

**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**

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We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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

Title:

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Abstract

This qualitative study aims to explore how fathers in prolonged post-divorce conflict construct their parenting agency and position their child in relation to their view of conflict-related threats. Eight divorced fathers were interviewed, with experience of, on average, seven years of high conflict after separation. A reflective thematic design supplemented with positioning theory was used to analyze the fathers' responses. Drawing on positioning theory, the fathers' agency emerged in the analyses from three dominant storylines or world manifestations of post-divorce dangers. Fathers either acted as (1) *heroic saviors* in a polluted realm storyline where they positioned their children as victims that need to be saved from the dangers of impurity, (2) *jungle guides* in the wild nature storyline where they positioned their children as trainees of survival skills to deal with intrusive events and ever present post-divorce dangers, or (3) *beacons* in a foggy moor storyline where they re-positioned their own behavior to follow a self-clarifying routine so that their children would experience life in a less ambivalent, foggy and insecure manner. We argue that researchers and therapists would benefit from knowledge that captures the moral underpinnings of fathers' agency.

Keywords: fathers' agency, post-divorce conflict, qualitative research, positioning theory

Introduction

When family therapists listen to a high-conflict father's experience of post-divorce family life, they are often presented with frozen narratives about victimization and struggles with "the

troublesome other” parent (Stokkebekk et al., 2021). However, the stories of how fathers navigate family life in relation to how they view their child(ren) are seldom told. The lack of fathers’ experiences and views also applies to qualitative research about post-divorce families. As noted by Forsberg and Autonen-Vaaranemi (2019, p. 24), “divorce has mainly been studied from the viewpoint of women and children to the relative neglect of the position or experiences of fathers”. In addition, Campo et al. (2021, p. 291) argue that “this empirical gap contributes to a truncated understanding of post-separation familial relationships and practices, and limits the conceptualization of post-separation fathering”. This paper is an effort to add to the knowledge of how post-divorce fathers construct their presence and agency in the lives of their children, in relation to threats that come from prolonged postdivorce conflict.

Contemporary ideas of fatherhood have shifted in many western societies from an emphasis on a breadwinner role to a growing expectation and valuing of the father’s caregiving activity in cohabiting and separated families (Campo et al., 2021). These changes in fathering over the last decades have led to the greater involvement of fathers in their children’s upbringing. There remain, however, discussions over the extent to which the discursive shifts in fathering ideals (as equals to mothers) are evident in fathers’ caring practices (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019). Nevertheless, the new ideal of the “involved” father and the move towards gender equality in post-separation parenting has increased the expectations, complexity and pressure of co-parenthood (Sclater & Piper, 2019). The repositioning of fathers as equals to mothers has resulted in a shift where a shared custody arrangement after separation is now the norm in many western societies, and to an increase in legal disputes and the need for professional aid in conflict resolutions (Lawick & Visser, 2015). Post-separation fathering is thus a “a complex relational and moral process, shaped deeply but not straightforwardly by gendered patterns of caring for children” (Philip, 2014, p.

220). In other words, separation for most fathers involves a process of moral reorientation and transformation, where some fathers feel more attentive and available to children (without a cohabiting co-parent) and become more involved, while other fathers become less involved (Koster & Castro-Martín, 2021). Fathers who are more involved prior to separation tend to have more frequent contact after separation (Haux & Platt, 2021). Although most separated parents manage to establish a working co-parenting relationship, it is estimated that 10–15% of parents have unresolved conflicts that can be corrosive, highly destructive, and dangerous to family health (Smyth & Moloney, 2019). They are not able to establish a cooperative relationship, remain disengaged in everyday family life and engage in abrupt episodes of conflict, mediation or litigation concerning disagreements about their children (Cao et al., 2022). Parental distress among fathers from poor-quality interparental relationships may spill over to undermine parent–child relationships (Camisasca et al., 2019). In theorizing about prolonged post-divorce family conflicts, the main focus has often been on professional descriptions and typologies of co-parenting relationships and conflict dynamics, through terms such as high-conflict (Anderson et al., 2010), or of parents that are identified by interparental hatred (Smyth & Moloney, 2017).

Yet, many qualitative researchers have argued for a need to privilege knowledge that is based on parents’ meaning making, rather than theorizing that is based on a view of post-divorce conflict challenges as reflective of intrapersonal or parental pathology (Bertelsen, 2021; Treloar, 2018). In other words, there is a need to develop contextualized knowledge “that better reflect[s] the challenges, complexities and, more importantly, the lived experiences and support needs of parents who navigate this complex and contested terrain” (Treloar, 2018, p. 342). Parents’ experiences of prolonged post-divorce conflict often involve concerns about children and constant distrust of the other parent that is highly stressful. Bergman and Rejmer (2017) reported that concern over a lack of ability to care for the child

was the most common theme evident in high-conflict cases, followed by co-parenting difficulties, violence and abuse. In these circumstances the child is found to be “everywhere and nowhere in the parents’ minds” (Target et al., 2017). That is, the parents’ intense preoccupation with the acrimonious relationship compromises their capacity to focus on the child’s experience, “so the real child is at times unintentionally “nowhere” in their minds” (Target et al., 2017). Parenting stress and a lack of agency are a threat to parenting quality and the well-being of children (Holt, 2016).

Fathers’ Agency, Positioning Power and Moral Emotions

Parental agency or agency as a father refers to a feeling of presence, influence, and reciprocity in the lives of children (Amundson & Short, 2018). However, being faced with prolonged post-divorce conflict often promotes an identity as a father that is closer to one of victimization, the opposite end on a continuum of agency. In our use of agency, the concept should be understood as one that highlights the fathers’ own constructs, performative accounts and justifications of agency while being entangled in family conflict. Thus, our utilization of agency should not be misinterpreted as a psychological construct that elicits effective or “normative good parenting” that promotes healthy family adjustment. This is in line with Davies (1990), who argues that it is not whether individuals can have or do not have agency, but whether there is a choice which can “provide 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 construct their children’s needs in relation to the threats that children are exposed to from conflict-related challenges. Our present study of fathers’ agency relies on positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) and how moral emotions guide parents (Rozin et al., 1999). Positioning theory indicates how a social life consists of moral rights and duties, that provide subject positions for people to take up. Harré et al. (2009,

p. 5) propose that positioning theory is concerned with “revealing the implicit and explicit patterns of reasoning that are realized in the way people act toward others”. Positioning theory consists of a triad of concepts (storyline/positions/speech acts). A storyline is a loose cluster of narrative conventions that gives directions to what kinds of positions are available for parents to take up vis à vis their child or vis à vis their co-parent (Davies & Harré, 1990). Positioning involves the use of categories to signify that a categorized person belongs to one category and not another. Speech acts refer to the fact that an utterance or action can have different effects depending on how it is interpreted. When fathers talk about child-related challenges, it could be heard as either pleading (a child in need of protection) or as an expression of resentment (e.g., accusations concerning their co-parent) (Stokkebekk et al., 2021). Family life consists of a moral order where parents have a duty to care for their child and children have the right to care. Consequently, when fathers talk about child and parenting concerns, they also address their moral obligations as fathers to attend to these needs. A father’s sense of parenting agency is intricately connected to positioning power, meaning whether he is successful in negotiating and holding on to a position as a father vis à vis the other parent that secures an independent influence over the child.

Emotions play a central role in how parents position themselves and express a moral stance, i.e., in a display of anger if being hindered (by the other parent) in performing their self-designated duties as a parent (Benson, 2003). While there are many reasons for former partners’ anger toward one another, including ongoing pain, longing, and grief over the end of their romantic relationship (Emery, 2011), strong negative emotions (e.g., contempt, anger, disgust) play an important role in defending boundaries to one’s desirable moral order (Benson, 2003; Rozin et al., 2016) such as one’s preferred position as a parent. Upholding moral order (e.g., help children to overcome life challenges) might “give rise to positive self-conscious emotions like pride” (Benson, 2003, p. 75).

The aim of the current study is to gain insight into how separated fathers in a prolonged conflict situation perform parental agency by positioning themselves (as an act of self-positioning) and their children (as an act of other-positioning) in specific kinds of storylines. Being a parent in prolonged conflict may promote frozen storylines and positions that “tempt the speaker [interviewee] into compelling narratives that fit so comfortably that they may even conceal possibilities of [agency] choice” (Tan & Moghaddam, 1995, p. 391).

The following research questions are explored:

1. What storylines of parental agency emerge when separated fathers talk about their children who are in distress from the conflict?
2. 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?
3. How do these storylines legitimize fathers’ own subject positions and actions towards their children and ex-partner?

Methods

Qualitative Design

In this qualitative study we use positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990), within the paradigm of social constructionism (McNamee & Hosking, 2012) to explore fathers agency towards their children during prolonged parenting conflict. This study is part of a larger PhD study about postdivorce families with parents in prolonged conflicts (Stokkebekk, 2022) where the subject positions of children (Stokkebekk et al., 2019) and the parallel self- and other positionings of co-parents have been explored (Stokkebekk et al., 2021). 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 participants’ identities, names have been altered and the gender or age of the children are not described. The fathers

were recruited from a child inclusive and resilience oriented family therapy program(Huglen et al., 2020) hosted by a family counselling agency in Norway, with the aim of strengthening children and their separated parents in prolonged conflicts. Parents who sought therapy were assessed by a team of family therapists in individual interviews with the following inclusion criteria: (1) parents who have experienced conflict or problems in co-parenting more than two years after separation; (2) are unsuccessful in resolving their post-divorce conflict or co-parenting difficulties in attending court, therapy, or mediation services; and (3) where one or both parents view their current co-parent relationship as either conflictive, in a deadlock, distressful or unsolvable. Seventeen families were invited to be part of a doctoral study, and 14 parents (eight fathers and six mothers) gave their consent and were interviewed during 2017 and 2018 by the first author. All interviews were conducted prior to family therapy engagement. For the purpose of this paper, we focus on the interviews that were conducted with the eight fathers.

Sample

The eight fathers who were interviewed had 16 biological children (six boys and 10 girls) altogether. The children (both genders) were on average 13 years old (10–16). The fathers had full-time custody (four children), a shared custody arrangement (five children) or contact with their children every other weekend or less (seven children). In seven of the eight families, there were siblings over the age of nine and under the age of 16, and the siblings had different schedules 85% of the time. As is not uncommon in Norway (Lyngstad et al., 2014), the younger children lived under joint custody, while the older children had changed arrangements to live mainly with one parent. Fathers reported that post-divorce conflict had lasted on average seven years past separation. All fathers had unsuccessfully tried to solve their cooperation difficulties in family mediation, court proceedings, with the aid of a child protection agency or in psychotherapy, etc. At the time of the interviews, most post-divorce

fathers (seven) had a new cohabiting partner or wife. Their new partner often had children from a previous relationship, and/or with their current partner.

Data Collection

The fathers were interviewed after admission to and before the outset of therapy. All interviews of the fathers were conducted by first author who also did individual interviews with children cf. (Stokkebekk et al., 2019) and ex-partners /co-parents (Stokkebekk et al., 2021) as part of a PhD research project (Stokkebekk, 2022). The interviews were conducted either at the participant's home or the family counselling office. We hoped that having a choice of interview setting would promote a feeling of safety, so that fathers would disclose their reflections about conflicted family life from a backstage position (Goffman, 1971). Each interview lasted from 60–90 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide was applied with open-ended questions regarding topics such as (a) descriptions of the family, (b) living arrangements, (c) family relations, (e) family strengths. In the interviews we posed questions such as: *What do you do to cope with the conflict as an adult and a parent? What does your child do to deal with/cope with conflict related challenges? What strategies/thoughts do you have about what your contribution is to support the child/adolescent?.* (see thesis for more details, Stokkebekk, 2022, p. appendix).

Data Analysis

In analyzing the interview transcripts, we applied a reflexive thematic-oriented approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019) supplemented with a discursive analysis from a positioning theory perspective (Päivinen & Holma, 2016).

First, all transcripts were read and reread without any attempts to analyze them by first author. During the next analytical stage, first author paid attention to the storylines the fathers enacted

while talking about how their children were affected by conflict-related challenges. In reading the transcripts, first author analytically asked *what themes emerge when fathers talk about their child as affected by challenges from family conflict*. The themes appearing in each transcript were coded as dominant storylines. The dominant storylines were subtracted and translated to English with an effort to clarify the self-positioning of fathers and their other-positioning of children. First author developed initial themes, which were developed further together with the second author in the later stages of analysis. In the last analytical step, we asked: *what positions do fathers take up in these dominant storylines and what kinds of subject positions do they then construct for their children (and ex-partners) in them?* Furthermore, we examined how these descriptions reflect on parental agency as “having positioning power over their children” and what kinds of legitimizing functions they serve for the actions and the subject positions that fathers take up. This final step offered insights that were useful in discussing what fathers’ descriptions of child distress meant for their position as an agentic father. First author suggested to use landscapes (and second author was familiar with the use of microcosmoses) to highlight the different context of threats that fathers experienced. The application of landscape metaphors can be characterized as standing in the middle of a continuum with the polarities of analytical rigor and analytical novelty/improvisation (Bøttcher et al., 2018, p. 33) This “analytical balancing” between evocative highlighting and detailed describing was under constant reflection in the analysis. At this stage, all authors gave their feedback about the applicability and trustworthiness of the themes.. Through the process, we became convinced that the use of the microcosmos metaphor efficiently deconstructed fathers’ emotional and moral despair and view of agency related to the dangers that surround children. Further methodological and analytical dilemmas is discussed at length in the PhD thesis (Stokkebekk, 2022, pp. 90-93).

Contributions and expert-positionings of authors

First author is an experienced family therapist/ family mediator and a PhD Candidate that was writing his final paper, at the time of the study. The paper is part of a PhD project, that evolved from a clinical interest in promoting resilience in postdivorce families in prolonged conflicts (Huglen et al., 2020) to an academic interest in exploring the self-positioning of children and parents in these circumstances. Second author, a sociologist was invited as an expert in the use of positioning theory in the qualitative analyses, and contributed in the analyzing of the interviews, conceptualization of themes and (re)wrote 20 % of the paper. Author 2 had no prior academic experience with the subject of parental conflict. Author 3, whom is a senior clinical psychologist/ family mediator was invited as an international expert on postdivorce families/parental conflict/family mediation. Third author contributed with input on conceptualizations (i.e. parental agency vs parental conflict) and how the paper could be contextualized in interaction with the knowledge base in the field of divorce/conflict resolution. Authors 4 and 5 are PhD supervisors who monitored the whole process of the paper with support, ideas, and feedback. The PhD supervisors contributed to all versions of the paper with their senior academic expertise in child and family social work, parental conflict, resilience, discourse psychology and from their experience in training master-level social workers. The conceptualization of the paper; to focus on fathers was done by first author after suggestions from one of the PhD supervisors (author 4).

Findings: Three storylines of Fathers' Agency and of Threats to Children

Below we will present three dominant storylines of parental agency that emerged when we analyzed eight interviews with fathers in prolonged conflict. They exemplify different storylines, “microcosmoses” and moral orders of post-divorce dangers that surround children and show how, in our data, fathers typically position their children and their own ethical stance in terms of parental agency. All storylines are presented with excerpts from the

interviews that demonstrate how fathers position themselves and their children and how agency is constructed.

1. Post-Divorce Dangers as Impurity, as in a Polluted Realm Storyline

Eirik (non-residential/shared custody father) describes his ex-partner as an overinvolved mother who is attentive to all the children's wants "if they have hurts or not". He other-positions his ex-partner as a mother who uncritically attends the children's wants and needs and self-positions himself as a father who is making appropriate decisions about their needs. In this way, he categorizes her along female stereotypes as undertaking emotional and uncritical mothering for the service of the children, as opposed to fathering, which he sees as rational, deliberate, and authoritative action. By referring to traditional gendered binaries, he positions his ex-partner's childrearing method in the category of passive and his own in the category of active:

It's pretty passive, there's not much going on (...). They can stay indoors a whole day and... watch tv and do gaming. They can have a whole day indoors, even if the weather is nice outside (...). And it's something that I'm not a fan of (Eirik, 661-664).

Eirik highlights always being worried about his ex-partner's incapacity as a parent. From the following excerpt we can read how Eirik also other-positions his ex-partner's new boyfriend in the category of passive and associates her and his passivity with multiple storylines and a lack of fulfilling responsibilities in them, such as taking care of the needs of the children, giving them a proper upbringing, and cleaning the house, as well as their energy levels and work ethics. He is concerned that his children are "on their own" in a polluted microcosmos that is entertainment-oriented, unclean, "sleepy", crowded by too many children and pets, and for these reasons dangerous:

[T]heir mother and her new boyfriend were in bed all day, sleeping. That was the impression I got while delivering, or picking up clothes or things like that at their place... The kids said that “he just lay there gaming” – kind off. And the mother, when the children are at school, or (...) on vacation (...) she will have to sleep during the day several hours, “charge” to get energy to do something. And when there are two parents who are so passive... I don’t think it is an ideal situation when they have [many] children, altogether. In addition to dogs and other pets that need attention (...) Then the daily house cleaning and things like that. All this made me stressed out and I worried about if things were OK. I tried to talk with my ex about it and I brought it up to her parents. My concerns were not taken seriously (...) and I went to the family counselling office, tried to arrange mediation meetings, but she didn’t attend. I had to go to the child protection services, and there was an investigation. And (...) they just thought that there is a conflict between me and her (Eirik, 701-719).

Positioning his children from the perspective of having insider knowledge as exposed to the pollution from an unresponsive family environment, Eirik draws on a logic of unsustainable development, pointing to a growing mismatch between the children’s needs and the lack of available resources. Simultaneously, by accusing his ex-partner and children’s stepfather, he self-positions himself in the eyes of the interviewer as morally superior as a parent. He presents the “dangers of the passive household” as facts and his children as victims who are at the mercy of these threatening circumstances.

He talks of parenting as an active process of “doing”, and in his view “lying in bed all day” is contrary to the obligations of parenthood. Moreover, he thinks that being a parent means raising children to be active. In navigating his concerns, he takes on two strategies of parental agency. First, in his efforts to intervene and make changes in the other household, he contacted the responsible parent, her family and then the authorities as a legitimate concerned

parent. He talks about child protection services' failures in "discovering" an "unclean and passive household" due to notified visits where his ex-partner and her family members are able to clean and "cover up". The following excerpt from the data demonstrates Eirik's second strategy of parental agency:

I'm telling them that it's really important not to sit in with a PC. Go outside, be with friends, be social! It's important to be with friends, right. If you just sit here with your computers, then you lose contact with friends. And while the years go by, you lose a lot of childhood, right? (Eirik, 859-858).

In his second strategy of parental strategy – in which he positions himself in the compensatory role – he stresses to his children the importance of doing outdoors activities as a counterforce and remedy to exposure to passivity (like staying indoors in front of a computer). In doing this he also repositions his children from being victims to agents with a responsibility for being active. Consequently, here he also challenges the mother's first-order positioning indoors and in relation to computer time and gaming. In his second-order positioning, he tries to re-position the children from social media-related interaction to face-to-face interaction with friends and towards a more active lifestyle. He links face-to-face interaction with friends to the active, right kind of social life and associates sitting inside with a computer as a passive activity that leads to a storyline of loneliness. His ultimate fear is that his children will end up having a lost childhood. In teaching them about the importance of being social and active, he other-positions them as pupils.

He thinks that as he is a non-residential parent, his ex-partner can ignore his concerns. He positions himself as powerless in relation to the mother's first-order positioning of a passive family life storyline. He thinks that the mother has more power in the positioning of the children, which he tries to challenge with his second-order positioning that redirects them towards active childhood. Although he is referring to his inability to change the family

circumstances in the other household, his actions demonstrate his efforts to make changes. He tries to create a new kind of moral order based on a more active lifestyle for his children. He is frightened that his children will become like their mother, passive beings “in a bubble” that is isolated from the world.

Eirik’s way of positioning his ex-partner and the threats to his children resemble the fairytale of (little Briar Rose) Sleeping Beauty (Grimm et al., 2014). Eirik’s concern about his children being consumed by passivity (go into a shell, sleep all day) creates a looming presence of danger and despair that is similar to a predicament or warning from a prophecy:

The biggest fear is that they [children] go after her [mother] in a way. And do the same, goes “into a shell” and just stay in an apartment. I have gathered that their mother does not have much network. She does not have any colleagues or contact with anyone (Eirik, 854-856).

From Eirik’s perspective, his children are under imminent threat of passivity, just like in the fairytale of Sleeping Beauty in which it is “foretold” that the newborn princess “shall not die but fall in to sleep for a hundred years”. The passive household of the mother represents impregnable surroundings, “the hedge of Thorns”, where everybody becomes inattentive and pacified. Unlike the fairytale, Eirik is a powerless “king” who lacks the authority and resources to invade into the danger and to eliminate the threat. Therefore, he tries to rescue his children with the help of authority figures (the court, child protection services). He justifies his action as morally necessary since he believes that the unclean and passive moral order at the mother’s home would eventually contaminate his children. Thus, with a feeling of being disgusted, he self-positions to himself a moral obligation to promote the storyline of purity with guided outdoor activities. Otherwise, his children could fall asleep in a dirty and toxic sleep from which they would never be able to wake up.

Gorm (full-time father) describes how his ex-partner, in contrast to himself, is unable to see the children's point of view and to prioritize their needs. He is positioning himself as a father who is providing "pure" parenting with attention to the children's subjective needs, in contrast to their mother, who he is other-positioning along a storyline of impurity (or inabilities) in regard to what he defines as vital parenting skills. "If she only had taken their perspective – seen what the kids wanted and listened to them ehh then it wouldn't have been a problem – instead the problem becomes bigger and bigger" (Gorm, 156-161). He further explains, "it is the little things, it is something missing. There's a relationship that's missing – what shall I say – see her kids in a proper way as from... from a mother's perspective" (Gorm, 189-192). He describes that both his children made an active choice to "leave" their mother. First his son Harald, as described in the following:

Harald took his bag and moved away from his mom. He didn't want to live there anymore. He didn't want anything more to do with her. Ehh, then it emerged that he had some challenges. Which I think was really tough. I had to shield him from his mother – without shall we say – to hand over his information to his mother and try to facilitate for things to be OK. That's probably why the level of conflict between their mother and me has become as high as it has become (Gorm, 41-48).

In the above quotation Gorm self-positions himself as a hero who provides safe and secure home for his son and daughter who need to "escape" from the conflict-ridden home of their mother. He justifies his action "to shield" his son from his mother as morally necessary, since he believes that their mother is unable to sort out the conflict with her son, causing a psychosocial risk that may contaminate his children. He is positioning himself as a full-time parent that in contrast to their mother will "facilitate for things to be OK" with his ability to understand and secure the children's subjective needs.

2. Ever-Present Post-Divorce Dangers, as in a Jungle Storyline

Vidar (shared custody father) talks about how his ex-partner has made unwarranted allegations about him being abusive. He has, however, always trusted the court system and other authorities, and that they would secure justice from allegations and secure further contact with his daughter. In parallel with this, he explains the importance of teaching his daughter Sofie awareness and coping skills to protect herself with the aid of authorities. Vidar describes his view as follows:

I informed her that I am not allowed...that “no parent is allowed to do anything bad to you” (...) It is important that she doesn’t think that “it is only dad who can help me on this journey here, and no one else”. “What if my dad treats me badly, then there’s no one to help me!” That would be terrible for her.

I: So, you kind of want her to feel confident that she can seek help, if necessary?

F: Yes. I think it is important for a child to understand; “your father, your mother, are always really important. But they can also be bad for you”.

Vidar’s experiences have taught him that there is a “post-divorce jungle” of false allegations of abuse and violence that threaten parent-child relation. He has a strong trust on authorities as he believes that they provide vital resources in coping with injustices in this jungle.

Likewise, he wants his daughter to know that even people who care about her may turn out to be bad in the case of which she needs to know how to act. He is, thus, preparing Sofie for a “post-divorce jungle” where she is prepared to seek social support if necessary if she finds that her parents are doing something that represents a threat to her and harm her.

Ivar positions his ex-partner into the category of intruder. He talks with an angered voice about how his children are being manipulated by an intrusive mother, regarding their living arrangements. He talks about how his children have different positioning powers to the threats from intrusiveness and of being manipulated. In describing his children, he positions

them psychologically in relation to their personal skills and attributes, rather than in relation to their roles as siblings or as related to age differences (hierarchy/ developmental capacities). He portrays his youngest daughter as a person who “tries to adapt to needs of others” as she is often proclaims that she has “two homes” and that she wants to spend an equal amount of time in each household. He also positions her as “loyal” [towards her father] since she is able to stand her ground while being pressured to spend more time with her mother. In contrast, Ivar positions her teenage daughter Hilda as “more unpredictable and self-centered”. He states that at first, Hilda wished to live full-time with him. For a period, he was able to convince her not to live with him full-time by arguing that it would engulf the conflict with his ex-partner and put more strain on the relationship with his new wife. This storyline did not go as he expected, as the next excerpt shows. Their current 50/50 (shared-custody) arrangement ended in him receiving an email from his daughter about her desire to live permanently with her mother. Ivar explains:

I think Hilda has kind of capitulated thinking that “I can’t stand up to my mom anymore, now I just have to give up” (...) that is, the survival instinct that has kicked in there. Which made her choose that solution. I said to her “it’s fine the way you want it. But when you make a decision like that you want to be with mom then I want to be involved earlier in the process, I don’t want to be informed in an email that your mom has authored. Because it’s not mom’s decision alone” (Ivar, 631-638).

In this excerpt, Ivar first positions his daughter as powerless and as a compliant victim, having no other choice than to surrender to her mother’s will. In describing “her surrendering” as a “survival instinct”, he explains it as the only healthy storyline to identify with. In this context, he also positions his daughter as an agent with influence and demands that she inform him about what is going on in her life so that he can use parental agency and also participate in the decision-making.

He characterizes his daughter's "in-between" position in the loyalty conflicts between her parents as reflecting the ever-present dangers of post-divorce life. He represents these dangers as "inevitable" and "natural", as forces that wrap his daughter into a moral order in which her life resembles a struggle in the wild or in the jungle.

Ivar describes his ex-partner as "having good intentions, but that she has been telling fairytales so long that she believes they are true". In this way, he categorizes his ex-partner as a liar without a moral awareness of doing something wrong. The acts of lying then become de-personalized manifestations of threats. In Ivar's way of describing how his ex-partner acts towards his children, the mother becomes positioned as a "lurking snake" and her ever-present intrusiveness and manipulation towards their children become represented as connoting the natural forces with which his children need to learn to get along.

He talks about how the children often catch their mother in a manipulative action, sending text messages from the children's phones to him so that he would think that the message is from one of the children, even though in reality it is from his ex-partner. The messages can be in a form such as "I don't want to be with you this weekend". The following excerpt exemplifies how Ivar deals with these kinds of misleading messages while he is referring to talks with his daughter:

"You sent me some messages this weekend ?!" "No?!", "Yes, you did I said", and showed her the messages on my phone. "No, she hadn't written them!" And then she started to cry and became very upset. So, I said: "Don't you worry about it, Astrid, then we know what happened. It's mom who's been on your phone". So, I said "then you need to change your code, so mom does not have access, because this is a violation of privacy". "This is an offense." Eh... if mom wants to look through the phone, then you should be present (Ivar, 440-448).

Ivar approaches the mother's intrusiveness as an offense to his children's rights to privacy. He thinks that the mother treats the children as an extension of herself and not as separate subjects. This position makes the children powerless victims to her intrusion and therefore Ivar tries to reposition them as individuals who have rights and obligations to protect themselves from mother's invasive behavior. He self-positions himself as a teacher who informs and gives advice to his children on how they can build boundaries against their mother's intrusive behavior to protect their privacy. In this way, by challenging the mother's first-order positioning of children as her property who do not need to have privacy from her, he in his second-order positioning redirects them towards a storyline that makes them independent and morally responsible actors whose well-being is based on the right to privacy and on the ability to protect themselves. Overall, this prevalent storyline in our material embeds post-divorce life in the microcosmos that resembles the moral order of the jungle. In this kind of environment, the mother's intrusive and manipulating behavior appears as a normal element of the domestic circumstances. As fathers assume that they cannot do anything to change the circumstances, they self-position themselves in the role of a coach/jungle guide and do their best to teach their children essential coping skills to survive. They further assume that these kinds of coping skills are also important in adult life.

3. Post-Divorce Dangers as Mysterious, as in a Foggy Moor Storyline

In our data there are also fathers who describe how their co-parenting relationship suddenly changed from being good to extremely difficult and that they did not know the reason why the change occurred. For example, Halvor states that he has never understood where the problem is, and why his communication with his ex-wife suddenly became troublesome. He simply felt like being "blindfolded in a dark room and trying to find a light switch that is not there".

If in the polluted realm storyline omniscient fathers want to change the circumstances in which their children live with the ex-partner, and in the jungle storyline well-informed

fathers teach their children coping skills to survive the intrusive environment their ex-partner causes, in the foggy moor storyline fathers do not know the circumstances in which their children live. As fathers in this third storyline self-position themselves as powerless in terms of knowledge, their efforts are re-directed, from trying to understand the children and their circumstances, to the effect of their own actions as fathers. In particular, they think that the only way they can provide a good environment for their children to grow is to make their own behavior clear, routinized and easy to interpret. They try to act as a beacon to bring hope and stability to their children amidst the mysterious uncertain surroundings that resemble a foggy moor. The following excerpt exemplifies how Balder finds a solution to the mystery of why his daughter suddenly stopped coming on custody visits by shifting the focus from things he cannot know and have control over to things he can know and manage:

I don't know why my daughter doesn't come to me, can't answer. I don't have a clue (...) (Balder, 183-184). I made such a huge effort, for such a long time?! And nothing happened (...). But then I got one of those (...) a wake-up call or something like that, an awakening, that I must at least be a good dad for those kids I can. And in it, in this here to say the time period here, then my other kid came moving to me one hundred percent. He came. (...) So, I decided I am going to have to be there for him (Balder, 334-339).

By shifting the focus in his parental agency to the child who resides in his care, Balder is able to position himself into a storyline in which he can become a proper father who is “there for him”.

Loki (shared custody father) is caught in a dilemma of knowing that establishing a non-hostile cooperative relationship with his ex-partner will best serve his children's needs while simultaneously being aware that this requires efforts from him, as a father, that he

deems impossible. This unresolvable dilemma, between knowing what is best for his children and what he finds realistic to do, casts a misty shadow on what steps to take as a responsive father. Loki portrays himself as a victim of his ex-wife that deceived him thrice; being unfaithful, leaving him and replacing him with another man. He has had several episodes of confrontation with his ex-partner after divorce as he had turned up unannounced at his ex-partners apartment, fiercely angry, by creating situations where his children have screamed in anguish. After the divorce he decided to be present at his child's sport activities, even on weeks when they stayed with her mother. Then he would sit on the opposite side of the arena, making his best effort to ignore his ex-partner. He was told by his ex-partner that his daughter found the situation very difficult. "I've seen it, of course. But I'm probably still stuck, with blinders on. So. There's probably a lot of things that I see without comprehending it". However, realizing that the open hostility towards his ex-partner have taken its toll on his daughter Ellinor made him change his strategy:

I realized that okay – this doesn't work. So, I told her, "You know what Ellinor, I think now it's Mom's weekend, so you go to that soccer game with Mom", I really want to go to that soccer match, but I think it's going to be hard for you. So, it's not like, I couldn't be bothered to come, but I see this is going to be difficult for you" (Loki, 934-938).

By realizing what kinds of problems his action has caused, Loki repositions his agency as a father from a storyline of a "supportive father that is present in sport activities" to a father "that bests support his daughter by not being there". Thus, he becomes a beacon of hope that can shelter his daughter from parental hostility and prioritize his daughter's needs and subjective well-being.

Knut (non-resident father) is not concerned about the well-being of his children. Instead, his concerns are related to him being lonely, having infrequent contact and a difficult relationship with his daughter. He regrets moving out as a result of which he lost his possibility to be a parent who can focus on daily routines with his children as a residential parent. Now he must deal with his teenage children being unwilling to stay with him, and he feels lonely. Moreover, Knut finds it difficult to be attentive to his daughter's needs while feeling put down by her:

She's taking her mother's side to get to me. I'm the bad guy. But I don't know if that is correct, but that's what I feel. ... She's very much a teenager, very determined and very... She knows everything. She's going to teach me things that I've been doing for years. Eh so it's really hard to say how much she gets influenced by. ...Eh. I don't know (Knut, 394-400).

Knut feels being positioned as the "the bad guy". He presents two parallel storylines of how to understand his daughter's behavior. In one storyline he aligns his daughter with her mother's opposition against him. However, her unruly and strongminded behavior could also be understood as part of a storyline of teenage behavior. Not knowing her daughter's true thoughts, and not even being able to trust his own feelings, he is left with one strategy as a father – to avoid fueling the conflicts with his daughter. The relational difficulty with his daughter makes it difficult for him to comprehend if or to what extent his ex-partner is causing it. Therefore, he aims to become a beacon of hope that can focus on here and now relationship with his daughter by removing all fogginess between them with his light.

The next excerpt is another example of the storyline where the father experiences powerlessness as he does not know what his child wants and needs. It describes a situation in which Birger's daughter becomes upset when her mother picks her up after custody visits:

I am sometimes wondering, because when she is with me, she doesn't want to go back to her mom. Then she says, she doesn't want to, she wants to be with mom and then she cries (...) I become a little suspicious (...). Because then I think that this may be an expression of loyalty. It may be that she wants to show me that she cares about me.

I: So, you interpret "her not wanting to go" may have different meanings?

F: It can be her way of showing that she misses me and that she loves me. There is no way to really know this. So, when she leaves with her mom I have no idea how she is. It may well be, that she is smiling and happy and all that is good. I don't know (...) much about it (...). But I know that when I have returned her to her mother on Sunday afternoon, the mother has never been allowed to touch her. She has never been allowed to put her in the car and buckle her up (Birger, 498-519).

In this excerpt Birger is self-positioning himself as an "unknowing parent" (and thereby powerless parent) and other-positioning his daughter into two contradictory storylines: the *storyline of loyalty* and the *storyline of genuine wish to be with him*. He is unable to get any information from his ex-partner as to which of the storylines their daughter follows and whether his daughter is unhappy or happy when she returns to her mother. He has not addressed this issue with his daughter, since he is afraid that it is difficult for her to talk about it. Therefore, like Balder, he aims to shift his attention from things he cannot know to things which he can influence. Then his own action becomes the object of change. To end the "muddy" situation so that his daughter "does not get any more upset" he decides to have a "clean ending" to it by developing clear repeated routines: "Now Saga, this is what we do. And then we do this, and then I buckle you up to the seat" (523-532, Birger). These routines provide an illuminated and compact platform against an unclear and unsteady environment.

Discussion

Our findings show that fathers construct different storylines about what kinds of consequences prolonged post-divorce conflict has for their parental agency and their child. According to our findings, it is typical for fathers to self-position themselves in this kind of inflamed situation (1) as *heroic saviors* who are other-positioning their children as victims that need to be saved, (2) as *jungle guides/coaches* who are other-positioning their children as students (agents) who need to learn tools for dealing with intrusive events, or (3) as *beacons* who re-position their own behavior to follow a self-clarifying routine so that their children can experience life in a less ambivalent, foggy and insecure manner. These positions are related to specific moral stances and orders and give different moral authority and justification to fathers' parental agency. Positioning oneself as an "all-knowing" authoritative father (i.e., the heroic savior) renders few possibilities of including the child's own perspectives, which is critical for being able to provide children with support that is a good fit for their understanding of the world and their needs (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Efforts to teach children skills to address post-divorce difficulties entail, again, the responsibility of not portraying the other parent as an enemy. When being consumed by a fog of ambiguity fathers often need, in turn, support from others so that they can become empowered to re-position themselves as beacons for their children. Clearly, these storylines of struggles to find parental agency and fathers other-positioning of children demonstrate that fathers in prolonged post-divorce conflict needs professional support on how to create safe havens for themselves and children among all the storms (Lebow, 2019). All fathers, except two, had concerns for their children's well-being from post-divorce dangers which they perceived as intrusive or inadequate care by their mothers and considered to be in conflict with their moral order or parenting style. This brings an expanded understanding of fathers' agency in prolonged post-divorce conflict, in contrast to studies where fathers' concerns are reduced to worries about diminished child

contact after separation and mothers' gatekeeping (Nixon & Hadfield, 2018). Our study indicates that fathers are self-positioning themselves with moral obligations of agency according to their ontological view of children's post-divorce challenges. In addition, the study shows how fathers are other-positioning children as either predominantly victims (in need of rescue/protection) or as agents (in need of coping skills/father presence/support). This result is in line with the studies that advocate the need to take into consideration father's ethical views when we try to understand parenting behaviors (Elizabeth, 2019; Philip, 2014). Most fathers portrayed their own parenting behavior in a positive light. In many cases they explained their children's distress as caused by circumstances where co-parents (mothers) were to blame or in which the child was caught in a loyalty conflict between two hostile parents. However, some fathers described episodes of denigration of their ex-partner in front of their child and of aggressive confrontations towards their ex-partner. Furthermore, while disclosing detailed accounts of aggressive transgressions towards their ex-partner and in front of their terrified children, these episodes were presented as storylines of justified anger towards the ex-partner, and not as storylines of children who were the victims of family violence. This is in line with other studies that describe how parents in enduring conflicts struggle to comprehend the negative effect of their aggressive behaviors (Johnston et al., 2009). Moreover, these findings clarify fathers' diverse parental agencies in conflict situations and help therapists to become sensitive to the social worlds of fathers as they aim to deconstruct family risks such as aggression, hostility or acts of violence. These complementary insights (fathers' stories of agency and in some cases implicit tales of family risks) increase therapists' competence to re-position fathers into storylines that better serve – in line with good parenting – the needs and well-being of children.

Nevertheless, there is always a danger that therapists are in a hurry to re-position fathers' agency along desirable and normalizing storylines of well-being that are alien to them

(Rober & Seltzer, 2010). These efforts may threaten fathers' understanding of what kinds of rights, responsibilities and moral emotions are legitimate, in accordance with their own values and identities (Benson, 2003; Rozin et al., 1999). Empirical studies indicate that parental disputes are primarily conflicts of values and identities and entangled with concerns as to whether the other parent has the capacity to care for the child (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017). In addition, empirical findings indicate that negative emotions are strongly related to co-parenting concerns, especially among divorced parents with enduring conflicts (Koppejan-Luitze et al., 2020). We argue that positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990), along with theories of moral emotions (Benson, 2003), provide productive approaches to study the variation in desirable moral obligations (positions of parental agency) of parents in conflict. For example, *feelings of anger* may be related to concerns of ethical violations to integrity to oneself or a family member, *feelings of contempt* may be related to the ethical violation of not fulfilling parenting duties, and *feelings of disgust* may be related to ethical violations of moral purity (i.e., uncleanness/polarities in parenting values/practice). This approach to emotions highlights their social and changing character in opposition to the view in which emotions are seen as inner states of an individual (Smyth & Moloney, 2017). To approach emotions as social ingredients increases flexibility in therapeutic work and makes the intervention to someone's life less threatening, since the aim is not to change who people are as persons, but to redirect their way of acting to a pattern in which they are able to take into account the needs of those involved. Our study suggests that fathers should include children's meaning making in family life (Walsh, 2016), be responsive to their needs and their rights to live free of exposure destructive conflicts and violence. Moreover, parents should be attentive to how their children understand conflict-related challenges and feelings of threats (Stokkebekk et al., 2019) such as when parents entangles them in conflict matters or denigrates the other parent (Rowen & Emery, 2018). The importance of performing this kind of risk-/resilience-informed

parenting is in line with longitudinal studies (Katz & Gottman, 1997) showing that parental warmth, with low levels of derogatory comments about the other parent, buffers children from a range of negative outcomes. Giving their child a voice, and the right to address post-divorce related concerns, creates conditions to cultivate the co-existing storylines of independency and dependency and serve the needs of being connected to one's family while striving for subjectivity and individuation. This is in line with research that shows that children of divorce become more rapidly independent when compared to their peers in nuclear families (Emery, 2011). Consequently, parents need to recognize their child's need for individuation and the loss of connectedness and influence over children that a divorced family life entails (Emery, 2011).

Strengths, Limitations, and Validity of the Study

An assessment of the strengths and limitations in a qualitative study should be conducted in the context of the 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 first author. First, *thick, rich description* from an analysis of fathers' storylines provides an ample opportunity 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 awareness of possible preconceptions and alternative interpretations. Thus, the development of the analytical themes and findings was critically assessed by coauthors of varied professional backgrounds (i.e., family therapy, social work, sociology, and psychology).

Questions for Further Research

Future research needs to clarify the interconnectedness of fathers' agency, moral obligations, and emotions. In addition, it is important to explore parents' positioning of children across genders, generations, and geographical areas in different family constellations and how parental agency is related to constructions of moral obligations.

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