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

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Abstract

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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

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

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

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

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

METHODS

Qualitative design

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

Research ethics

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

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

Recruitment of participants

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

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

Data analysis

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

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

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

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

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

John and Mary's storylines

John's storyline of "being falsely accused"

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

TABLE 1 Parallel storylines of the troublesome other and I

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

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

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

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

Stig and Mette's storylines

Stig's storyline of "the invasive female manipulator"

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

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

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

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

Brian and Karen's storyline

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adam and Hilde's storyline

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Roger and Margaret's storyline

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DISCUSSION

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

The troublesome other and I

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

TABLE 2 Self/other matrix of willingness to cooperativeness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Strengths and imitations of the study

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

Questions for further research

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

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