Original Article

Entangled in the Web of Conflicts

Prolonged Divorce from the Divorcees' Perspective

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Abstract: *Introduction*: Previous research findings painted a mixed picture regarding conflictual divorce. A lack of empirical clarity hinders professionals from intervening with this population effectively. *Methods*: Based on two-wave interview data with 21 divorcing individuals from Lithuania, we explored an array of conflicts that could be related to enduring divorce lasting from 6 months up to 4 years. *Results*: The results show conflictual divorce as a multifaceted, evolving phenomenon intertwined between many disputes on five interconnected levels. The most prominent ones are with a former spouse and related to self-concept changes. Over time, these conflicts partially transform into disagreements with involved institutions and the country's legal system. In the end, divorcees become involved in enduring uncertainty and embracing inner resources to continue their journey. *Conclusion*: Positioning enduring divorce within multiple conflict levels identifies several points associated professionals can use in their work with divorcees and the fundamental need for collaboration among stakeholders for effective interventions.

Keywords: conflict levels, divorce, qualitative study, Lithuania

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Introduction

Marital breakdown is a reality in contemporary societies. Although divorcees must agree upon many issues, most couples find ways to manage their marriage's formal termination and reduce conflict (Amato, 2000). However, some couples engage in divorce or separation processes that last years (Lebow, 2019). Estimates say that 10% to 25% of divorces linger within this frame of enduring and pervasive conflict (Kelly, 2012; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015). Such a relationship is usually marked by a high degree of anger, hostility, distrust, intensive custody litigation, ongoing difficulty in communicating about the care of their children, and higher-than-usual rates of nonpayment of child support (Cohen & Levite, 2012). We differentiate high-conflict divorces (HCDs) from other conflictual divorces by the intensity and underlying factors that likely precipitate and perpetuate the conflict (Saini, 2012; Sandler et al., 2008). However, most literature focuses only on the interpersonal conflict between divorcing partners and its effects on minor children. While that is a valid emphasis, it fails to present the complete picture. Only recently have scholars started to pay more attention to other types of conflicts that might perpetuate disagreements (e.g., Bertelsen, 2021; Fargion et al., 2021; Jiménez-García et al., 2019; Treloar, 2019). They point to mismatching opinions between divorcees and associated professionals or symbolic conflicts related to the inner workings of each divorcee to come to terms with the end of the relationship.

Many studies have shown that HCD has many detrimental effects on the lives of the involved people. It is a significant risk factor for many forms of dysfunction and psychopathology in families, in both adults and children (Davies et al., 2016; Harold & Sellers, 2018; Lamela et al., 2016). The risk of adverse effects is so high and severe that the diagnostic condition "child affected by parental relationship distress" is included in the DSM-5 (Bernet et al., 2016). While conflictual divorces are in the statistical minority, they are the most costly in litigation, resources, court time, and financial cost. Solicitors' fees are usually not capped, and court fees increase with the case's complexity. Consequently, administrative divorce costs can become substantial (Crail, 2022; Kapelle, 2022). Furthermore, HCDs usually occupy much of family court resources, which raise access to justice issues for other families waiting in the litigation queue (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011; Smyth & Moloney, 2017). Since ongoing HCD has many adverse effects on society, it is considered a psychosocial and health-related issue requiring special attention from researchers, social support specialists, legal specialists, and mental health professionals (Hald et al., 2020).

Despite the urgency of the phenomenon, it is surrounded by multiple methodological and theoretical issues. Until today, there is no common understanding of a conflictual divorce. Some scholars underline that marital dissolution always involves a certain degree of conflict. Therefore, divorce can be regarded as conflictual only when spousal conflicts surpass the 2- to 3-year mark (Haddad et al., 2016;

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Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Lebow, 2019). However, professionals quickly label a divorce as conflictual, even within the first months of marital dissolution (see Gulbrandsen et al., 2018). As many studies provide only theoretical knowledge based on outsider-expert understandings, divorcees are predominantly spoken for and about, but their voices are rarely heard (Haddad et al., 2016; Treloar, 2019). People are categorized, seen, and approached in a rather theoretical and negatively predetermined way. Professionals who think about the HCD cases they manage use too few concepts and concepts too rigid to fit the emotionally volatile and ever-shifting situations (Dijkstra, 2023). Even if research is empirical, data are primarily gathered in postdivorce settings, paying scarce attention to the happenings amidst the ongoing procedures increasing recall bias. So far, we have found no research examining the HCD and focusing on the ongoing pre-legal-divorce period. Specifically, research scarcity in this area prompts further investigations into the experiences of divorcees during this time frame (Lebow, 2019; Lewandowski et al., 2006). A better understanding of the multidimensionality of enduring conflicts based on empirical data would help approach HCDs more effectively and efficiently. It would be beneficial on personal, relational, and societal levels (Hald et al., 2020). Despite the vagueness of the HCD definition, we use this term to describe the marital dissolution process that endures for more than half a year and is associated with heightened degrees of conflict between the divorcing couple.

Overview of Divorce-Related Conflicts

Divorce literature points toward various conflicts arising during this conflictual process. Johnston (1994) proposed a conceptual model involving three dimensions of conflict: domains, attitudes, and tactics. According to Johnston, the domain dimension encompasses what divorcees disagree about, such as finances or childrearing. The tactics dimension relates to how individuals manage their disagreements, and the attitudinal dimension describes the degree of hostility or negative emotion toward a former spouse. Conflicts between divorcing spouses usually stem from perceived or experienced resources or power differentials. The most common and apparent targets for divorce-related conflicts are the distribution of assets, children's residence, care and custody, visiting arrangements, and alimony (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011; Gulbrandsen et al., 2018). However, some resources are much harder to identify, though they play a substantial role in divorce. For example, we could talk about agency or power to manipulate expertise or information or the ability to take away something material or do something to another (Bollen et al., 2013). When people perceive that their valued resource is unjustifiably threatened, they feel somehow diminished and attempt to keep it or get it back (Van Deurzen & Adams, 2016). Although HCD interactions are usually characterized by overt and active attack and defense (Gulbrandsen et al., 2018), they can also be inactive and less visible (Ashcraft, 2000). Some tactics could be related to the maintenance of the HCD, such as triangulation or the involvement of other people in the conflict (Archer-Kuhn, 2018; Birnbaum & Bala, 2010). On another side, empirical research argues that divorcees in postdivorce high-conflict settings also show conflict deescalation behavior, such as asynchronous written modes between each other (messaging or emailing) to keep intimacy and emotions at bay (Smyth et al., 2020).

Although conflicts arising at the interpersonal level between the divorcing individuals lie at the core of the dispute, researchers also point toward other disagreements affecting the continuation of the HCD: Conflict may stem from the adversarial nature of the legal system and supporting professionals involved in the process. Although some studies reveal that the experiences of divorcees with officials are somewhat mixed (Smithson & Gibson, 2017; Studsrød et al., 2014), most feel unheard, labeled as "high-conflict couples," misunderstood, or misrepresented. Recent empirical studies in high-conflict postdivorce settings revealed that, in many cases, former spouses sense a substantial disagreement between what they need and what representatives of involved institutions tell them to do (Bertelsen, 2021; Treloar, 2019). According to divorcees, what they experience as continuing negotiation work, professionals view as conflict and see them as incapable of speaking authoritatively about the needs and interests of their children. Consequently, when parents feel that the involvement of the professionals is not helping them or their families, they experience mistrust and become less likely to cooperate with them in the future (Bouma et al., 2020).

Further, some researchers point toward symbolic conflicts related to self-change amidst a divorce. Scientific literature argues that people create themselves and strive to maintain stability via fusion with various elements from valued life domains (Tabri et al., 2017). However, divorce often affects individuals' ability to narrate themselves and leads to inner conflict (Schiller et al., 2016; Sedikides et al., 2010). Individuals can experience self-changes as positive or negative (Mattingly et al., 2014). If the bond between the partners was regarded as self-expanding, its loss is experienced as painful, fearsome, or offensive and could become a driver for a prolonged HCD (Demby, 2009; Smyth et al., 2020). However, in some marriages, individuals might experience a subtraction of positive self-attributes or an addition of negative attributes. Consequently, the dissolution of such a bond would allow

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the rediscovery of neglected aspects of the self, inner strength, and freedom to stand firm and fight (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). In their longitudinal study, Hetherington and Kelly (2002) showed that self-changes for divorced individuals vary: For some, it is a journey of positive self-rediscovery; for others, it reveals hidden dependencies and personal vulnerabilities they never knew existed or did not wish to know, so that self-transition becomes longer and more complex.

Another aspect rarely spoken about in the context of HCD is time and its role in the divorce process. It is rather uncommon in our society to speak of being unable to get divorced or having divorce decelerate as a problem (Lebow, 2020). The absence of a timely mechanism to disengage leaves many individuals stuck in the developmental pause of uncertain time, waiting for uncertain changes, which is not helpful for anyone. Staying for a prolonged period in an unclear situation can prevent the timely and effective self-redefinition, thereby increasing inner unclarity (Slotter & Walsh, 2017). In that respect, with this study, we point out that time and waiting for the changes play a separate and no less important role in the HCD process.

Divorce prompts a review of coping strategies for adapting to divorce-related challenges (Sakraida, 2008). Hattie (2008) argues that internal strategies are integral components of the self which help it to become stronger. Coping strategies refer to divorcees' tendency to make cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage, tolerate, or reduce divorce-related stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Strategies fall into two main classes: Problem-focused strategies target managing stressful situations, whereas emotion-focused strategies target managing the negative affect associated with the situation. Social support-seeking is an additional strategy that can involve aspects of both problem- and emotion-focused coping (Vitaliano et al., 1985). Meaning-making could be a valuable coping strategy against deleterious effects for divorcees (Koen et al., 2011). In his research, Hopper (2001) pointed toward retrospective meaning-making as an important coping strategy amidst the marital dissolution process: The divorcing persons attempted to define and redefine their relationships to shape the content of their experiences into meaningful and consistent wholes to support themselves in dealing with inner divorce-related challenges.

In summary, we use the model of Polak and Saini (2019), which encompasses four levels of the factors one needs to consider when looking at conflictual marital dissolution: the ontogenic, microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem levels. Scholars argued that, to better understand HCD, one needs not only to look at the microsystem (parent-child relationship, family, friends, kin) or the ontogenic (biological, psychological and emotional, behavioral, cognitive) aspects as well as at the exosystem (child welfare, police, other institutions), and macrosystem ones (social location, laws, legislation). Furthermore, we argue the necessity of another level – the chrono (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) – to present a more comprehensive picture of the conflicts experienced by each divorce amidst their enduring divorce process.

Methods

Study Design

We conducted a qualitative study using semistructured interviews and a reflective journal to collect data. The university Research Ethics Committee granted ethics approval (Protocol No. 6/-2021). We used a constructivist grounded theory methodology, as it is well suited for answering questions related to social processes and provided a systematic approach for understanding self-concept development during ongoing life traumatic events (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). In grounded theory, data collection and analysis occur parallel and are iterative. Constructivist grounded theory suggests that data are constructed through an ongoing interaction between participants and the researcher, and that the analysis reflects both perspectives (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). The study consisted of two-wave interviews.

Recruitment and Participants

We recruited the sample through convenience, snowball, and purposive sampling techniques. First, various social and mental health support centers, community agencies, lawyers, and counselors mediated the recruitment process. Later, we sought participants through advertisements on social-media platforms. Third, we approached individuals from a personal network with a request to pass along information about the research to people they knew who were going through a divorce or could share it with others. Finally, after each interview, we asked participants to share information about the research with others who fit the criteria. Regardless of the recruitment method, anyone who expressed a willingness to participate in the study was screened to ensure that they (a) were still legally married, (b) lived in Lithuania, and (c) had been in the process of divorce for at least 6 months (not living together or in a litigation process). We chose 6 months to minimize the probability of including non-HCD divorcees, as statistical data shows that, in Lithuania, 97.23% of divorces are finalized by mutual agreement within the first 6 months (Putvinskis, 2020). Persons meeting these inclusion criteria and agreeing to participate were scheduled for an interview.

We conducted the first interviews with 21 individuals (5 males and 16 females). Participants ranged in age from

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28 to 64, with a median age of 43.8. The mean number of years since the beginning of divorce was 2.1, ranging from 6 months to 4 years. Our participants had been married for 16.1 years on average, ranging from 2 to 40 years. All of the participants had children with their divorcing spouses. All relationships with spouses described in this study were heterosexual and gender-normative. Two of the participants were (former) spouses of two other participants. From the initial cohort, 18 (4 males and 14 females) agreed to share their stories during the second wave of interviews. At the time of the second interview, five participants indicated having finalized their legal divorces since the first interview.

Interview Procedures

We carried out the first wave of semistructured interviews (T1) using a topic guide developed after the initial literature review, which we refined in light of the data collection. The interviews took place online using the most convenient communication channel for the participants. Most participants preferred audio-conferencing, except for two individuals who stated that video-conferencing would be easier for them. Interviews typically lasted about 1.5 hours and were audio-recorded. Before the interviews, we provided the participants written and oral explanations of the purpose of the study and asked them to sign an informed consent form. We emphasized their voluntary participation, and that they could leave any question unanswered if they wished and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. After the interviews, we asked each participant if they would agree to participate in a follow-up interview.

No sooner than 6 months after the first interviews, we emailed or sent text messages to the divorcees inquiring about their willingness to participate in the second round of interviews. We chose to meet divorcees for the second time because multiple interviews provide more opportunities to understand the complexity and ambiguity of told life stories (Thompson, 2007). We developed the interview guide for T2 to focus mainly on the divorce conflict, with the intention of getting more in-depth and breadth information about the dimensions of the conflicts on various levels, their meaning for the divorcees, and how (according to them) this dynamic could relate to the (de)escalation of the divorce conflict. The second wave of the interviews (T2) typically lasted up to 1 hour and took place using the same teleconferencing method as during the first interview. Before each second interview, we shared some results from the first interviews, once again informed participants about the purpose of the study and their rights as research participants, and asked for their consent, including for an audio recording of the session. After we had received their oral consent, the second interview took place. Our primary purpose for the second interview was to go deeper and broader into the topic of HCD. Therefore, we asked questions to investigate aspects associated with high conflict maintenance, escalation, and possible decrease.

Data Analysis

We transcribed and analyzed the interview data, applying a grounded theory approach. The data analysis involved an iterative process of collecting, coding, comparing, writing memos, sorting, and writing. Coding is essential to developing a CGT and occurs in particular interconnected stages. First, the researchers read each interview to gain an overall sense of the text and notice certain things of interest, first impressions, or conceptual ideas about the data. Second, the readings helped identify and code what individual sentences or sentence clusters revealed about the ongoing divorce experience. We assigned a code to each sentence or sentence cluster to capture its essence. In the CGT, this stage is called *initial coding*, which helps separate data into categories and identify processes.

After seeing how the codes coalesced, we identified the most important codes and engaged in focused coding. In this stage, Charmaz (2014) suggested noticing what codes appear more frequently among initial codes and have more significance. This means continuously asking what initial codes imply and what they reveal and comparing them to each other to determine categories. Consequently, we arranged the codes in various levels of abstraction, creating categories. Even though the frequency of codes is the guiding principle for determining categories, the significance of the code – which does not appear in most interviews – cannot be undermined. For example, we detected the "liberating from the prison of marriage" code in the 15 interviews and "the positivity of new partners" only in four. Nevertheless, the latter code was also included in the "rebuilding of the valued self" category, as all divorcees with new partners underlined their significance in self-development. We categorized the codes that substantially changed the phenomenon's essence – those most salient across the participants' experiences – as main categories; minor categories added complexity and depth to the main categories. Discerning the main from a minor was an iterative process involving several additional data immersions.

Throughout the process, some categories changed along the way. For example, we changed the initial category "victimizing self" into the minor categories "losing valued self-investment" and "losing the illusionary self." After multiple reconsiderations, we determined that participants conveyed the opposite message of pitying themselves, instead pointing toward their strengths, discovering past life's adversities, and emphasizing their attitudinal changes. Finally, we assigned theoretical arrangements to

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the data and revised them until the collection of structural experiences captured the similarities across and variations within the participants' experiences. We did the coding using NVivo 12 software.

Additionally, in our data analysis, particularly during the last theoretical coding of data, we used the combination of the approaches of Johnston (1994) and Polak and Saini (2019) to support our exploring how divorcees living through an enduring conflictual divorce describe how they experience conflicts pertaining to their divorce processes. The combination of theoretical categories was relevant in the first place, as it expanded the view of the divorce processes and prevented looking at the divorce from a too-narrow angle. They allowed us to grasp the multidimensionality of the divorcees' experiences and enabled us to understand of the interchange with multiple contexts and situations. This helped us to understand how various other (particularly external) pressures on divorcees translate into how people organize their narratives of everyday life, whether in terms of acceptance or resistance against dominant discourses.

Results

In this section, we present the results of our study regarding the multiple levels of conflicts individuals go through in their enduring divorce process. Following the ongoing reflective coding, we arrived at the five main categories, representing the conflict experiences of the divorcees, and five ones indicating the strategies individuals take to deal with those conflicts. We present the overview of the categories to come to a more comprehensive picture of the findings.

Losing the Past-Future Self

The Collapse of the Whole World

This category points toward internal disputes regarding the meaning of the end of the marriage. Individuals questioned what the marriage vow "till death do us part" and its dissolution meant to them. Internal disputes were especially obvious during the first years of the divorce and became less expressed with time. Many perceived the initial response to divorce as a total loss of self. It seemed as if "everything is collapsing, everything we had built, all the dreams are collapsing," "the end of the world," or "like a death experience." Divorcees reported feeling devastated, having prolonged depressive episodes, becoming trapped in the crisis, and not knowing how to proceed with their lives further. For some, thoughts about suicide became prominent. Interviewees argued that their intense emotions related to the importance of marriage in their lives. They had always hoped for and dreamed of living in a traditional family. Therefore, divorce became "a painful loss of a relationship [and] family, because the family was always essential to me."

Simultaneously Losing and Gaining Parts of Self

Here we talk mainly about the simultaneous loss and gain of certain self-segments divorcees experienced as positive or negative. The individuals reflected on how their roles had changed and what those changes had meant to them. Many reflected on forfeiting the role of the exclusive partner or unclarity in understanding their roles as parents. Others argued about focusing exclusively on the role of a parent. For example, one female participant reported that her feminine self-identity had become dormant; she dedicated all her energy to raising her children and identified "more with a role of a mother than a woman." Divorcees also discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the gained role of (non)initiator. Initiators argued that taking the first step to divorce was not easy; it took much time and effort to decide to leave a (violent) marriage to protect oneself and children. Even though both partners understood the impossibility of living together, initiators felt blamed for the divorce and its consequences. Conversely, the noninitiators talked about the painful shock of being "the one who was left." However, some admitted they had waited for their spouses to act first to proceed with the divorce.

(Re)building the Valued Self

Acquiring One's Old Self Back

To respond to the above changes, divorcees employed inner strategies to help themselves with divorce transformations. Many referred to divorce work as the result of inner emotional healing, the journey to learn more about oneself, and the lessons life had given them. They referred to doing inner work to avoid pain, to "reduce the emotional burden," or even to emotionally disconnect from their spouse. Some individuals talked about regaining freedom from dysfunctional family environments, self-respect, and self-love. They reported acquiring more of their "old valued self" over time. As a result, their emotional well-being increased, and they felt calmer, safer, and more satisfied with their lives.

Gaining Strength Through the Process

For some respondents, the decision to divorce was proof of their inner strength. As Katrina (47) stated, "Divorce is not an easy thing, and it's a myth that only weak people divorce. Because being in a destructive relationship, I think, is even easier than getting out of it." Another divorcee continuously told herself, "I am strong enough that I had to go through all of this. Only a strong and determined person can get that much."

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Leaning on Activities as Supporting Resources

This category refers to divorcees searching for more active external activities. People talked about learning meditation, attending yoga classes or self-discovery courses, attending church, or doing sports. Some argued that the only way to go through the initial emotional turmoil was to become immersed in intensive work. One divorcee revealed she had the energy to go through hectic working days, but weekends without job duties were full of pain and suicidal ideation. Many pinpointed the necessity of talking. They argued they needed people, including mental health specialists, with whom they could share their pain. New partners became major aids in lifting the divorce blues and bringing perspective and hope for the future.

Unjustly Attacked by the Former Spouse

Facing the Ex-Spouse's Hostile Intentions

This refers to seeing a former spouse's behavior predominantly through a negative lens. Interviewees argued that their former spouses did not keep promises or follow official agreements. They neglected their children's basic needs by not paying alimony, not seeing their children, or preventing the other parent from doing so. Interviewees believed they were lying, engaging in manipulative or provocative behavior to achieve their goals. Next to the obvious intent to get more money, the less apparent one was to provoke conflict, or as some interviewees described, to "eat me alive," "make sure that I suffer," or "break me morally." It all sparked negative emotions, such as anger, hatred, contempt, and distrust.

Entangled in the War of Principles

This category refers to interviewees reflecting on the changing intensity levels of the conflict. According to them, emotions emerged mainly when considering specific situations, particularly court hearings. When there was no direct communication between divorcees, the conflict remained in the background, seemingly nonexistent. Most individuals argued that conflict came exclusively from their former partners. However, some admitted that both sides held on to their demands and engaged in "a war of principles" to prove their truth. The possibility of emerging from this vicious circle was questionable. Interviewees believed that they had reached the lowest acceptable level of demands, and that giving up more would "set a precedent to exploit me and the situation in the future."

Prevented from Contacting Their Children

This concept refers to the perception of spouses' abusive behavior toward children identified as an indirect attack on the divorcees. Not having the possibility of interacting with one's own offspring was one of the primary sources of anger and frustration for divorcees. The pain of seeing how ex-partners manipulated children while themselves being unable to change the situation was highlighted as one of the most frustrating experiences. One father told us about a visitation to his sick son living with a mother. When the time to leave came, the son "started putting on his shoes, saying he wanted to go with me. You see this and cannot do anything because you've done everything possible legally, but it did not work."

Distancing from the Ex-Partner to Keep Emotions at Bay

Escaping the Former Spouse's Control

We talk here about the noncommunication between the divorcing couple. On the one hand, it occurred because one side ignored and blocked all possible communication, such as not answering messages, emails, or calls. Refusing to communicate and cooperate felt like a way to extend control over the other partner. Conversely, some revealed themselves as initiators of noncommunication, blocking most interaction channels with their exes. The main reason for this was self-protection. According to divorcees, their former partners manipulated them, "trying to find all the weak spots to suck my energy like a vampire," and were eager to provoke endless conflict. The only way to escape it was to avoid direct interaction purposefully.

Minimizing Direct Communication

According to interviewees, engaging in written communication with their former partner via messages and emails helped control conflict levels. For example, a divorcee with three children argued that emailing worked well, despite his wife blocking all other communication channels. Emails helped him take a break, calm down, and respond more thoughtfully. According to many interviewees, the written form of communication kept emotions low. The interaction became fact-based because both sides realized that any texts could be used in court or forwarded to an official. In addition to choosing a less emotional communication channel, divorcees discussed other activities to avoid conflict. They referred to persuading themselves to be more tolerant, hold their anger, or second-guess whether to press charges against the former spouse.

Unprotected by the Professionals

Questioning the Professionalism of Officials

Interviews revealed divorcees reflecting on the effectiveness of the involved professionals. On the one hand, they received some positive remarks: Divorcees saw good

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private attorneys as critical players during the divorce who helped participants communicate their needs in appropriate legal terms and understand the legal system. People saw courts as a means of clarifying the divorcing couple's relationship. However, the majority perceived professionals as incapable of doing their jobs. Because of the specificity of cases, "they do not know what to do with these situations" or lack experience. People speculated that some professionals might be inclined to prolong the divorce process, as it paid off for them financially.

Facing Institutional Violence

Interviewees described institutional indifference particularly negatively. According to them, professionals had their own procedures and followed their agendas; they ticked boxes to show that they did the job while caring only about their own well-being. Divorcees felt pushed from one office to another, yet discovered that nobody truly cared about their situation. People reported feeling humiliated, asocial, and helpless – "forgotten pieces in a self-perpetuating machine." There was too much formality and too little human understanding. People felt that, despite their efforts to prove the seriousness of their situation, institutions looked at them as divorcees in "conflictual relationships" and did not act. One of the participants referred to this phenomenon as "institutional violence," which resulted in losing trust in the institutions and professionals working there.

Interacting with Officials Out of Necessity

Extensive Interaction with Professionals

Many research participants proclaimed the extensive use of formal approaches to dealing with an HCD. They discussed multiple meetings, phone calls, and official letter exchanges with involved professionals. One father even remembered using an external home where he stayed with his child while the situation was under police investigation. Despite the heavy use of services, divorcees underlined that they mainly did it out of necessity. For some, the involvement of social workers was the only way to control the other parent's actions with their children and demand the right to see them. Officials became a channel to communicate with former partners. When direct communication was impossible or avoided, agents' interaction helped move the process forward.

The Inevitability of Dealing with Officials

Other interviewees revealed being forced to start interacting with institutions and professionals in response to their former partners' actions. If not for these actions, they would have avoided the formal ways to mediate arguments as long as possible. According to them, the process became a long chain of interactions with no perceivable end. In contrast to their expectations of solving the conflict, institutions maintained the conflict or even made it more prominent. During our second interview, Peter (46) stated, "It is like the First World War – many deaths, and everyone just sits in their trenches and does not go anywhere, just shoots. And there is no result."

Invalidated by the Legislation Gaps

Allowing for Injustice to Occur

This category points toward the diverging discourses between divorcees and their legislative environments. According to divorcees, there was no legal regulation on psychological violence, incitement, and parental alienation syndrome. Consequently, "nobody can do anything because there are no real laws." For some, legislation gaps seemed like means of repressing their constitutional rights to freedom or equal responsibilities and rights toward their children. Additionally, people argued that the system prioritized children's needs, wishes, and well-being from the get-go. However, the "child's voice above all" strategy was often dangerous, especially in cases of incitement or manipulation. Similarly, a child's refusal to see one parent was automatically taken at face value, ignoring the whole situation and possible manipulation. As a result, while parents fight a "war of absurdity," "a child suffers most," and the system allows that to occur.

Lacking Human Connection

People argue that what struck them the most was the inhumanity of the entire legislative system. Divorcees saw it as a machine where "no one cares about your emotions. There is a law, and it is supposed to be in a certain way." Similarly, people argued that the legislative system did not control anything. It fell to absurd levels when "you can write as much as you want, complain as much as you wish, but no one will do anything, and one is left alone to fight one's fights." Individuals also felt much formality because of the digitalized environment, where instead of a person, one has to interact with a computerized system, and "a human connection is lacking." As a result, divorcees felt alienated from the social environment, bringing unsafety and unprotected.

Voicing Systemic Gaps

Yielding to the Inflexibility of the System

Individuals spoke about the moments they decided to avoid going against the system. According to them, they realized the fruitlessness of the fight because of established legislative traditions in the country. Paul (48, T2), a father

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in a 3-year divorce, argued: "It is not typical for both partners to participate in child's upbringing and financial support 50% … If a court proceeding is in dispute, then all the money must be allocated to the one the children live with, and the other one has to provide money and see their children sometimes. I realized that I could not spit against the wind because there is such an order, and that's that."

Reaching for Collective Support

Nevertheless, some divorcees, especially those on a prolonged divorce trajectory, reflected on taking actions to fight not only their spouse but also certain parts of the system. One individual spoke about writing to the country's bar association to complain about felt injustice. Others took steps through the Association Against Parental Alienation. One active association member underlined that she participated in the interview to change something in the current situation "To avoid the consequences caused by not knowing about parental alienation syndrome." However, participants admit that, regrettably, their actions have not succeeded so far.

Stuck in Unpredictability

Binding of the Unknown

Unpredictability during interviews was revealed through the feeling of being stuck in the process or, as one divorcee expressed herself, "sitting in a pile of dung." People viewed divorce as something they were dragging behind them, and that was not allowing them to be completely free. It evoked a continuous longing for more peace and the desire to finally plan everything according to their wishes. Participants experienced feeling as if their arms were bound, which brought the feeling of not being able "to get rid of the person or move forward building a normal life" (Julie, 47). Furthermore, being still legally married prevented people from taking loans and moving on with their ideas. People felt like "a type of citizen, but not fully."

Endless Waiting

Participants talked about being stuck in endless waiting without clarity regarding when the finish will come and how. This related not only to the uncertain ending of the proceedings but also to the lack of clarity about the ongoing aspects of the process itself. People saw themselves as caught in the uncertainties of the future, whether unexpected situations would arise, and whether they would be prepared to face them. Peter (46) expressed it as "Something will happen again; it's not over. I always get something. And you continuously feel hung up, captured … So you sit and wait." It all kept divorcing individuals in a constant state of alertness. The waiting was so intense and overwhelming that at times it resulted in a depressive state.

Siphoning the Self into Absurd Entanglement

One of the essential processes of the research participants related to suffering the absurdity of an unrelenting divorce process. People often used the word "absurdity" in addition to other words, such as abnormal, far from reality, "fighting with windmills," "like a Kafka novel," and "the war of absurdity" to describe their experiences. This absurdity related mainly to being involved in the process and in activities that made no sense. The individuals felt that the process, like a spiral, was siphoning off their day-to-day situational clarity and comprehension. Thus, the divorce process became a somewhat separate phenomenon and had a life on its own.

Authoring the Self Through Meaning-Making

Pursuing Moral Integrity

To fight feelings of processual absurdity, individuals engaged in meaning-making, which became a core strategy in enduring divorce. Gathered data showed that divorcees created meaning, particularly by underlining moral integrity, honesty, and their goals' trustworthiness. They saw themselves as genuine individuals, having nothing to hide and therefore having nothing to be ashamed of or blamed for, as they were "following the path of the truth." Individuals talked about fighting for their values, perceived truth, what was of the utmost importance to them, and what they believed to be rightfully theirs.

Guarding Children's Well-Being

It is essential to underline that, for divorcees involved in intense child-related disputes, the well-being of their offspring became the main focus in their meaning-making process. While focusing on their children, financial issues became secondary means to protect them. For example, one divorcee underlined protecting her daughters from the psychological harm of her husband: "I am fighting because I believe that my daughters are experiencing the same psychological violence I experienced for so many years." Children were at the heart of meaning-making and self-creation.

Persevering Through the Difficulties

Most of the time, divorcees underlined feeling strong and motivated to continue their enduring divorce. They portrayed themselves as strong because they had survived the difficult process and continued the fight. Such a self-enhancing strategy better allowed them to transcend the ordeals of divorce. For some, the proof of their strength was behind their decision to divorce. For others, strength meant not stopping when it was tough and continuing the battle: "It costs a lot of energy, effort, money, and health.

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All that was an extraordinary experience. I had to somehow survive it, but I am very happy today because I have grown my spine. I am a strong, happy woman who can do everything for my child now."

Representation of Divorce Multidimentionality

Figure 1 presents an overview of the above-discussed categories, placing them in a particular schematic representation based on the divorce models discussed in the theoretical section. We displayed multiple levels of conflict, starting with the Onto level and ending with the Chrono one, which we added to complete the results. We placed each conflict experience on a distinct level and the strategies people undertake to cope with these conflicts. For example, on the Exo level, we depicted individuals experiencing institutional unprotectedness and arguing about interacting with them mainly out of necessity. On the Chrono level, we see people preoccupied with hanging in ongoing unpredictability while engaging in meaning-making to support them in this endless waiting. Arrows pointing down and up depict the interconnectivity of levels and individuals moving up and down those levels amidst their divorce process.

Discussion

Previous research findings painted a mixed picture of the association between the divorce process and self. Usually, individuals involved in HCD are pictured rather theoretically (Haddad et al., 2016). Empirical data regarding divorcees' experiences are minimal, creating gaps in providing adequate support (Bertelsen, 2021). Because of indecisive results and a general shortage of empirical studies in the area, we undertook this investigation to explore how divorcees in Lithuania see and experience arising conflicts amid their enduring conflictual marital dissolution process. We provide a schematic overview of the findings placing conflicts on multiple levels (from Onto to Chrono) and attitudinal and tactics dimensions.

Interview data reveal that conflicts somehow begin simultaneously at the ontogenic and microsystem levels. Their intensity is highest during the first years of divorce. Individuals experience various disruptive losses, which damage their previous "coherent and integrated self." Perceived violent attacks from former partners intensify emotional reactions and add further (symbolic) losses to the situation. In this context, one should view multiple losses along the time continuum, as their emergence and disappearance do occur not simultaneously. Scholars have argued that feelings of disequilibrium because of divorce are typical and, for most people, resolve over a period of 6 to 24 months (Lebow, 2019; Strizzi et al., 2021). Although this scientific data usually come from the period of the postdecree settings, we could argue that, in the long-term, adjustments to divorce and the levels of stress and well-being take a somewhat comparable path.

The self-expansion model indicates that, during divorce, people lose many fused, valued self-aspects (Aron et al., 2001). These losses are especially painful as marriage and family life remain highly valued by many in our societies. This notion is particularly prevalent in Lithuania, where more traditional family values exist. Lithuanians view family life, including raising children, as the central and foremost priority of a person's, particularly a woman's, life (Kanopienė et al., 2015). Therefore, divorce becomes highly stressful by exceedingly threatening valued core-self aspects connected to being a part of the traditional family structure. However, divorce does not consist solely of losses. The divorcees also argued that, amidst various losses, they had rebuilt a more valued and authentic version of themselves they were proud and happy about. To be struck by a crisis is disruptive but can also be an opportunity to find one's position concerning fundamental values (Du Toit, 2017). No matter how seriously someone is affected, the situation always contains both pain and possibility, reaching the positive via the negative (Jacobsen, 2009). Losing something during the ongoing HCD goes hand in hand with the gains in something else, creating an ongoing inner instability and the need for reequilibration with own means or the aid of others.

When the disagreement between a divorcing couple remains unresolved, they turn to professionals for support, which brings further challenges. We speculate that, with time, Exo-level conflicts replace Micro-level conflicts to a certain degree. Disputes on this level further pull the HCD deeper until it reaches the lower (Macro) level. At this point, the individuals realize that inequalities and imperfections observed earlier derive from the deficiencies at a systematic level and, therefore, are more challenging to influence. The literature argues that judicial processes and involved institutions are limited when solving family problems (Bertelsen, 2021; Polak & Saini, 2019). Even worse, especially in cases of HCD, institutions can often facilitate or magnify conflict, thereby causing further harm (Saini et al., 2013). Individuals turn to institutions for help and support yet often receive the opposite result. Few empirical studies on HCD have shown negative experiences while interacting with specialists, particularly a lack of understanding because of differing discourses (Bertelsen, 2021; Treloar, 2019). Considering the general mistrust by Lithuanians for the judiciary (Pankūnas, 2020), the negative attitudes toward the legal system could be exacerbated

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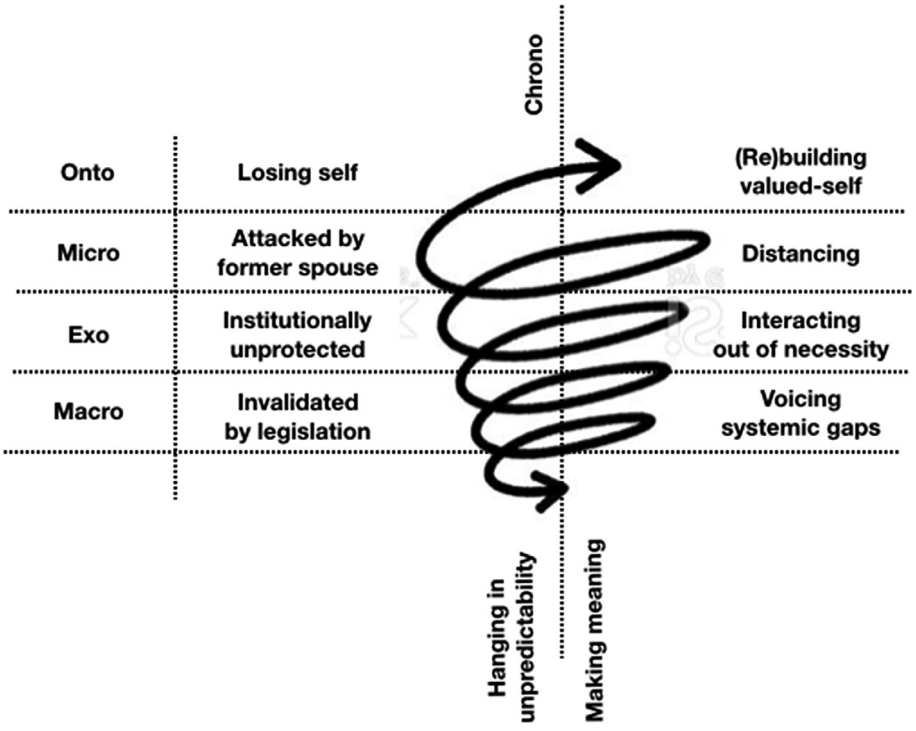


Figure 1. The interconnectivity of conflict levels, based on divorcees' experiences.

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even further and increase the experiences of ambiguity, uncertainty, and insecurity.

Unable to rely on the professionals and legal system of the country, individuals felt increased loneliness and missing protection. This is not surprising, as scholars argue that people turn to each other for meaning through their relationships and communities to create a sense of shared reality (Greenberg et al., 2014; Hong et al., 2007). However, when a person's reality is not shared by others, particularly professionals and legislation but also by a former spouse, they feel they have a unique perspective, and that others do not – or cannot – understand their outlook and experience. This, in turn, increases the feelings of isolation. When such reactions are situational, they produce momentary and short-term effects, whereby an individual's sense of validation of their self is threatened and attempts are made to eliminate this feeling. However, such situations ensure that other aspects come to the front and have more prominent effects.

Over time, the divorcees moved up and down the spiral from losses, attacks, and invalidation while hanging on to enduring uncertainty. A realization of enduring violent situational uncertainty surmounted a more reflective existential type of inner conflict. Individuals instigated a so-called disillusionment when individuals (temporarily) conceived divorce-related expectations. It is rather uncommon in our society to problematize not being able to get divorced or having divorce decelerated (Lebow, 2020). However, this was the reality of most of our interviewees. Finding oneself in the ongoing ambiguity and prolonged waiting created a setting where the losses and gains could not be fully integrated, mourned, or enjoyed. Individuals found themselves in undetermined mourning. Keirse (2017) talks about the mourning-without-end process, paired with enduring losses of hopes and ideals of what the reality could have been or should have been and uncertainty about what can still happen. In those circumstances, individuals feel ongoing helplessness and powerlessness to do something about the situation and the need to find balance in one's life without losing their grip on it. Usually, people dislike waiting situations, particularly when uncertainty about the waiting time is involved. People experience waiting as the anticipated (potentiality) loss, which induces anxiety and, as such, can be considered an agent for psychological stress (Cofer & Appley, 1964). While waiting, it is hard to define self and answer who one is. There is much space for fantasizing and rumination about possible outcome scenarios. One becomes vulnerable to losing self or allowing the inner world to impoverish. The links between distress and time perception suggest the possibility of a downward spiral during stressful waiting periods, such that distress makes time seem to slow down, which exacerbates distress (Rankin et al., 2019).

The divorcees turned inwards to create their own meaning and purpose to face increased uncertainty. People attempted to do so by focusing on their values and

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perceived moral truth. They saw themselves as good, moral, and righteous individuals who could survive life's adversities and come out of them with greater strength and extraordinary experience. Scholars underline that experiencing enduring uncertainty and absurd situations might be both paralyzing and stimulating. In many cases, it questions previous understanding, and besides providing ongoing grief, it might also call for exploring possibilities and elaborating new conduct (Zittoun et al., 2003). Meaning reconstruction becomes a central process in healing in response to losses (Neimeyer & Sands, 2011); it involves sense-making efforts over time.

Although meaning-making may be seen as an effective strategy, it can also have its downsides. Moving from professional authority and expertise to self-authorization and personal agency may be an important part of positive change as an individual develops a sense of self as a knower with agency (Treloar, 2019). However, the full embrace of one's values, directions, and views on the truthfulness of the situation comes with adverse side effects. Once meaning has been encountered, it propels divorcees away from other perspectives, making it difficult for them to let go of the conflict, thus contributing to the perpetuation of HCD (Rovenpor et al., 2019). The above-mentioned duality of meaning-making posits that support strategies can be efficient or inefficient, helpful or not, depending on the specific circumstances. One can see a similar duality with other strategies; therefore, promoting any of them as the solution to all situations without considering possible negative impacts could come at an unexpected cost.

Conclusions

Our research results convey the multidimensionality of conflicts in HCDs. The data indicate the most prominent arguments with a former spouse (Micro level) and conflicts related to the self-concept changes (Onto level). Over time, these conflicts partially transform into disagreements with involved institutions (Exo level) and the country's legal system (Macro level). It deepens the conflict, disappointment, lack of trust in the supporting specialists, and the effectiveness of the legislative system as a whole. Finally, divorcees immerse into the enduring waiting in the ongoing uncertainty (Chrono level), which colors the divorce process in its own colors. Our results invite the reader to view HCD as a multifaceted evolving phenomenon intertwined between many conflicts on multiple levels and therefore more complicated to resolve. The focus of attention should be directed toward the specificity of each individual divorcee and the broader institutional, legislative, and even political environments. Individuals often feel left alone to resolve ongoing disputes. Yet, that might be overdemanding, considering the emotional labor and inefficiencies at the institutional and legislative levels.

We cannot underline more the importance of early interventions. Information about divorce and its preparations should be one of the targets to guard individuals' well-being during this labor-intensive, emotional process. Professionals should have special training on how best to work with each parent to better respond to family needs. There could even be a discussion about specialized teams responsible for supporting parents and coordinating associated professionals (Saini et al., 2013). Specialized (law) psychologists would add much value because distinctive emotional interventions are paramount during the first years of a divorce (Lebow, 2019). Such teams would help prevent treatment providers from working in silos and inadvertently contributing to the conflict (Polak & Saini, 2019).

Emotional labor is significantly high for individuals involved in litigation processes. If other supporting resources are unavailable, lawyers could become the individuals who help divorcees prepare psychologically for the legal process. Lawyers can reduce litigation stress by providing more information about the litigation process, how it might resolve, and the experiences other litigants have had (Keet et al., 2017). A carefully planned litigation process can prevent overreactions to triggers. One should also spend time preventing increased stress and looking for the signs of trauma caused by litigation, which could destabilize the divorcee and prevent them from making the best-calculated decisions, leading to later regrets (Keet et al., 2017). Impaired decision-making capacity does not produce the best outcomes in cases and might further increase conflicts between the divorcees.

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Open Data
The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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