	Alkoholbruk, partilfredshet og samlivsstatus. Før, inn i, og etter svangerskapet – korrelater eller konsekvenser?
	Thun, Eirunn	Shift work: negative consequences and protective factors

	Hilt, Line Torbjørnsen	The borderlands of educational inclusion. Analyses of inclusion and exclusion processes for minority language students
	Havnen, Audun	Treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder and the importance of assessing clinical effectiveness
	Slåtten, Hilde	Gay-related name-calling among young adolescents. Exploring the importance of the context.
	Ree, Eline	Staying at work. The role of expectancies and beliefs in health and workplace interventions.
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Graphic design: Communication Division, UiB / Print: Skipnes Kommunikasjon AS

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ISBN: 9788230866405 (print)
9788230850411 (PDF)