

Conflict - concern - commitment

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A study of parenthood in high-conflict divorce cases

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¹ See Stokkebekk, Syrstad & Bertelsen (2019)

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1.Introduction – mind the gap

- They talk about the parental conflict, right? I wish we had a different word for it. (From a research interview with a mother)

What are we doing when using the language of high-conflict divorce about parents and children in the wake of family breakup? How are parents' knowledge and experience formed in encounters with professionals in the process of transformation from being a mother or father in despair to becoming part of a high-conflict divorce case? What role do institutional services targeting high-conflict divorce cases play in this process? Are these services part of the problem? And, if they are, do they still harbour an emancipatory potential? These are questions that I raise in this thesis, and I try to keep them open. To accomplish that, I proceed with a sense of uncertainty about what a high-conflict divorce is and what to do with it. As a whole, the thesis seeks to illuminate the connections between institutional services catering to concerns over the consequences of parents' post-divorce disputes and the everyday world of the people addressed by these services. I approach this aspiration from two angles. First, by exploring how high-conflict divorce can be seen as part of the social organisation of knowledge in questions of parenthood in contemporary Norwegian society. As an analytical manoeuvre, this involves locating the activities of both parents and the various professionals mandated to intervene in their lives within the same coordinated pattern of understanding and action. Second, by attempting to locate and address a sense of parental agency vis-à-vis the institutional apparatus whereby parents are identified and addressed as part of a high-conflict divorce case. Throughout the work, I specifically seek to use a vocabulary that speaks of - and to - the individual parent as a subject emerging in dialogue with (but not as a product of) the normative and ruling processes characteristic of a present-day parenting discourse.

1.1 An initial overview of the research process

My interest in post-divorce conflicts springs from 20 years of experience with such conflicts as a clinical psychologist. In my own practice, which began in a family unit within the Norwegian hospital-based child and youth mental health care and later evolved to include working with family therapy and mediation

within the Norwegian Family Counselling Service, such conflicts have consistently stood out as among the most steadily recurring relational patterns characteristic of ‘cases’. As the only child of still-married parents, myself married to the mother of our only daughter, before embarking on the research for this thesis my relationship to such conflicts was formed from the perspective of an outsider. ‘High-conflict divorce’ was something happening to other people – to clients in my office, friends and acquaintances, cases in the clinical and research literature, or in the lives of fictional characters.

In the opening paragraphs of my application for research funding, I unreflectingly reproduced the currently dominant discourse about high-conflict divorce: research has unrelentingly shown post-divorce parental conflicts to constitute a prominent risk factor for children’s psychosocial well-being; such conflicts place a significant burden on public resources, yet, when it comes to designing interventions and professional services that might help parents put an end to their conflicts, we collectively seem to be at a loss; “*more research is needed to increase the quality of services and secure optimal use of resources.*”² Here, I treated high-conflict divorce as an intra-familial phenomenon with a predictable prevalence and a set of known associated risks. When framed as a clinical problem, its inner workings appeared as something to be figured out by meticulous research, preparing the ground for evidence-based programmes and interventions.

The research project that I described as my bid to contribute toward this end consisted of a naturalistic case study conducted according to an ethnographic methodology. It started with an initial engagement via participant observation within the local practising of a multi-family therapy programme for families in high-conflict divorce situations in the Agder region of South Norway. Subsequently, I interviewed parents, therapists, child welfare caseworkers and judges who all were, in some way, stakeholders in this local practice. The particular model according to which the groups were conducted was the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ programme (van Lawick & Visser, 2015). This model represents an innovative approach to working with enduring high-conflict divorce issues, utilising a multi-family group therapy format. As the name

² This is a direct quote from my project description.

indicates, the programme was not designed to resolve individual parental conflicts but rather to enable parents to better understand how their conflicts affect their children and equip parents with the knowledge and skills to act responsibly on these insights. The programme relies on experiential exercises and joint activities between parents and children to facilitate open dialogues about how to make children's situations less hurtful. Each multi-family group involves up to six pairs of parents and their children, who come together for eight bi-weekly group meetings lasting about two hours.

When the research began, I understood 'the case' to be studied to be the multi-family group *practice*. As suggested by Abma and Stake (2014), the initial research question was not more complicated than "how can we understand the case better?" (p. 1151). Pursuing this question, I sought to foster an understanding of some of the different ways that such a clinical programme made sense (or not) to its various stakeholders. What came to push the research forward were concerns and puzzles that became apparent as the process of inquiry progressed, driven not by a desire to test or build theory but by a wish to see what could best be learnt from the case.

From my perspective as a researcher, the most troubling of these issues was that, for many of the parents that I interviewed, taking part in the clinical practice that I considered to be 'the case' did not seem all that significant. Instead, for many, it appeared to be "one of those things" that *one* did as a parent when part of a high-conflict divorce situation. From the perspective of a mother or father - whose everyday life was spent commuting between lawyers, courtrooms, meetings with therapists, mediators, and caseworkers, spending their days documenting every phone call, e-mail, and text-message exchange, their evenings studying case documents, and their nights lying awake worrying about their children or about how to afford the next round of court litigation - taking part in an eight-sessions, multi-family group therapy programme did not necessarily seem like a big deal. One of the parents who participated in the study exclaimed that "I accept any suggestion if it can be of help. I've tried so many things... but so far, nothing has been helpful, really."

During the research process, an awareness of a mismatch between the generic image of the 'high-conflict divorce parent' implied in most research and policy

development, and parents' subjective knowledge from their everyday lives, snuck up on me. Interviewing parents who were part of high-conflict divorce cases, the unidirectional and instrumental understanding of the relationship between parents' conflicts and professionals' actions that I had entertained when designing the study seemed gradually more and more alien from what appeared to be parents' experiential realities. Instead, their identities as high-conflict families, the final proof of which was them being referred to the multi-family group programme that constituted my research project's point of access to them, seemed to some extent to have been fixated through their participation in a sequence of orchestrated dialogues in meetings with professionals from legal, welfare and therapeutic services. Hence, if I was to understand 'the case' of the therapeutic practice, I decided that I needed to construct an account of the institutional processes that the parents I had interviewed were already part of and to develop an understanding of what was already at stake for them upon entering the multi-family therapy programme.

Eventually, I found linguistic and analytical tools that enabled me to handle what I was discovering in the sociology of Dorothy Smith (2005) and Gert Biesta's (2009; 2020a) language for education. Although not immediately compatible vocabularies, in separate ways, they provided me with concepts that allowed me to engage with the data so as to leave space for the study participants to remain 'selves' in the texts that I produced and to take their attempts at existing as subjects of their own lives seriously. The first two articles I wrote began from a standpoint in parents' experience. Drawing on the methodology and sociology of institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005; 2006), I analysed accounts from interviews where parents talked about either their everyday lives in general (Bertelsen, 2021a) or encounters with professionals as part of the process of becoming a 'high-conflict divorce case' (Bertelsen, 2021b). These articles were not directly related to the multi-family therapy programme. Instead, they sought to explicate the interface between subjective experience and institutional organisation and illuminate how the social organisation of high-conflict divorce was actually happening. For the last article I wrote (Bertelsen, 2021c), I started the analysis from my field notes from participant observation in a 'No Kids in the Middle' multi-family therapy group. In this article, I attempted to understand the

educational potential of this multi-family therapy programme, drawing primarily on Gert Biesta's (2009; 2020a) educational vocabulary.

1.1.1 From third-person perspective to first-person accounts

Becoming aware of the gap between institutional truth and experiential reality represented a significant turning point in the research process. It did not happen suddenly but was the result of the ongoing dialogue between my engaging with the study participants, working analytically with data, being in conversation with my team of research supervisors, and searching the literature for concepts and frameworks that could help me make sense of what I was finding. This forced me to step out of the safety of a distanced, third-person perspective of high-conflict divorce, attuning instead to participants' first-person accounts of everyday reality (Biesta, 2020a).

By third-person perspective, I refer to any view that treats social reality as a collection of general phenomena that can be theorised and explained in a unified and coherent way from the outside, independently of subjective experience. This perspective is usually taken in theoretical, clinical, and policy approaches to child-related disputes between not-cohabiting parents. It also covers the aims and understandings with which I initially began this study. By first-person accounts, I mean the kind of descriptions and understandings that speak to, and from, the reality of subjective experience. For a mother or father, 'high-conflict divorce' is not primarily a social ill or a generic condition to suffer from; it is a continually renewed and specific question about what to do as a parent, arising at the border between social organisation, subjective experience, and moral commitment. The answer to this question is, ultimately, something that each person must figure out for themselves. Dealing with this shift in perspective, the articles that make out the main body of work for the thesis represent three separate tactical attempts at finding a vocabulary that was not contingent on the same discourse through which I had initiated the research. The methodological choices made, and the academic resources relied on, represent my scaffolding of this shift, constructed to help me figure out the characteristics of the territory I found myself moving through, the places it allowed me to visit, and to locate and deal with the obstacles that got in the way.

1.2 Overall objective of the thesis

The thesis asks not primarily what the consequences of post-divorce conflict are, or whether a particular therapeutic model works or not, but perhaps most of all what is highlighted or solidified, and what recedes, when conflict is taken up as a perspective. I suggest that there is risk associated with using conflict as the primary lens through which we, as a society, attune to not-cohabiting parents who stay in situations of unresolved trouble concerning their children. As our knowledge about what *good* parents ought to do grows ever more convincing, the room for *actual* parents to take action in their own lives seems, in a certain sense, to shrink proportionally. This dynamic is challenging to spot from the perspective of general policy or scientific objectivity. When starting from a standpoint in people's everyday experience, on the other hand, the gap between abstract or institutional truths and actual and experienced reality is, at least as I have come to see it, striking.

To illuminate and explore this gap, the study's aims were threefold: first, I sought to understand how parents' knowledge and actions in high-conflict divorce cases relate to the social organisation of parenthood in a general sense. Second, I was interested in finding out what happens to parents' concerns when they engage in institutionalised sequences of dialogues with professionals. Third, I wanted to find out if, and how, there is room for parents' subjective agency within a therapeutic programme that is itself part of the social organisation of post-divorce parenting, and to figure out a way to conceptualise this. In the three articles that make up the core of the thesis, these aims were further articulated as three research questions:

- 1) How does the knowledge and experience of parents who are part of a high-conflict divorce situation exist in dialogue with dominant strands of discourse about parenting and divorce? (Article 1, Bertelsen, 2021a).
- 2) How are parents' knowledge and experience shaped through encounters with caseworkers in the process of becoming a high-conflict case? (Article 2, Bertelsen, 2021b).
- 3) How are parents who are identified as part of a high-conflict case positioned vis-à-vis social norms, their children, and themselves as acting

subjects when engaging with a particular model for multi-family group therapy practice? (Article 3, Bertelsen, 2021c).

In my discussion of the findings from the three articles, the two concepts accompanying conflict in the thesis' title - concern and commitment - represent my attempt at widening the conversation about post-divorce troubles to better make room for the everyday realities of real people. I hope that this will encourage in the reader - be that reader an academic, a professional, a legislator or policymaker, or a parent in post-divorce conflict (or more than one of the above at the same time) – a sense both of social orientation and subjective agency, via a heightened sensibility for the precarious, heterogeneous, and complex real-life actualities hidden underneath the high-conflict divorce umbrella. As such, the thesis is a work aspiring toward solidarity – not in the sense of making claims about a common human nature, but more in the direction of how Richard Rorty (1989) conceived of it as a will to attend to “the pain and humiliation of others, doubt that present institutional arrangements are adequate to deal with this pain and humiliation,” and a “curiosity about possible alternatives” (p. 198).

2. The institutional context of high-conflict divorce

After separation or divorce, many parents experience that enduring and unresolved issues concerning their children affect not only the relationship between parents or between parent and child. Often, it engages the institutions of family legislation, child welfare, family therapy and mediation, schools, community health services, and extended family and social networks (Anderson, Anderson, Palmer, Mutchler & Baker, 2010; Birnbaum & Bala 2010; Visser et al. 2017). In this chapter, I begin by giving a brief outline of the institutional architecture for divorce and post-divorce disagreements as it is currently organised in Norway. I then provide a discussion of ‘high-conflict divorce’ as a concept. Finally, after presenting how parents in high-conflict divorce cases are typically constructed from the standpoint of practitioners, I suggest treating high-conflict divorce not as a clinical concept with psychological connotations but as a linguistic expression that orients us to the social organisation of family policy and parenting ideology in present-day societies.

2.1 The architecture for divorce and post-divorce (dis)agreements in Norway

Norway is a somewhat unique case when it comes to the organisation of the institutional interface between public and private issues concerning the care for children in situations of family breakup or post-breakup disagreement between parents. Due to this country’s unique scheme for statutory, mandatory mediation, all parents with children below the age of 16 who wish to end their relationship as partners (whether they are married or cohabiting) must seek mediation (Marriage Act, 1991; Children Act, 1981). The primary purpose of mediation is to encourage and assist parents in producing a written custody agreement specifying a division of legal and physical custody and the amount of children’s time to be spent with each parent (Barne- og familiedepartementet, 2006). For married couples, a certificate of mediation is required to be allowed to apply for legal separation. For both separated married and cohabiting parents, many of the financial support schemes available from the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration require a written parenting agreement and a certificate of mediation (Domstoladministrasjonen, 2019). If parents who have already moved apart wish to bring issues related to child custody or visitation to court, a recent

(i.e., within the past six months) certificate of mediation is required. Thus, the breaking up of a cohabiting family unit and the institutional framework drawn up for this transmission and dealing with issues of concern that might ensue in its wake involve both a personal or private dimension and a public and governmental one.

In addition to mediation, state involvement in divorce-related conflicts is achieved via district courts and child welfare services. While mediation is a consultative service, courts can regulate the domestic sphere directly (Ottosen, 2006). If parents' conflicts persist over time, repeatedly engaging the institutions of mediation and litigation without seeming to reach a sustainable agreement, child welfare services are sometimes notified. Such a notification of concern is authorised by an understanding of prolonged conflict as itself a condition of neglect (Barne,- likestillings- og inkluderings- departementet, 2013). Although rarely implemented, an intense conflict between parents is considered a legitimate reason for promoting a care order if the conflict can be shown to seriously hamper the parents' capacity as caregivers (Child Welfare Act, 1991, §4–12).

2.2 High-conflict divorce – clarification of the concept and some common understandings of it

When the relationship between non-cohabiting parents remains hostile despite attempts at mediation or where parents have repeatedly sought litigation in court, their situation is commonly referred to as a 'high-conflict divorce case'.

Statistically, having parents who constitute a high-conflict divorce case has consistently been found to increase the likelihood of a significant number of psychological and social troubles in children (see Amato, 2010; Hetherington, 2006, for comprehensive overviews).

During the past three decades, there has been a trend across most Western industrialised countries, including the U.S. (Amato, 2010; Gruber, 2003; Wolfers, 2006), England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, England, and Wales, 2011) and Australia (Parkinson, 2011) characterised by an increase in the number of legal disputes over children's living arrangements. In 2004, Neff and Cooper (2004) estimated that the top 10 per cent of conflict-ridden cases in the U.S.

Family Law Courts took up 90 per cent of the courts' resources. In the Norwegian context, between 2001 and 2006, the courts saw a 50 per cent increase in the number of litigations concerning child custody, parental responsibility, and visitations (Koch, 2008). This statistical curve flattened between 2009 and 2014, but the tendency remained the same (Oxford Research, 2016). Treloar (2018) points out that these developments have happened in parallel with (and in some sense despite) a proliferation in research, policies, and interventions to mitigate inter-parental conflict after separation.

Several Norwegian (Gulbrandsen 2013; Gulbrandsen & Tjersland, 2011; Koch, 2000; Ådnanes et al., 2011) and international (Buchanan et al., 2001; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011; Smart & May, 2004; Smart, May, Wade, & Furniss, 2005) studies have looked at what the main issues of concern in high-conflict cases are. These studies show much variation, but common between these cases is that parents disagree about residence and contact (Jevne, 2017). Since these are the issues that the legal framework and professional guidelines for mediators and other professionals (in Norway and other countries) define as legitimate grounds for seeking mediation or filing for litigation, this is not surprising.

It is difficult to find a single account providing a concise and comprehensive empirical definition of 'high-conflict' in the context of divorce and separation or child welfare. Francia, Milliar and Sharman (2019) noted that suggested definitions often derive from theory, reviews of previous literature, observations from legal professionals, or authors' personal clinical experience. Literature reviews are often motivated by an interest in deciphering the relationship between high-conflict divorce and other factors, such as children's adjustment, or the impact of specific interventions (Haddad, Phillips, & Bone, 2016), and not a primary concern for understanding the real-life correlates of the concept itself. Some researchers have stressed the importance of differentiating high conflict from domestic violence, recognising that violence can sometimes be disguised as high conflict and poor communication (Archer-Kuhn, 2018; Kelly, 2003). Johnston (2006) similarly argues that although high levels of conflict may sometimes *involve* violence, they should be distinguished from relationships where the presence of violence is a dominant condition.

A decade ago, Birnbaum and Bala (2010) wrote that although high-conflict disputes received much attention among social science researchers during the first decade of the present millennium, and although the term was already then in frequent use in the courts, the lack of a clear scientific operationalisation prevented coordinated progress in this area. Analysing existing social science literature and Canadian case law, they demonstrated that the language of high-conflict was both ambiguous and vague. They point out that this could easily lead to situations involving varying degrees of violence, alienation, or abuse, to be lumped together with situations characterised by non-hostile difficulties in communication and cooperation, and differing parenting styles, as instances of the same. Nevertheless, despite this vagueness and ambiguity, they observed that the concept ‘high-conflict’ was still often used as if homogenous and robust when justifying arguments, parenting recommendations, and decisions in the context of child custody disputes. Based on this analysis, these authors tentatively suggested distinguishing between high-conflict cases characterised by a) poor communication, b) domestic violence, and c) parental alienation. They also suggested the need for differentiating between cases where conflict is mutual and cases with one apparent instigator.

2.2.1 Parents in high-conflict divorce cases as seen from practitioners’ standpoint

Distinguishing between these different qualities of dispute may significantly contribute to improved accuracy in various professional judgements vis-à-vis situations of disagreement between parents. However, another characteristic of this and many other conceptualisations of high-conflict divorce is that it represents what might be referred to as a *third-person perspective* on this phenomenon; that is, it locates high-conflict divorce as something objectively happening to someone (else) and marks it as primarily a dyadic dynamic. Conceived as something that parents *do*, post-divorce conflict is sometimes further considered a form of parental neglect and, thus, parental “failure” (Barne, - likestillings- og inkluderingsdepartementet, 2013; Neale & Smart, 1997; Smart & Neale, 1997). Summarising what the research literature says about parents in high-conflict divorce, Kelly (2003) wrote that:

“The characteristics of parents in enduring disputes, aside from high conflict and intense anger, include pervasive distrust, poor or nonexistent communication, disregard, contempt for the other, or both, extreme polarisation in views, imperviousness to rational positions or arguments, unsubstantiated allegations of abuse or poor parenting, loss of child focus, and frequent use of the child to express rage toward the ex-partner” (Kelly, 2003, p. 38).

Many practitioners, I believe, will find this a recognisable image of how parents in high-conflict divorce cases often come across vis-à-vis professionals who are mandated to help them in some way. In the fields of family therapy and child welfare, working with high-conflict divorce cases constitutes a problem that practitioners often find to cause frequent feelings of personal failure and despair (Kåstad, Halvorsen & Samsonsen, in press; Rød, Ekeland & Thuen, 2008; van Lawick & Visser, 2015).

Based on both a thorough review of literature from the divorce mediation field and personal experience as a mediator, Guldbrandsen (2016) suggested that, as observed from the standpoint of mediators, the critical characteristics of couples in high conflict are:

- Opposing views on issues that both hold to be essential.
- Strong distrust characterised by pointing out various forms of betrayal and ascribing hidden motives and traits to the other.
- High degree of defensiveness characterised by a refusing or ignoring of arguments and frequent counterattacks.
- High emotional pressure, often in the form of aggressive, challenging, or sarcastic and disrespectful language, and sometimes as reactive physical attacks, emotional expressions of despair, sorrow, or fear, or as frozen or contained emotionality.
- Absence of positive appraisals or confirmations.
- Incompatible narratives about the couple’s history, each other as parents, the breakup, and the co-parenting relationship in its wake.
- Repeated and often escalating hostile exchanges.
- Frequent derailments in the conversation and recurrent breaches of attempts at constructive clarifications.

- Triangulation, as in attempts at seeking support from third parties involved. (Gulbrandsen, 2016, p. 27, *my translation*).

These, Gulbrandsen suggests, should be considered characteristics of how parents *appear* from the practitioner's standpoint. It is, importantly, not an attempt at explaining what is (or has been) happening, nor is it an attempt at making claims about the truth value of what is being said or about parents' intentions. Some of these characteristics will be observable in many, if not most, of divorce situations to some degree. Whether a particular case should be considered a high-conflict case from the mediator's standpoint must, according to Gulbrandsen, necessarily depend on an overall assessment of the exchanges taking place, particularly the emotional vibrance of the interactions.

2.2.2 High-conflict divorce as a mode of institutional engagement

In more general terms, the concept 'high-conflict divorce' is typically used to refer to "a challenging minority of cases that are consistently identified as difficult, complex, time-consuming, and costly for individuals, practitioners and the courts" (Smyth & Maloney, 2017, p. 405). When referred to in this way, high-conflict divorce demarcates a particular mode of engagement between families and institutions of the state, more than it provides specific and reliable information about similarities between the actual parents involved. Instead of inviting speculation about the diagnostic (psychiatric or otherwise) characteristics of parents in an ongoing conflict, Smyth and Maloney's (2017) definition highlights some common characteristics typical of the *case*: it is experienced as difficult, complex, time-consuming, and costly. It does not ascribe responsibility for the origin of conflict to particular subjects or attempt to describe what characterises people typically involved in such cases. Instead, it points to a set of concerns or experiences likely to be shared by anyone involved in such a case, from whatever position.

In the research for this thesis, I have used the concept 'high-conflict divorce' similarly to how Smyth and Moloney suggest. I have treated it as a descriptive concept designating a particular set of institutionalised engagements between parents, children, and professionals. My interest in high-conflict divorce is neither conceptual nor diagnostic but pragmatic and existential; I have explored

ethnographically some of the ways that high-conflict divorce, as an institutional complex, affected the everyday lives of parents. Scientifically, my work does not contribute toward a different or more precise nosology of high-conflict divorce. It is simply a study of what goes on when people engage with the concept under specific circumstances. In the next section, I outline some of the primary institutional responses, or frameworks for interaction, by which state institutions seek to respond to high-conflict divorce as a phenomenon.

2.3 Institutional measures to reduce the negative impact of post-divorce conflicts

Political changes in social services and healthcare systems and changes in professional power – what Foucault (2006) refers to as ‘modern power’ - is reflected in the increasing popularity of clinical guidelines. The current ideal for such guidelines in clinical services is ‘evidence-based practice,’ representing the idea of integrating “the best available research with clinical expertise in the context of patient characteristics, culture, and preferences” (APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, 2006, p. 273). In Norway, within the general public discourse about children’s living conditions, there is a growing concern about the consequences of severe and long-lasting parental conflicts and a growing governmental push to develop clinical guidelines for use in working with families identified as being in high conflict (Barneombudet, 2012; Bufdir 2015; 2016; Helland & Borren, 2015; Rød, Ekeland & Thuen, 2008).

Most Western countries have established policies for systematically managing the interface between person, family, and state in matters of post-divorce conflict (Parkinson, 2011). Some examples of such initiatives are the Unified Family Courts in the U.S. and Canada (Babb & Danziger 2008), the establishing of Family Relationship Centres in Australia (Parkinson 2013), and the Norwegian scheme for mandatory mediation for parents moving apart (Children Act 1981; Marriage Act 1991) or finding themselves in a situation of conflict when living apart (Children Act 1981). As part of what some refer to as a global tendency toward an increasing professionalisation of childrearing practices in general, in this and many other areas of life, parents are seen as needing public support, advice, and guidance (Gillies, 2005). This view implies a notion that parents

who, for some reason, fall outside of the norm of amicable divorce lack the information and assistance that they need to establish effective parenting.

Mediation represents an institutional approach that has become more prevalent internationally for supporting divorcing parents toward non-adversarial resolution of child-related conflicts (Amato, 2010; Folger & Bush, 2001; Douglas, 2006; Emery, Sbarra & Grover, 2005). It is a mode of conflict resolution designed to help parents resolve disagreements over issues such as child custody, access arrangements, and child support. In Norway, mediation is mandatory for separating parents with children below the age of 16, whether they are married (Marriage Act, 1991, § 26) or cohabiting (Children Act, 1981, §51, third paragraph). Mediation is also mandatory for parents seeking court litigation over issues concerning the care of their children after divorce or breakup (Children Act, 1981, § 51, first paragraph). The Norwegian mediation scheme's main intention is to promote cooperation through assisting parents in reaching an agreement regarding future care for their children (Barne- og familiedepartementet, 2006).

In Norway, mandatory mediation is administered by the state-run Family Counselling Service. Internationally, there are few services equal to this. To my knowledge, the service that comes closest to it is the Australian Family Relationship Centres, which are part of the Australian family law system. These centres provide information, advice, and free or heavily subsidised mediation to parents in child-related disputes. The centres constitute a significant part of an Australian national early intervention strategy to help parents manage the transition from parenting together to parenting apart in the aftermath of separation. They also play a role in strengthening intact family relationships, primarily through providing advice and referring families to other services when needed (Parkinson, 2013). In the U.S. and Canada, Unified Family Courts serve some of the same purposes. These provide coordinated services to those who bring family-related issues before the court system, handling questions of divorce, legal separation, parentage, domestic abuse, restraining orders, child, spousal, and family support, child custody and visitation, child abuse and neglect, children's violations of criminal law, as well as mediation and self-help services for parents (e.g., parent education programmes) (Babb & Danziger, 2008).

Gulbrandsen, Haavind and Tjersland (2018) point out that, in the Norwegian context, formal guidelines for mediators meeting parents in high conflict emphasise the responsibility to inform parents about laws and regulations, the value of agreements, and standard or typical reactions in children. Such a focus is also characteristic of many educational and therapeutic programmes internationally, targeting parents in divorce (Amato, 2010). These typically involve a mix of curricular material containing information on child development, how inter-parental conflicts affect children, communication skills, and practical exercises relevant to the topics introduced (Jerwell et al., 2017; Kramer et al., 1998). In recent years, such programmes for parent education or “training” have become a favoured way for governments to implement family policy agendas throughout Europe and the U.S., both to improve the general quality of parenting in the population (Gillies, 2005; Hopman & Knijn, 2015; Widding, 2011) and to specifically counter the presumed detrimental effects of divorce (Amato, 2010). In the Norwegian context, one of the latest additions to institutional attempts at preventing and ameliorating severe conflicts between divorced parents is a standardised two-hour informational course for parents who are engaged in mediation (referred to as “Mini-Course,” (Barne-, ungdoms- og familieetaten, 2017)). These courses are also an integrated part of a new standardised three-to-six sessions model for high-conflict mediation referred to as “process mediation,” which has been implemented as the model of choice for mediation in cases where divorced parents seek to bring their dispute before a court (Kåstad, 2018; Kåstad, Halvorsen & Samsonsens, in press).

In line with an understanding of high-conflict divorce as an inferior or ignorant way of *doing* parenthood, in an op-ed in the Norwegian newspaper Aftenposten, the head of the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth, and Families (Bufdir) drew a parallel between research on cot death associated with belly-sleeping in babies, and research showing a link between post-divorce conflicts and children’s psychosocial development:

“Research shows [...] a link between divorce and deterioration in mental health and school attrition in children. It is not the breakup, but long-lasting conflicts between parents, that hurt children. Research shows that when parents are provided with knowledge about how the conflict affects

their children, they take this into consideration and change. Knowledge works.” (Trommald, 2015, *my translation*)

As I understand this claim, it aligns with a dominant understanding of high-conflict divorce as a failure in parenting. It can be further taken to imply an understanding of parents who engage in such conflicts as more or less ignorant of their children’s needs and as catering primarily to their own narcissistic desires. This establishes a schism between the parental dyad as the site of a conflicts’ origin and the target for intervention on the one side, and policy-backed professional expertise on the other. Parents need a wake-up call in the form of someone showing them that what they are doing is not good enough, what to do instead, and how to do what they ought to be doing.

2.4 Critique of high-conflict divorce as a concept descriptive of people

In this thesis, I do not intend to challenge the basic assumptions that I understand to be the primary motivation for this view: that being a child caught between divorced parents in perpetual conflict is a bad place to be and that for children and parents alike, an everyday life characterised by mutual trust and respect is preferable to one where these qualities are lacking. However, while the idea of solving societal problems by developing effective services supported by scientific evidence has obvious appeal both to common sense and to public policy decision-makers, the straightforward and technical connection between cause and effect implied in the idea of ‘evidence-based practice’ has been criticised for being too positivist, reductionist, and rationalist to make sense, or be of use, in the context of such complex phenomena as human relational problems (Harrison, 1998). Epistemologically, post-positivist, feminist, and phenomenologically informed critiques further emphasise that science is itself a profoundly social endeavour. Rather than increasing authority through alleged objectivity using research methodologies approximating scientific experiments, some claim that such procedures obscure the subjective elements that inescapably enter all forms of human inquiry (Goldenberg, 2006). Existentially, the idea of evidence itself – irrespective of epistemological stance – can even be

said to work against personal agency by making the value of human action into a technical and instrumental question.

Informed by such critiques, a key aspiration in all the three articles for this thesis was to problematise what I consider to be an implicit assumption in many policies and clinical guidelines for working with families in high-conflict divorce situations. This assumption is that the problem of high conflict resides within, and begins with, parents (at least to a large extent) and that what the state or other governing bodies do when intervening is to offer up a counterforce to the destructive effects of parents' priorities and actions. In most Western liberal democracies, where child-centric values have a strong standing (Hennum, 2014), grown-up, independent citizens are entitled to fashion their own lives and cater to their subjective desires as long as these do not interfere with the wellbeing of others, most of all children (whose "best interests" are to be safeguarded and given priority). Post-divorce conflicts have been shown to have reasonably predictable negative consequences for children, thus mandating the state to intervene to guide and instruct parents toward more amicable solutions. Ultimately, representatives of the state can remove children from their parents' care should the parents persistently fail to shield their children from witnessing conflict (Barne,- likestillings- og inkluderingsdepartementet, 2013). In this way, the mandates of social institutions catering to high-conflict divorce cases are framed as limits to individual freedom. The activity of doing high-conflict as parents is treated if not as narcissistic hedonism, then at least as a form of egoistic parental behaviour where children's basic emotional needs are sacrificed in pursuit of self-centred desires.

In the next chapter, I turn to qualitative research exploring high-conflict divorce situations from parents' perspectives. This research paints a different and more complex picture of parents involved in high-conflict divorce cases.

3. Parents' meaning-making and experience in high-conflict divorce cases

While much research has been devoted to documenting how post-divorce parental conflicts affect children's psychosocial wellbeing, the literature on individual parents' knowledge and experience within high-conflict divorce situations is much more limited. In a recent review article assessing the available qualitative research on separated parents' meaning-making and experiences in the context of child custody disputes, Francia, Millear and Sharman (2019) identified eight studies where mothers and fathers' meaning-making and experiences of enduring (i.e., lasting more than two years) high-conflict co-parenting relationships were examined. As they interpret the aggregated findings from the studies included in their review, these authors suggest that the primary reason motivating parents to engage in such conflicts appears to be their concerns for the children's safety and wellbeing when in the care of the other parent. They further suggest that the data reviewed support an understanding of parents' experience of high-conflict divorce as reflective of a co-parenting relationship embedded in pervasive mistrust, fuelled by the individual parent's concerns over differing parenting styles or for the other parent's ability to provide adequate care for the child, and a mutual sense of disdain from the other parent about one's concerns. This last point, the authors suggest, might in part be connected to the nature of the family law system in many countries, which often works to position parents as adversaries (a point also made by Jonston, Roseby & Kuehnle, 2009). This situation, they suggest, does not support the kinds of behaviours and attitudes generally associated with cooperation and trust. I now turn to some of the studies reviewed by Francia, Millear and Sharman (2019) and a recent study (Treloar, 2018; 2019) not included in their review.

3.1 Research on parents' concerns in high-conflict divorce cases

Cashmore and Parkinson (2011) explored the dynamics of contact disputes between parents in Australia, interviewing 20 parents who had participated in a court-ordered programme designed to assist families where parents seek court litigation to settle contact disputes. In interviews, the individual parent's

understanding of the history and nature of the disputes, their experience of the court system, and their response to the mediation programme were explored. The authors found that the central concern for these parents was worrying over the child's safety and wellbeing when in the other parent's care, mainly when children were below school age. A second critical issue was a wish to behave responsibly when children expressed resistance to contact, especially on the question of overnight stays where the child was not close with the visitation parent. Also, issues such as the presence of new partners and financial disagreement appeared to fuel disputes.

Aiming to understand what characterises conflicts behind legal disputes over custody and access between parents, Bergman and Rejmer (2017) did a textual analysis of summons applications from six district courts in Sweden, including statements of defence, rapid information inquiries, and custody investigations. Based on this material, the authors distinguish between two kinds of conflicts: conflicts of interest and conflicts of values. In their use of the terms, a conflict of interest occurs when parents disagree on matters relating to time with the child, maintenance responsibilities, or the right to information about the child. In other words, a conflict of interest is characterised by two parties competing for a scarce resource. In contrast, they suggest that custody conflicts can be categorised as a conflict of values when the issues addressed are allegations of lack of parenting capabilities, accusations of drug use, mental health issues, or domestic violence. The authors point out that while there is good reason to assume that conflicts of interest might be productively settled via mediation and compromises, conflicts of values are not necessarily of a kind that can be settled in the same sense³. In the data material they analysed, Bergman and Rejmer found that most conflicts could best be defined as conflicts of values, stemming from concern about the other parent's capability to care for younger children. These included lack of child-care ability, cooperation difficulties, allegations of ongoing violence, addiction, mental or physical illness, access sabotage, and threats to take the child abroad. They also found that arguments underlying summons applications were often formulated as attempts to represent children's wishes (e.g., that a

³ Bergman and Rejmer's (2017) point resembles the way the philosopher Stuart Hampshire (2000) distinguishes between justice in procedures and justice in matters of substance. While, as a procedural matter, justice is accomplished when both parties in a conflict are equally heard in a process of rational, adversary reasoning, Hampshire argues that in matters of substance, typical of moral conflicts, just procedures do not necessarily lead to the *experience* of justice being done.

summons application was filed as a response by one parent to the child's concerns or worries about the other parent).

Jevne and Andenæs (2017) made similar findings when interviewing Norwegian parents who were in contact with the Child Welfare Service during custodial disagreements. In this study, the dynamics in high-conflict divorce situations was conceptualised as a dialectic between two identity positions from where parents articulated their concerns: as a concerned parent or an accused parent. These positions were associated with different approaches to questions concerning the sharing of care for children. Typically, the concerned parent would worry about the child's wellbeing while staying with the other parent, seeking ways to extend one's care and responsibility into the other parent's household. The parent accused of not providing proper care, on the other hand, would easily perceive the co-parent's involvement as undue, motivating him or her to take steps toward increased distance in the co-parenting relationship.

In a naturalistic study of audio recordings from high-conflict divorce mediations in Norway, Guldbrandsen, Haavind and Tjersland (2018) sought to explore what drives conflict in actual conversations in mediation. They found that discussions based on general terms such as "the child's best interest" and principles of "fairness" seemed to drive, rather than contribute to illuminate or resolve, conflicts (a finding also made in an associated study by Kjøs, Madsen and Tjersland, 2015). The authors conclude that neither informative practices nor a strict orientation toward agreement seems to be constructive when both parents are deeply concerned and upset.

In a study based on interviews with Canadian parents with an experience of having been part of a high-conflict divorce, Treloar (2018) places high-conflict divorce in a life course perspective, focusing on how parents changed as individuals over time as they responded to their evolving circumstances. Treloar stresses that these processes are not limited to being personal or inter-personal but occur in an intersectional social, political, and legal context that changes over time. Treloar found that among the parents she interviewed, adverse experiences associated with conflict were often paralleled by a sense of personal growth if and when parents were supported with resources that addressed their particular needs and challenges. Both in this article and a second article based on the same data material (Treloar, 2019), Treloar argues that taking a "long view" of the

challenges facing parents in high-conflict divorce situations might open new vistas for widening, and moving on from, decontextualised and individualised understandings of high-conflict divorce.

Taken together, the findings from these studies suggest that high-conflict divorce should not exclusively be taken as a descriptive label referring to a phenomenon observed in a specific portion of family breakups. It also seems to be a somewhat *performative* concept (Austin, 1962), giving shape to what can be said and done by parents and professionals alike in situations where the institutions of the state get activated by concerns between parents not living together. The findings from the studies reviewed above all support an understanding of high-conflict patterns in relationships between divorced parents as a process that, from parents' point of view, is connected to deeply held personal values of care and concern for the wellbeing of their children as well as to broadly held social values and norms. Just as much as it can be taken to be a *cause* that justifies repeated state intervention, high conflict can be seen as happening in *dialogue* with repeated engagements with state institutions.

I believe we begin here to see a difference between high conflict as illuminated from a perspective of parenting as an objective domain of expertise on the one hand and as the subjective task of managing or negotiating one's parenthood on the other. The idea of parenting as expertise seems to underpin many current policies and intervention strategies. According to Vansielegheem (2010), building preventive parental services on predefined criteria, standardised tests, and effect studies severely hinders any parent's ability to speak *as a parent*. The parental figures present in such a discourse are described by Suissa (2006) as "rather one-dimensional, uncomplicated figures" who "impart values, exert authority, make choices and have comprehensive conceptions of the good" (p. 73). Thus, there appears to be a certain distance between the outsider, or third-person, view of governance that holds high-conflict divorce to indicate that parents are not "doing their job" appropriately and parents' insider view of their engagement.

In contrast to government documents and professional guidelines, where parents are addressed as more or less generic figures, authors writing from a first-person position often provide different descriptions of parental existence. For example, in her thorough investigation of the everyday worries of contemporary American mothers, Sarah Menkedick (2020) writes that "in decisive moments, when

expectations vaporise amid vivid reality, we are often not who we had imagined being. Motherhood is this shift made permanent” (p. 356). I believe Menkedick’s statement represents an existential observation that not exclusively speaks to mothers’ experience (although my using it here is admittedly an abduction to some degree), but to the predicament of parenthood in general. This perspective on parenthood quickly disappears when addressed from the third-person perspective of professional and academic expertise (Treloar, 2018). As Suissa (2006) notes, neither public policy nor statistics-based research are well-suited genres for describing or elaborating the nuances, dilemmas, and struggles that are often part of parents’ everyday world:

“Nowhere in these images do I recognise the people I meet everyday ... people who also happen to be parents. These people are often confused and constantly challenged by the experience of being a parent; developing, refining and questioning their ideals and values; and struggling to find a balance between their selves and their children, their love and their anxieties, their ideals and their fears. Crucially, they are engaged in a process not just of *doing* - ‘parenting’, in other words - but of *being*” (Suissa, 2006, p. 73, emphasis in original).

3.2 Psychotherapy and everyday life

When the study for the present thesis was initially conceived, the overarching goal was to contribute to the implementation and further development of the local practice of a particular clinical programme for parents and children identified as high-conflict cases, the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ programme (van Lawick & Visser, 2015), in the Agder region of South Norway. To this end, I adopted a qualitative and ethnographic study design (Creswell, 2007; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), following two separate multi-family groups run at two different locations during the interval between February 2018 and June 2019, utilising participant observation and individual and group interviews as primary methods for generating data (see chapter 5). The initial ambition of the study was to establish a view of the therapy practice from within the individual lives of participants. I wanted to approach the therapy practice not as a

technology applied to a set of problems but as something a group of people were bringing into existence as they came together for what I presumed to be a shared set of purposes.

During the research process, the primary focus shifted from a more phenomenological preoccupation with understanding how high conflict divorce and taking part in this specific therapy programme was experienced by the participants in the form of events, or as given phenomena around which the various participants would congregate. Instead, my interest turned toward how participants' differing experiences could be understood to be evoked in dialogue with the form of social organisation of which the group practice was a part. While interviewing parents, this shift gradually happened as I realised that their narratives rarely fitted particularly well with the cultural script about parents in high conflict as self-centred caregivers in *need* of professional intervention. Instead, their identities as high-conflict families, the final proof of which was them being referred to the multi-family group programme, seemed to some extent to have been fixated through their participation in a sequence of orchestrated dialogues in meetings with legal, welfare and therapeutic services (which became the central theme in my Article 2, Bertelsen, 2021b).

This shift in research interest involved a profound epistemological shift, from the outsider, birds-eye view of multi-perspectivity to a situated view located in the embodied experiences of parents. This shift meant that I needed to reconsider how I understood my own subjective position in the field. As a clinical psychologist with no personal experiential reference to divorce or post-divorce troubles but with a broad array of experience from working with such troubles as experienced by *others*, I was myself located differently vis-à-vis the sequences of orchestrated dialogues under study than were the parents whose experiences came to define the study's problematic. However, as a parent myself, I could often identify with the worries, concerns, despair, and hopes, as well as the understandings of what children need and how parents ought to provide for them, that the parents participating in the study articulated as part of their knowledge of the world. Accordingly, the primary standpoint of the inquiry came to be located in the embodied perspective *of* parents and not, as I had initially planned for, in

the abstract perspective of a view-from-nowhere kind of generalised knowledge *about* parents in high-conflict divorce.

Dreier (2008) argues that in psychotherapy, hegemonic knowledge limits the attention span of science to therapy sessions, where “a professional expert acts on a client with a particular diagnosis (or problem) by means of a particular technique and thereby causes a particular outcome in his client” (p. 3). Although many clinical studies include other factors than these within their field of attention - perhaps most notably various client characteristics and qualities in the relationship between client and therapist, Dreier holds that, ultimately, the aim of most research on the practice of psychotherapy is the uncovering of reliable causal patterns between therapist actions and client effects. When the therapist is viewed as an expert holding some general knowledge from which a set of techniques are derived as professional know-how, this fosters an understanding of the therapeutic project based on technical rationality. The treatment activity consists of the therapist applying these techniques to the client and her problems or concerns - often referred to as the “medical model” for understanding psychotherapy (Elkins, 2009). This, Dreier points out, marginalises the many contributions of other people, situations, and events outside of the clinic that affect what happens in the therapeutic setting. When the therapeutic project is seen and understood from a standpoint within the institution itself, the outlook is affected by the perspective and interests of the therapy experts and limited to events in which they are present or to happenings that occur within the attentive reach of the institution. The privileging of the intra-clinical event, and the understanding of it as the expert application of general professional knowledge and know-how to the clients’ particular problems, supports an un-situated, extra-local view of knowledge that serves an institutional epistemology in the study of specific, localised persons and problems (Dreier, 2008, p. 26; Smith, 1990a; 2005).

According to Dreier (2008), research on persons in psychotherapy rarely accounts for the complexity of therapy as social practice. He points out that a theoretical account of what goes on between (and within) people in a particular context should include how people come to participate in the context in question. However, in much of the clinical research literature, “persons are studied as creatures seemingly immobile in social space moving in time through their life

histories. [...] They are normally only studied in one context (or situation) and assumed to function in a basically identical way in other contexts” (p. 39). Thus, Dreier suggests, abstract notions of agency should be replaced by contextual understandings of subjective modes of participation, leaving questions about identity and personal capacities fundamentally open:

“We may then ask how personal stability and change are allowed and inhibited by a person’s trajectory of participation in structures of social practice. A theory of structures of social practice with institutional arrangements and trajectories may guide our analysis of how the social world lends order, direction, and significance to ongoing personal activities. [...] If we do not ground a person’s life in structures of social practice, we lose track of what that life as a whole is about: what it is a part of, involved in, and concerned with; the full significance of its real possibilities, challenges, dilemmas, problems, and contradictions” (p. 40).

To escape the drift toward unity and abstraction that inevitably decontextualises theory *about* persons from the question of what it takes to *be* a person, Dreier claims that it is necessary to turn the gaze from looking at - or inside - the person, and to instead seek to discover the socially organised world from the standpoint of the person.

3.3 The gap between institutional reality and parents’ experience as a problematic to be explored

Before doing this research, my perspective and knowledge of high-conflict divorce cases came almost exclusively from my own office, in the position of a psychologist working within different state institutions, all with a particular mandate vis-à-vis the people identified as the users of these services. In part to counter the risk of my own clinical experience dominating the direction of research interviews, unwittingly inviting parents to take on a client position and myself to rely too much on my clinical experience and professional knowledge (what Smith (2005) refers to as ‘institutional capture’), for the present research I conducted as many of the interviews as I could in parents’ homes. There, I

quickly came to experience that the people I met did not so much resemble the ‘high-conflict parents’ I was accustomed to meet in mediation or therapy; these parents seldom came across as angry, distrustful, full of contempt, or unable to see positive qualities in the other parent. Instead, just like the parents described by Suissa (2006) in the quotation above, they frequently communicated an experience of “struggling to find a balance between their selves and their children, their love and their anxieties, their ideals and their fears” (Suissa, 2006, p. 73).

One of the mothers I interviewed right before she was to take part in the multi-family group that constituted the ethnographic point of access for the study said that:

“They talk about the parental conflict, right? I wish we had a different word for it. Because... I realise that there is a conflict and that this is how it appears from the outside. However, I can assure you that it is very challenging to cooperate with someone who refuses to cooperate with you. I’m not even sure I would call that a conflict - because I want to cooperate! I know that cooperating is what is best for my child. But right from the start, there has been zero cooperation and zero contact. He went straight to ... professionals immediately after the breakup. They told him that in a situation such as ours, no contact was the best option. And that’s how we have kept on doing things. He talks to professionals and says, “this is the situation. What should I do?” And then he follows the advice he is given.” (Mother, pre-group interview)

Equally complex descriptions of how being a part of a high-conflict divorce case was experienced and understood by parents could be found in most, if not all, of the interviews I did. Another mother explained that:

“It seems clear to me now, really, that, legally speaking, this is all very difficult. I have accumulated five binders of documentation. I just put it all in binders. Everything ... I can get. But still, that makes ... many hours that I could have spent otherwise. I could have spent them on the children instead of using all my energy on documentation. And on ... public

services that haven't really proven to be useful ... or helpful ... for the children. And not for us, either." (Mother, post-group interview)

The distance between the different perspectives on high-conflict divorce - the view from the therapists' or mediator's chair of parents in high-conflict as angry, distrustful, full of contempt, polarised, and in need of intervention; the policymaker's view of parents in high-conflict as lacking in knowledge and needing instruction; and the view from parents' position, from where dealing with professionals' intervening and educative policies came through as a significant part of what made high-conflict divorce into an existential predicament – came to mark the overarching problematic (Smith, 1987; 2005) of the study. I let these different views or understandings of high-conflict divorce represent something parallel to naval leading marks or bearings for a fishing spot (Heide, 2014), indicating the presence of an interesting field somewhere between them. Like fishers might get an idea of the location of an underwater shelf (where a shoal of fish is likely to stand) from reading the surrounding landscape above water, figuring out where the underwater continuation lines of the landscape most likely will fail to join⁴, I used this difference, not as something to be explained or sorted out. Instead, I approached it as a clue that there was something important lying in-between these perspectives, joining them together, that it would be of value to investigate. Hence, the line of fault between the figure of the high-conflict divorce parent implied in much of the clinical, research, and policy literature, and the experience of parents addressed by the interventions based on the same literature marks the specific area of the social where the research for this thesis is located.

⁴ My metaphorical use of the concept of "bearings" in this context in no way reflects the complexities of this phenomenon. In its proper linguistic setting, as it has been in use in the context of fishing in the Nordic region since pre-Christian times, bearings refer to the practice of locating a point at sea by knowing how to orient between certain known visual cues on land. From pre-historical times until the advent of modern underwater sounding technologies, bearings were highly treasured knowledge, ingeniously figured out by carefully attending to one's surroundings for extended periods of time. Bearings were passed down through generations as a resource equivalent of ownership to arable land. While my use of the concept of bearings in the present context is only a shallow pastiche of the proper sense of the word, envisioning the research problematic *as* bearings helped me relate to the line of fault between high-conflict divorce as seen from an institutional and from an experiential standpoint, respectively. In this sense, thinking of standpoints as bearings helped me realise that the line of fault was not something to be explained or sorted out, but illuminated and capitalised on as a research problematic.

The sense that parents' experiential knowledge of being part of a high-conflict divorce case and the dominant scientific-political discourse about high-conflict divorce seemed, in important ways, to be out of sync, thus came to constitute the overarching problematic that I, in each of the three articles for the thesis, in different ways sought to write forth and make sense of. As a technical term, Smith (2005) describes a research problematic as "a territory to be discovered, not a question that is concluded in its answer" (p. 41). A problematic is, thus, not the same as a problem formulation. It is a way of directing the researcher's attention "to a possible set of questions that may not have been posed or a set of puzzles that do not yet exist in the form of puzzles but are 'latent' in the actualities of the experienced world" (Smith, 1987, p. 91).

Hence, the analytic interest of the study was not to test a hypothesis or develop theory but rather to conduct an exploration of high-conflict divorce, starting from the everyday experience of parents who had become part of a high-conflict divorce case. This meant that I would try and discover which discourses are operative and what difference it made whether or not one participated in these discourses. Here, the focus would be not only on how parents would move through, and engage with, institutional processes, but also how their experience of "self-understanding and critique, their worries, their projects of self-improvement, and their feelings of success and failure" (McCoy, 2006, p. 121) could be made sense of and brought to the table to illuminate this problematic.

3.4 Aims of the study

As they came to be formulated in the process of doing the research, the aims of this exploration were threefold: a) to understand how the knowledge and doings of parents in post-divorce conflict are socially organised; b) to explore what happens to parents' concerns when they engage in institutionalised sequences of dialogues with professionals; and c) to find out if, and how, there is room for parents' subjective agency within a therapeutic programme that is itself part of

the social organisation of post-divorce parenting, and to find a way to conceptualise this.

In the three articles that make up the core of the thesis, the following research questions worked as entry points to high-conflict divorce as a research problematic:

- 1) How does the knowledge and experience of parents who are part of a high-conflict divorce situation exist in dialogue with dominant strands of discourse about parenting and divorce? (Article 1, Bertelsen, 2021a)
- 2) How are parents' knowledge and experience shaped through encounters with child welfare caseworkers in the process of becoming a high-conflict case? (Article 2, Bertelsen, 2021b)
- 3) How are parents who are identified as part of a high-conflict case positioned vis-à-vis social norms, their children, and themselves as acting subjects when engaging with a particular model for multi-family group therapy practice? (Article 3, Bertelsen, 2021c)

In chapter 5, I describe the research I conducted to explore these questions empirically. Before that, in chapter 4, I present the primary theoretical resources that I drew on and the main concepts I came to rely on for analysing the data.

4. Theoretical framework

4.1 Standpoint theory and existentialism

As a way of reducing complexity, research is itself an exertion of power and, thus, a political act (Biesta, 2020c, p. 56). The decision to make the disjuncture between parents' knowledge and experience from being part of a high-conflict divorce case on the one hand, and the abstract reality contained in various textualized institutional accounts of high-conflict divorce on the other to be the primary problematic of the study, links the inquiry's epistemology to feminist standpoint theory.

Standpoint theory represents the view that social identity is relevant to knowledge acquisition (Toole, 2020) and that individuals' perspectives are shaped by their social and political experiences (Wylie, 2012). Opposing the possibility of non-contextual knowledge, it promotes kinds of research that are committed to mapping what is "actually happening" as those who live the processes and phenomena under study experience them (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, p. 52). Thus, it emphasises the importance of basing research on social reality in people's everyday experiential knowledge (Harding, 1986). One's social standpoint gives shape to experience and knowledge, influencing what is intelligible, what becomes salient, and what is considered to have relevance (Toole, 2020). A standpoint does not identify a position or a category of position (e.g., 'mothers' or 'fathers', or 'parents who are part of a high-conflict divorce case') by and for whom knowledge is "produced." Instead, it establishes a "subject position ... that is open to anyone" (Smith, 2005, p. 268), locating a perspective situated in a particular situation or institutional complex. It presumes certain experiences and understandings to be commonly shared by those who share a particular position and makes possible the exploration of social reality as it unfolds from this perspective.

Adopting parents' standpoint as the starting point for the inquiry led me to draw on the sociological work of Dorothy Smith, both as a theoretical and methodological foundation, for a significant part of the research (see section 4.2 below). A key standpoint theorist (Wylie, 2012), Smith (1990a) argues that grounding inquiry in people's everyday experience privileges the subjective

sense of disjuncture, or of “being out of step” (Campbell, 2003, p. 17), as an entry point to understanding how people’s everyday world is organised socially (see also Smith, 1987). Attending to moments when organisational practices subordinate subjective knowledge illuminates the workings of prevailing ways of knowing and acting that otherwise might easily pass unquestioned and be taken for granted (Campbell, 2003).

The idea of standpoint locates knowing as a social activity. As a sociology, the method of inquiry known as institutional ethnography, associated with Dorothy Smith, provides conceptual tools for exploring the social organisation of knowledge. Starting from, and looking *with*, subjects’ local, personal knowledge and experience, the goal is to make visible how ruling takes place as people engage with the kinds of abstract, textualized systems of knowledge that characterise how social organisation is typically accomplished in present-day, late-modern societies (Smith, 2005). This method of inquiry allows the explication of how particular aspects of everyday life are orchestrated to happen the way they do (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). In the first two articles for this thesis (Bertelsen, 2021a; b), I used institutional ethnography’s methodology and analytical concepts (Rankin, 2017; Smith, 2005; 2006). Here, I studied how parents’ experience in high-conflict divorce cases was connected to more general parenting discourses (Bertelsen, 2021a) and what happened to parents’ experience when a particular high-conflict divorce discourse was activated in meetings with professionals (Bertelsen, 2021b).

However, I also wanted to make sense of parents’ experience from participating in the particular therapeutic programme where I had taken part as an observer, which marked my study’s ethnographic point of access. For this task, I did not find in institutional ethnography the tools I needed. To still be able to maintain ‘high-conflict divorce’ as a problematic to be explored (and not a problem to be solved or explained) and remain committed to avoiding a drift toward decontextualised theorising (Dreier, 2008), in my Article 3 (Bertelsen, 2021c), I turned to the educational work of Gert Biesta (see section 4.3 below). Opting for an educational rather than a therapeutic vocabulary was a conscious move to help me bracket my own experience as a therapist when making sense of a particular therapeutic practice. However, more than that, it was intended as a way to engage with the idea that therapeutic programmes for parents in post-divorce disputes are

primarily concerned with the transfer of knowledge (which I, in section 2.3 above, argued is salient in both the Norwegian mediation scheme and in many educational and therapeutic programmes targeting parents in divorce internationally).

Biesta (2015) argues that the neoliberal preoccupation with ‘learning’ fails to capture what is *educational* about the work of education. He convincingly shows how the language of learning makes the question of content and purpose invisible, marginalises teaching as a relational activity, and puts the burden of succeeding on the learner (e.g., Biesta, 2006; 2010). While learning is often presented as a process of empowering, Biesta argues that, in actuality, it undermines the value of, and even the possibility for, people appearing as subjects in educational situations. Biesta’s conceptualisation of education can be said to represent an existential perspective, arguing for the importance of recognising education as, first of all, a relational process where persons engage with the perpetual challenge of being a self. Applying Biesta’s educational vocabulary allowed me to concentrate on how both normative and existential issues of parenthood were set in play within the particular therapeutic practice where part of my study was conducted.

As I use them, the perspectives of institutional ethnography and Biesta’s existential understanding of educational purpose come together in demanding that we appreciate high-conflict divorce as an actuality encountered from the first-person perspective of those who (from a third-person perspective) are seen as a conflict’s main protagonists. From this position, we need to direct the gaze of inquiry outwards. On the institutional level, toward the encounters, texts, and social institutions that parents engage with along the trajectory from being a concerned mother or father in distress to becoming a key figure in a high-conflict divorce case. On the existential level, we must consider the ethical claims that such a process of engagement places on the person whose parenthood is made the issue of concern.

In the following sections, I explicate the key ideas and concepts that I drew on from the work of Dorothy Smith on institutional ethnography and Gert Biesta’s theory of education. I then briefly discuss how (and if) these two conceptual vocabularies might work alongside each other and how they differ.

4.2 Institutional ethnography

Institutional ethnography is both an alternative sociology and a method of inquiry, pioneered and developed through the work of Dorothy Smith (1987; 1990a; 1990b; 2005; 2006). As a project, it is concerned with “finding out how people are putting our world together daily in the local places of our everyday lives,” and how this somehow results in the construction of “a dynamic complex of relations that coordinates our doings translocally” (Smith, 2005, p. 2).

Institutional ethnography begins with people’s experience in an institutional setting (Griffith & Smith, 2013). It is people’s knowledge of and in their everyday work - what they do, how they do it, what they think and feel about what they do, and how their actions are coordinated with the actions of others - that is the object of exploration. By systematically exploring people’s knowledge and experience of what they do and are part of - their work knowledge – the researcher looks for signs and traces of how a person’s knowledge is coordinated with other people’s knowledge and actions (happening elsewhere and at other times). By drawing up these connections, the goal is to make a “map” of the local and trans-local relationships that make up the institution under study.

4.2.1 Ruling relations

Smith (1987) uses the terms *ruling relations* or the *ruling apparatus* to make visible how governmental and capitalist power and organisation work to orchestrate the knowledge and actions of people throughout modern societies. In such societies, ruling happens through institutions such as government, the legal system, business, management, professions, and education. These provide trans-local modes of ruling, making otherwise unrelated individual subjects encounter similar directives and constraints. Ruling relations can be described as objectified systems of knowledge that might appear as independent structures outside of time and space but are nevertheless brought into being by people’s coordinated actions.

A universal example of ruling relations in action might be the way people usually engage with passports. A passport certifies a personal identity, including the

possessing of national citizenship, and is in most cases needed for the passing of national borders. A person with a valid passport is typically greeted with a certain level of courtesy and allowed to pass into the desired country of destination. A person without a valid passport may be incarcerated or evicted. As a discrete object, the passport itself holds no other power than does a postcard from a relative or a leaflet inviting you to a street party next Friday. Whatever distinctive powers the passport contains, they are installed in it by people consistently *activating* this power in local settings. The fact that people continuously activate the powers invested in passports in almost identical ways across time and place is evidence of the *trans-local* potential for ruling installed in passports by force of the way we make them orchestrate our actions, knowledge, and experiences.

As a concept, ruling relations refers to a coordination of consciousnesses. Such coordination has a controlling effect on us, but it is nevertheless fundamentally social. A passport has never physically assisted anyone to cross a border. In situations of post-divorce co-parenting, nor has a signed written custody agreement itself picked up a four-year-old from daycare, helped a child with homework, or attended a parents' conference at a school. To understand how ruling arises and happens, one must study what people know and do in their actual and practical engagements with such texts in their performing of institutional schemes - their work and work knowledge – and how ruling is locally activated through people's factual engaging with the ruling relations.

As an example of how people become engrossed in these ruling relations, Smith frequently uses her own experience as a single mother entering a career in academic sociology. The sociology she had learnt, and which she was practising during working hours, had plenty of organising concepts and understandings that defined and interpreted her life at home – “but there was no talking back” (Smith 1987, p. 8) in the sense that there were no channels through which her first-person experiences from the domestic sphere could be vocalised or made to count within the academic world. Discovering that academia was meticulously engineered according to a gendered pattern presupposing that research was done by men (that is, by people with no responsibility for running a household with children), Smith found herself shifting back and forth between two bifurcated modes of consciousness - one existing at home and one existing at the university.

While her “university self” was mandated to theorise and publicly debate the likes of her “home self,” the same was not true the other way around. These modes of consciousness “could not coexist with one another. [...] They ‘existed’ in the same person. [...] But moving from one to the other was a real shift” (Smith, 1987, p. 7).

4.2.2 Texts in action

Relating people’s actions and knowledge to texts and text-mediated discourses are a necessary part of the analysis of ruling relations. As passports and custody agreements exemplify, texts are often what provide the link between the local and the trans-local in modern society. In Smith’s use, ‘text’ covers any form of reproducible normative content that can occur in identical form at different places and at different times, or that can be accessed in similar form from different, otherwise unrelated, locations: a law, a professional guideline, a leaflet found in a waiting room, a TV-show, a self-help book.

The Norwegian mediation scheme is a case in point. In Norway, which is the only country in the world where mediation concerning custody arrangements for children below the age of 16 is mandatory for parents moving apart (irrespective of their interpersonal level of agreement), applying for separation requires a valid certificate of mediation. If parents in such a situation qualify for certain benefits from the Norwegian Work and Welfare Administration, a certificate of mediation and a written, signed agreement between the parents stating how they have agreed to divide time and responsibility is needed as documentation. Thus, what is essentially considered and experienced as private - the dissolution of an intimate relationship and the care of children - is shaped by the trans-local existence and local activation of specific ruling texts, as well as the local production of administrative texts (certificates and agreements) that all have the effect of orchestrating the social realm in specific ways.

On the level of institutions, ruling is evident as a requirement for accountability in the sense that professionals are expected to answer for their actions in ways that involve documentation. The concept of accountability refers simultaneously to institutional responsibility (to follow procedure) and moral responsibility (to do the right thing) (Nilsen, 2017). In my Articles 1 and 2 (Bertelsen, 2021a; b),

the concept of this textual dimension of ruling was central to my analysis of how texts entered into and connected individual people's chains of actions.

4.2.3 Work and work knowledge

The concept of *work* is a central analytical tool in institutional ethnography, generously referring to anything people do “that takes time and effort, that they mean to do, that is done under definite conditions and with whatever means and tools, and that they may have to think about” (Smith, 2005, p. 151-152). Such a definition acknowledges how ruling relations are accomplished via people engaging with discourse in material form, and it keeps the *realities* of institutions within the experiential domain. Work happens at the interface between the individual subject and the physical and social worlds (McCoy, 2006). Dissolving the distinction between paid work and other intentional activities helps us see how the actions of people positioned differently within an institutional complex are connected via engagements with shared discourse. In the everyday lives of parents who are part of high-conflict divorce cases, their work might include such activities as attending mediation or therapy sessions or meeting with lawyers to prepare for a custody trial. As a term, ‘work’ might also involve more invisible or not immediately observable undertakings (DeVault, 2014; Smith, 2005) such as the worrying, fearing, or waiting that inevitably colour parents’ experiential reality when part of a high-conflict divorce case.

In institutional ethnographic exploration, *work knowledge* is a critical resource. This term refers simply to people’s knowledge of what they do and why they do it. Through dialogically assembling such work knowledge in interviews, or the researcher’s observations of people’s activities in a particular setting (Smith, 2005), different bits of work knowledge can be mapped and fitted together to make visible how trans-local ruling is produced locally. In this way, institutional ethnographic explorations might “expand the scope of our knowledge of what we are part of” (Smith, 2001, p. 161). In my Article 1 (Bertelsen, 2021a), I linked parents’ work knowledge from their struggles in post-divorce conflicts to two sets of dominant norms in current Nordic societies - gender equality and child-centred parenting. I looked at how these norms come to expression in legislation, family policy, and professional guidelines that govern the work of professionals mandated to oversee and assist parents in separation to ensure that their children

receive adequate care. In Article 2 (Bertelsen, 2021b), I looked at the work and work knowledge of parents and child welfare caseworkers that went into the formulation of someone's everyday lives as a 'case', in the process of assessment and referral of parents and children to a multi-family therapy programme for families in high-conflict divorce situations. In both these analyses, I linked the work and work knowledge articulated by participants to trans-local texts and other discursive material, looking for what was happening when the ruling potential of these texts was activated locally.

4.3 Biesta's existential conception of education

As noted above, for my Article 3 (Bertelsen, 2021c), I decided to step out of the institutional ethnographic mode of inquiry and use Gert Biesta's concepts for explicating educational purposes as analytical concepts. In line with Hannah Arendt's (1977) claim that "education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it" (p. 285), Biesta (see in particular Biesta, 2017a) sees what is at stake in education as the question of existing in and with the world in a *grown-up* way. By this term, he refers to the ability of the person being taught "to make and ponder the distinction between one's desires and their possible desirability" (Biesta, 2017a, p. 18). When grown-up-ness is conceptualised in this way, it does not refer to the fixed endpoint of a learning trajectory or developmental process, nor is it a quality that some people permanently possess, and others lack. The existential potential in any educational situation has little to do with teaching someone what to think and do. To educate is, instead, to summon someone as a subject who can already think and act and demand that they make use of these faculties (Biesta, 2017b).

In Article 3 (Bertelsen, 2021c), which concerns the practice of the multi-family therapy programme involved in the institutional circuit described and studied in article 2, I theorised the *educational* potential of programs for parents in enduring conflicts after a divorce using the local practising of the 'No Kids in the Middle' programme as a case. Here, I applied Biesta's educational vocabulary to highlight how such programmes work as instructional systems (Parlett & Hamilton, 1977) expressive of a ruling apparatus that invoke therapists to convince parents of certain ways of acting and thinking. At the same time, such programmes could be conceived of as providing a venue where parents are

confronted with the realities of their situation. This challenge, or confrontation, can be seen as an existential dimension that “cuts across” the question of ruling. In Biesta’s vocabulary, this is often discussed as bringing the ‘I’ of the individual subject into play⁵.

Biesta’s academic career began in the 1990s, at a time when the ethos of ‘evidence-based medicine’ was established in the psychotherapy field (Smith & Rennie, 2014), and an interest in the concept of ‘learning’ emerged as the dominant spirit in education (Rømer, 2021). In his early writings, Biesta linked this observed preoccupation with learning to roots in enlightenment philosophy shared by mainstream pedagogy and the kind of critical pedagogy represented by figures such as Paolo Freire. According to Biesta, both the mainstream and its most prominent opponents shared the same kind of “totalitarian tendencies” (Biesta, 1998), present in their differing claims to know the truth. As an alternative, drawing on the philosophy of Rancière (1991), Biesta suggested a form of “emancipatory ignorance”, understood as:

“An ignorance that does not claim to know how the future will be or will have to be. It is an ignorance that does not show the way, but only issues an invitation to set out on the journey. It is an ignorance that does not say what to think of it, but only asks, “What do you think about it?” In short, it is an ignorance that makes room for the possibility of disclosure. It is, therefore, an emancipatory ignorance” (Biesta, 1998, p. 505).

From this starting point, in his subsequent work, Biesta (2006; 2010; 2014; 2017a) has concentrated on exploring the possibility and conditions for agency in the educational relationship (Grandjean & Morsing, 2017).

⁵ In his own work, Biesta limits his area of concern to education, almost exclusively within the relational frame of teacher and student in the context of conventional forms of schooling. He has written extensively about the education of adults, particularly in the context of continuing education, but, to my knowledge, never specifically about parent education in the sense that I do in this thesis. Any objections to the relevance of Biesta’s concepts as I apply them in the field of parent education should thus be directed at my theoretical and practical judgement, and not be seen as issues relating to the concepts themselves.

4.3.1 Qualification, socialisation, and subjectification

Biesta argues that any form of education should attend to three different purposes: qualification, socialisation, and subjectification (Biesta, 2009; 2010). Qualification concerns the purpose of equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for effective action in various areas of life: in the labour market, further studies, and as citizens. Socialisation concerns reproducing norms and cultural traditions by passing on social, political, and cultural values and behaviours to preserve society. In the language of learning, the purposes covered by qualification and socialisation are in many ways considered the primary or sole purposes of schooling. In my approach to parent education, I considered qualification and socialisation as concepts encompassing the parts of the mandates of the Norwegian Family Counselling Service and the Child Welfare Service where it is stated that they are to “offer guidance, information and teaching” (Barne- og likestillingsdepartementet, 2018, p. 70, *my translation*; see also section 5.1, below) to families experiencing relational difficulties, and, in particular, families exhibiting high levels of conflict after a break-up. This mandate can be understood as the task of providing parents in high-conflict divorce situations with knowledge about how the conflict affects their children and the trust that this will lead to the desired change (cf. Trommald, 2015, as quoted in section 2.3 above).

Notably, apart from qualification and socialisation, Biesta stresses that education always has a potential for *subjectification*. As a form of existential and reflective event that sometimes interferes with the processes both of qualification and socialisation, in the educational encounter, there is always the possibility to address the student as a subject with a life of her or his own (Biesta, 2010; Rømer, 2021). At one level, this tripartite distinction of educational purposes can be taken as a descriptive-analytical tool that can be used, for instance, by anyone interested in devising or evaluating educational policy (Biesta, 2020b). However, in Biesta’s work, a palpable normative distinction in relative importance between the three domains comes through, a distinction that, if anything, has become even more articulated in his later work. The concepts of qualification and socialisation have no intrinsically emancipatory educational potential (in the sense that they are concerned exclusively with reproducing what has already been established). In contrast, subjectification is concerned both with what Hannah Arendt (1958)

addresses as ‘natality’, that is, the potential (or even necessity) of the student bringing something new into the world, and with the fact that the acting person is also, always, subject to the consequences of their own actions, and to how, and if, others pick up on what is set in motion.

Subjectification is a radical concept in the sense that it represents a form of possible resistance to, and harbours the capacity to evoke a break with, what is transmitted through the processes of qualification and socialisation. Thus, Biesta (2020a) suggests that:

“Subjectification should not be understood in terms of being responsible or, more specifically, in terms of taking one’s responsibility. Subjectification, in other words, is not a moral category, just as education as subjectification should not be understood as a form of moral education, and definitely not as a form of moralising education. Put simply, subjectification is not about responsibility but about freedom, including the freedom not to be responsible, the freedom to walk away from one’s responsibility, so to speak. This is not to suggest that subjectification and responsibility have nothing to do with each other, but the relationship is of a different sort, and it is important to bear this in mind, partly in order to avoid thinking that subjectification is entirely or automatically positive and happy. Human freedom can, after all, lead to the most wonderful, but also to the most disastrous, things we can imagine” (p. 101).

4.3.2 The arrival of the ‘I’

Drawing on the work of Zygmunt Bauman and Immanuel Levinas, Biesta (2017a; 2020a) understands subjectification as the event where a subject’s ‘I’ arrives as the result not of a willed decision but by it being evoked by something that is encountered, something that comes to me as a responsibility. According to Bauman (1993), “responsibility is the first reality of the self” (p. 13), and it is when this responsibility is encountered that a person’s subject-ness, his or her existence as subject, comes into play as a consequential matter. Importantly, and evidence of the association between subjectification and emancipation in Biesta’s thinking, the consequentialness of the question of the self, or the ‘I’, rests on the

unpredictability of my taking up or not of the responsibility for what is encountered. “The encounter with responsibility is, therefore, the ‘moment’ when I encounter my freedom and thus my unique existence as subject — unique in the sense that it is up to me to determine what to do, which no one can do for me” (Biesta 2020a, p. 101).

In Article 3 (Bertelsen, 2021c), I analysed my fieldnotes from participant observation in a ‘No Kids in the Middle’ multi-family group and data material from interviews with parents, therapists, child welfare caseworkers and judges, and looked at what was going on in light of Biesta’s concepts. This analysis led me to focus on aspects and moments in the practice that were not explicitly part of the programme ‘curriculum’ itself: the time spent in the waiting area before group sessions began, sequences when families moved from one room to another, or moments when something unexpected that did not have any direct relation to the programme content, or that was of a “different order,” happened. These, I suggested, might represent the “real” emancipatory potential of clinical programmes such as ‘No Kids in the Middle.’ In these moments, parents seemed to be encountering their parenthood in a more existential way than what seemed possible in more planned and therapist-controlled sequences.

4.4 Some remarks on epistemology and convergence and friction between the theoretical perspectives applied

The research adheres to a transactional epistemology (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). By that, I mean that I consider the research to be a way of engaging with reality and not a procedure for dispassionately representing it (Rorty, 1979). I borrow from postmodern and social constructionist thought the assumption that when it comes to social relations and phenomena, there is not one singular reality “out there” to be uncovered by meticulously disciplined research (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1985; 2015; Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001). Instead, realities are considered both multiple and socially constructed, relying on continuous subjective interpretation happening in a specific socio-historical context (Ponterotto, 2005).

However, following the key thinkers that I have come to draw upon, Dorothy Smith and Gert Biesta, I still believe it critical to appreciate that the

consequences of any such social organisation are material and, in some sense, absolute. Although acknowledging postmodern critiques of the idea that accessing and representing reality in an objective way is possible (Delanty & Strydom, 2003), as a general program for research, institutional ethnography importantly holds on to the possibility and desirability of “telling the truth” about the actualities of the social as people live them (see in particular Smith, 1990a; 1996). According to Smith (1990a), “if we set out to discover, we want our inquiry to produce a knowing [...]. We want to be able to say, ‘Look, this is how it works; this is what happens.’ We want to be able to say, ‘Look, I can show you’” (p. 34). This links her position, and institutional ethnography as a more or less unified project, to a post-positivist stance (Clark, 1998).

As I understand it, Smith’s notion of ‘truth’ is a pragmatic one, where knowledge is seen mainly as a tool for action (Brinkmann, 2018), generating primarily what Cornish and Gillespie (2009) refer to as “knowledge for taking care of oneself” (p. 804). The pragmatist influence is also present in Biesta’s work (see, e.g., Biesta, 2020c), perhaps first of all in his teleological concern with educational purpose, but also his relative lack of interest in ontological and epistemological issues. In my understanding, Smith essentially shares such an attitude.

Institutional ethnography admittedly represents an “ontology of the social” in and of itself (see Smith, 2005, pp. 49-79), but in a modest sense where discoveries and analyses are presumed to depend on the actuality in which they originated, “intended to extend rather than displace people’s expert knowledge as local practitioners of their everyday worlds” (Smith, 2005, p. 52). In a way that parallels, yet is not unambiguously similar to, Smith’s dealing with the interface between subject and reality, Biesta’s theorising of subject-ness answers first of all to an interest in explicating not what it is, but what it *takes*, to be a subject facing a particular reality (in whatever ontological guise one might choose to dress it). As I take it, his interest lies not in theorising subjectivity in itself but in making explicit the consequences that different ways of *approaching* the subject, and subjectness itself, may have.

Both Smith’s institutional ethnography and Biesta’s existentially oriented normative theory of education address the subject as an actor; they share an emancipatory aspiration to seek ways to counter the totalising force of neoliberal modes of ruling. Nevertheless, we do not have to take the comparison between

Smith's institutional ethnography and Biesta's theory of education very far before we see that there are substantial differences that set these two conceptual frameworks apart. Institutional ethnography focuses on how the individual subject is connected to, or is an integral part of, the social organisation of whatever they take part in through their work of engaging with institutions in the everyday (Smith, 1987). Its project is to make explicit the complex ways in which ruling is accomplished in present-day, neoliberal societies. Presuming an ontology where knowledge is socially organised, it seeks to contribute to subjective emancipation by providing a description or map, starting from a standpoint in people's experience in a particular position within an institutional setting. Thus, it aims to *show* how people's knowledge and experiences are hooked onto those of other people in ways that are often difficult to see from the inside of one's own everyday living.

Biesta's existential perspective, on the other hand, highlights how the individual subject is always (also) set apart from the social in that the question of *how* to engage as a subject cannot be answered from anywhere else, or by anyone else, but the person to whom the question is addressed. Institutional ethnography can be understood as a way of exploring how ruling is accomplished in situations where subjective agency is threatened or where institutional, abstract interests get realised at the expense of the interests of those being governed. Described in institutional ethnographic terms, Biesta's project could perhaps be characterised as a normative framework for the *responsible* execution of the particular domain of ruling relations that constitute an educational setting. According to Biesta, the fundamental gesture of education is to direct the student's attention toward something (Biesta, 2020d). Embracing the idea that education necessarily involves elements of ruling (although favouring a porous and gentle approach to it), in this respect, Biesta's immediate addressee is importantly not the student, but the teacher. What he promotes is an educational stance that actively acknowledges and embraces its own executive role in realising the social organisation of knowledge (via the domains of purpose he terms qualification and socialisation), while at the same time it refrains from formulating them as institutionalised standards that eclipse the educational situation in ways that make it difficult, or irrelevant, for people to relate to what is being communicated as active subjects. Institutional ethnography is both a theoretical sociology and a method of inquiry, made to explicate the why and how in situations where

subjective experience and institutional realities are “out of sync” (Campbell, 2003). Biesta’s project, on the other hand, can be said to be to provide a vocabulary in which to formulate what is at stake in the particular domain of ruling that is education, and to show why and how it is crucial to keep practice fragile enough to allow room for people’s (be they students or clients) ‘I’ to arrive. In Biesta’s writings, the first-person question is thus, importantly, not the question of “how does the world appear to the I?” It is a way of attuning to a particular *kind* of question that demands a first-person, an ‘I’, to respond.

5. The empirical study

5.1 Organisational context – recent developments in the Norwegian Family Counselling Service

The study for this thesis emanated from movements set in motion by recent developments within the Norwegian Family Counselling Service, the purpose of which were to contribute to the professionalisation and homogenisation of this service (Bufetat Region Sør, 2016). From its humble beginnings in the late 1950s, the Family Counselling Service was organised as somewhat unconnected and autonomous offices organised county-wise, with minimal state involvement (NOU, 2019:20). In 1996, the Government submitted a proposal for legislation for the Family Counselling Service (Ot.prp. No. 6 1996–97), and, in January 1998, the Family Counselling Office Act entered into force. The new law defined the Family Counselling Service as a unique service (i.e., neither a part of healthcare, social welfare, nor the legal system). In 2004, the administration of this service was removed from the county level and brought under state administration.

The Family Counselling Service consists of 39 offices spread out across Norway. The service is free of charge, and service users need no referral from a third party to seek services. Except for mandatory mediation (Marriage Act, 1991; Children Act, 1981), all contact with the family counselling service is voluntary. In 2016, the Family Counselling Service catered to 55,550 individual cases nationwide, divided between clinical cases and mediation. In 21 per cent of the clinical cases, co-parenting issues after a breakup were registered as the primary concern (Barne- og likestillingsdepartementet, 2018).

As stated in the Family Counselling Office Act (1997), in addition to clinical and mediational services, the service shall offer guidance, information and teaching aimed both at professionals in other services working with family and relational issues and the general population, as part of the Government's general strategy for universal prevention. An essential task for the Family Counselling Service in this domain is to provide parental guidance, individually or in groups, to strengthen parents in their role as caregivers. In this domain, there is currently a

particular focus on parents who exhibit high levels of conflict after a breakup and on involving children in the mediation between their parents to amplify children's perspective and experience and to enforce the position of "the child's best interests" as the primary concern in any parental undertaking (Barne- og familiedepartementet, 2006; Barne-, ungdoms- og familieetaten, 2017).

In 2011, the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs, the governmental body responsible for the Family Counselling Service and the Child Welfare Service, approved a new strategy for quality development. The intention was to ensure that services be based on sound professional knowledge and to standardise services to ensure equal service provision to the whole population regardless of socio-economic or geographical variables (Barne-, ungdoms- og familieetaten, 2017). The strategy was accompanied by a restructuring of the Family Counselling Service's internal competence structure. Among the most salient elements of this restructuring was establishing five national centres of expertise, each responsible for devising a central knowledge base, disseminating helpful knowledge to practitioners throughout the service nationally, and stimulating the development of novel practices. In each of the five Norwegian regions North, Mid, West, East, and South, one (or more) local family counselling office was appointed status as regional resource environment for each of the five areas of expertise. Thus, a complex, three-layered competence structure was established where, for all five areas of expertise, each local family counselling office would have status either as a national centre of expertise, a regional resource environment, or simply as a "regular" office.

5.1.1 The implementation of the 'No Kids in the Middle' programme in Agder

In the region of South Norway, the family counselling offices in Kristiansand and Arendal were appointed as one joint, regional resource environment within the field of high-conflict divorce in 2014. Ensuing from this responsibility was an obligation to contribute to improving services targeting this clinical domain specifically. The appointment coincided with the two offices implementing the 'No Kids in the Middle' programme (Høigilt & Bøe, 2021; van Lawick & Visser, 2015). 'No Kids in the Middle' is a concrete model for therapeutic work with children and parents who experience a situation of enduring conflict after a

family breakup, utilising a multi-family group therapy format. Each multi-family group includes up to six pairs of parents and their children, who meet for eight bi-weekly group meetings lasting about two hours. The programme is not strictly “manual-based”, but the programme’s developers have produced a brief instructional document outlining a suggested plan for each of the eight group meetings. In parents’ group sessions, therapists provide information, prompt discussions, give assignments and initiate experiential exercises. The structure of sessions in children’s groups are usually more loosely organised around the general theme of being a child when parents are fighting. During the final sessions of the eight consecutive group meetings, children jointly present their parents with a collective formulation of their concerns. Often, this takes the form of creative or artistic performances. In turn, the parents respond by communicating to the children what they take with them from participating in the group.

‘No Kids in the Middle’ is intended as a therapeutic programme, seeking to afford opportunities for parents and children to engage with their own situation. The key normative principles of the model are that parents in conflict should be conscious of how conflict affects their children; legal processes should be put on hold or postponed until after the group programme has ended; and that the group should provide parents and children with a space where they are free to interact with each other. Theoretically, the programme draws from systemic, narrative, dialogical, and trauma-informed therapeutic traditions. It also emphasises the importance of recognising that families’ social networks can play a significant role, both in preserving conflict and supporting change. Hence, families are encouraged to invite key members of their network to one or more Network Information Evenings held in conjunction with the programme (No Kids in the Middle, 2020; van Lawick & Visser, 2015).

The ‘No Kids in the Middle’ programme was initially developed in the Netherlands in collaboration between professionals from a clinic specialising in child trauma and a clinic working with parents in conflict. Mutually dissatisfied with the limits of the scope of their respective clinical mandates, inventive professionals joined the two clinics’ mandates to develop a multi-family therapy programme addressing both children and parents in separate and joint group sessions (No Kids in the Middle, 2020; van Lawick & Visser, 2015). When

imported and implemented in the Norwegian context, this organisational model was mirrored from the outstart, establishing the programme as a collaboration between the Department for Child and Youth Mental Health outpatient clinic at the South Norway Hospital and the Family Counselling Service⁶. Eventually, this resulted in three separate therapist teams practising the programme in this region: two city-based teams (catering to a combined population of approximately 270.000) and one team serving mainly a more rural population (of about 40.000 inhabitants). In the team serving the smallest population, the hospital-based mental health clinicians' role in the city-based teams was filled by professionals from the Child Welfare Service. In this team, professionals from a local municipality family centre also took part, making this team a three-part collaboration.

5.1.2 Establishing a public sector PhD project

In parallel with the initial work on implementing the 'No Kids in the Middle' programme in Agder, a collaboration aiming for an international research project concerning this therapy model was initiated from the Netherlands. Originally planned as a conventional outcome study relying on predefined quantitative measures, the University of Agder was engaged as a Norwegian national research partner. Grants for a preparatory project to translate and validate several research questionnaires were initiated, and a collaboration between the university and the clinical institutions (the family counselling offices in Agder and the Department for Child and Youth Mental Health at the South Norway Hospital) was formalized.

Because of issues with design and data generation (as a clinical site, the Norwegian contribution ended up being too limited to be included in the planned multi-site design), lack of funding, and circumstances associated with key people leaving the collaboration in the Netherlands due to personal and professional relocation, the Norwegian involvement in the planned research collaboration stranded. In the wake of this situation, I suggested conducting a smaller-scale,

⁶ A parallel project for implementing the 'No Kids in the Middle' programme was simultaneously initiated in the Norwegian Trøndelag region. This project had a different institutional structure and was run by the Church City Mission (Thuen, 2017).

qualitative, exploratory research project focusing on the local practice of the programme in the Agder region.

After constructing a proposal for a doctoral research project, in collaboration with the heads of the Family Counselling Office in Arendal and the Family Unit of the Department for Child and Youth Mental Health, South Norway Hospital in Arendal, I successfully applied for a PhD grant from the Norwegian Research Council via the newly established scheme for ‘Public Sector PhD’. This is a funding scheme where public enterprises can receive support for an employee to complete a doctoral project. The scheme’s overall objectives are 1) increased long-term and relevant competence building and research efforts in public enterprises, 2) increased researcher recruitment in the public sector, and 3) increased interaction between academia and the public sector (Forskningsrådet, 2018).

5.2 Study design

The research was designed as a naturalistic case study (Simons, 2009) of a particular clinical practice – the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ programme (van Lawick & Visser, 2015) as it was practised in the Agder region of South Norway in 2018 and 2019. Yin (2013) defines a case study as consisting of an “in-depth inquiry into a specific and complex phenomenon (the ‘case’), set within its real-world context” (p. 321). A naturalistic case study is conducted in the case’s actual setting and in a non-interventionist way (Guba & Lincoln 1981; Stake 2004). The design is usually not strictly determined before data collection begins or structured by specific causal theoretical models. Instead, it “follows the issues and circumstances as they emerge” (Abma & Stake 2014, p. 1150).

As articulated by Kemmis (1980), case study work is naturalistic in three senses. Firstly, it represents a search for phenomena in the social world and not an attempt to develop coherent theories about social phenomena according to concepts established in advance. Second, it aims to articulate the social world by creating descriptions of particular social contexts. Third, what is studied in case study work are ‘given’ situations. By ‘given’ is meant the issues that arise in the particular situation or context under study (what is elsewhere referred to as ‘emic’ issues, see, e.g., Madden, 2017). To qualitatively understand the case, the

researcher is required to experience the case as it occurs in its context and its particular situation (Stake, 2013). Several theorists further argue that case studies should not only consider the case in isolation but also explore how it is likely to interact with its context (Stake 1995; Yin 2013).

The decision to do the research as a naturalistic case study was strongly influenced by the social anthropological paradigm for educational evaluation research known as illuminative evaluation (Parlett & Hamilton 1976; 1977, Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1985), and the emphasis that this research strategy places on getting acquainted with the day-to-day reality of the setting under study (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1985, p. 294). Parlett and Hamilton (1977) advise that illuminative inquiries be organised as a tripartite sequence of 1) observation (attempting to cover as many as possible of the situations and variables affecting the outcome of the programme), 2) inquiry (covering interviews with programme participants and stakeholders from different subject positions, and inquiries into background and contextual documents), and 3) explanation (i.e., analysing the data material looking for connections relevant for understanding the value and shortcomings of the programme).

To a large extent, the study adhered to such an anthropologically inspired paradigm. By way of methods for data gathering, observation, interviews, and searching for relevant textual documents are also common ways of making institutional ethnographic inquiries. At the time when I was planning the study, I was not familiar with institutional ethnography. My later taking up its concepts as tools for analysis happened as the sense of disjuncture between parents' experiential accounts and the general discourse about high-conflict divorce gradually emerged as an emic issue, eventually constituting the central problematic of the study.

The empirical part of the study had a three-tiered design. First, I participated as an observer in a multi-family therapy group run according to the 'No Kids in the Middle' programme at a family counselling office in Agder, Norway. Second, I made individual interviews with parents. From the group where I had taken part as an observer, I interviewed parents four to six months after the group ended. Additionally, I interviewed parents from another 'No Kids in the Middle' multi-family group held at a different family counselling office in the same region.

These parents, I interviewed both immediately before they were to enter the group programme and four to six months after the group had ended. The reason for waiting several months with post-group interviews was that I wanted there to have elapsed a certain amount of time so that parents would have the opportunity to return to everyday life and gain some temporal and experiential distance opposite the multi-family therapy programme. In this way, I hoped that the parents and I, together, would be able to chart which experiences or impressions from the group had stuck with them and which had faded into oblivion or been rejected or reconsidered because they had proved unhelpful when confronted with everyday reality. By interviewing some of the parents immediately before the group programme began, I wanted to access their personal understanding of what participating in the group practice meant, and what they themselves considered to be most critically at stake.

Third, I interviewed therapists leading ‘No Kids in the Middle’ groups and child welfare caseworkers and district court judges who had referred families to the groups. Initially, I had also planned to interview children who took part in the groups. Due to several parents’ concern that this would put an undue burden on children, this particular aspiration was later abandoned (see section 5.3.1 on study participants, and section 5.6.1 on research ethics, below.)

5.3 Access and recruitment

Since my research picked up from what had already been an elaborate plan for conducting a more quantitatively oriented study where the local ‘No Kids in the Middle’ practices in Agder were to be included as ‘sites’, the therapists involved were already accustomed to the idea of making their practice available for research. As an ‘insider’ to two of the institutions running the groups⁷, I was more or less known as a familiar face to most of the therapists in the groups at all three sites where the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ programme was run. Opposite the group of therapists, my initial introduction as a researcher was done at a two-day national workshop for therapists practising after this model, led by the two principal architects behind the programme from the Netherlands. The workshop

⁷ I refer here to my being employed as a clinical psychologist in both the Family Counselling Service and the Department for Child and Youth Mental Health at the South Norway Hospital.

took place approximately six months before my period of participant observation began.

For the first-tier phase of the study, my status as a participant-observer in the specific 'No Kids in the Middle' group where I was present was arranged in dialogue with the therapists running this particular group. In intake interviews with families, they informed parents about my presence as an observer. Parents were not given the choice of refusing me to be present as an observer at this stage. In the first group meeting where I took part, I introduced myself to the group of parents at the beginning of the session. I explained the purpose and nature of my research project, specifying that participants were not obliged to talk to me and that, if they did, they could withdraw their consent to my use of notes or other recordings concerning them as data at any time without having to provide a reason for it. This was also communicated to parents in a letter of informed consent (Appendix C)⁸. Here, it was further specified that all information about participants would be anonymised in the case of later publications. At the end of the eight-sessions run of the group programme, I asked for permission to sit in on the evaluation meeting between each parental pair, the therapists from the group, and a representative from the child welfare service.

For the second-tier phase of the study, I asked each of the parents in this multi-family group if they would allow me to contact them a few months after the group ended to schedule an individual interview about their experiences from the group and about general issues of life as part of a high-conflict divorce case in general. For this phase of the study, I also recruited parents from a second multi-family group run at a different location. These parents, I interviewed first when they were under assessment for participation in a multi-family group, and then again four to six months after the group program had ended. I arranged with the therapists running this group to provide oral and written information about the study in intake interviews with parents. If parents agreed to it, the therapists relayed their contact information to me. I then called parents to schedule an interview, either in their own home or at the family counselling office where the group was to take place (see also section 3.3, where I elaborate the reasons for

⁸ All letters of informed consent included in the Appendices section are reproduced in their original Norwegian language form.

doing interviews in parents' homes). Each interview started with my giving an oral description of the whole study and presenting the participant with a letter of informed consent (Appendices D and E) to sign if they agreed to the conditions for participating in the study.

For the third tier of the study, which consisted of interviews with therapists, child welfare caseworkers and judges, I either contacted the individual participant directly or through a superordinate representative of the institution in question (for letters of informed consent, see Appendices F and G).

5.3.1 Study participants

The multi-family group where I took part as an observer comprised ten parents, ten children, and six therapists (two in charge of the parents' group and four of the children's group). In addition, five child welfare caseworkers took part in the post-group evaluation meetings that I attended.

The study participants that I interviewed directly in in-depth interviews were:

- Twenty parents participating in 'No Kids in the Middle' multi-family therapy groups in the Agder region of South Norway (31 individual interviews total)⁹.
- Twelve therapists from three different teams in this region working with the programme (three individual interviews, one sequence of three joint interviews with two therapists, and one group interview with seven therapists).
- Five caseworkers from one municipal child welfare service in the Agder region and three judges from district courts ('tingrett' in Norwegian) in Agder (all in individual interviews).

⁹ Seven of the parents interviewed individually took part in one multi-family group, and nine were part of a second group. In addition, I interviewed four parents (two ex-couples) who were initially set to be in one of the groups but reconsidered and decided not to participate between the time of the interview and the first group meeting. These parents were referred to the multi-family group by child welfare as 'high-conflict divorce cases.' Their interviews were included in the data material for Articles 1 and 2 (Bertelsen, 2021a; b) which were concerned with the social organisation of post-divorce parenting and the "making up" of high-conflict divorce cases. They were not included in the data material for Article 3 (Bertelsen, 2021c), which concentrated on the actual local practice of the 'No Kids in the Middle' programme.

Parents

Ten parents were mothers and ten fathers, representing a total of 12 co-parenting pairs. Age ranged from mid-twenties to early fifties; level of education ranged from vocational training to a master's degree from a university. Nine fathers and five mothers were in full-time employment, while five mothers and one father were not employed and were under some form of work assessment scheme via the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration¹⁰.

All parents were divorced or broken up from a relationship with a partner with whom they had one or more dependent children under 16. All breakups had happened during the past one-and-a-half to five years before the interviews. In nine of the co-parenting pairs represented, some version of shared residence was practised. Shared residence was defined as arrangements where the child spent at least 30 per cent of the time with each parent and where the parents had joint decision-making authority (Pruett & DiFonzo, 2014). In two parental pairs, both legal and primary physical custody was with the mother, while such custody was with the father in one pair. All parents had been to mediation at least once in the separation phase, and many had repeatedly sought both counselling and mediation at a family counselling office for issues of inter-parental disagreement.

Of the 20 parents interviewed, 19 reported having undergone assessment by child welfare services based on concern for an ongoing conflict¹¹. Twelve parents had been part of one or more court proceedings to settle disputes about custody or

¹⁰ In one of the anonymous peer reviews for my Article 1 (Bertelsen, 2021a), the reviewer called for more information about the ethnic, geographical, and religious composition of the group of parents participating in the study. I refrained from providing this, firstly because these dimensions (ethnicity, religion, and country of origin) did not surface as relevant to the issues of concern in the work of analysis (but they could have, with different participants). Secondly, I worried that providing more detailed demographics might risk compromising the anonymity of participants. They constituted a small group of parents and were largely (but not universally) known to each other. Additionally, since most but not all parents who participated in the two multi-family groups from which participants were recruited agreed to be part of the research, I needed to secure the anonymity of the ones not participating as well. Thus, if I for instance was to provide data about ethnic or geographical origin, it might be possible for participants themselves to deduce if certain parents took part in the research or not. Since neither the institutional ethnographic nor the existential frames for understanding that I used in the three articles supported specific generalisations where particular demographics (other than being identified as being a parent in a high-conflict divorce case and referred to one of the groups from where participants were recruited) would add substantially to the inquiry, I do not include this information.

¹¹ Interviews with the one parent who had no experience with the child welfare service were not included in the analysis for Article 2 (Bertelsen, 2021b), which was specifically concerned with institutional dialogues between parents and child welfare caseworkers.

access. Five of the parents reported seeking psychotherapy or other forms of counselling to help them deal with stress and trauma related to their situation. Six of the children had been referred to hospital-based outpatient mental health services for concerns connected to their parents' separation. Most of the children had attended some form of first-tier consultation (e.g., health nurse, school social worker) either individually or as part of formalised groups for children of separated parents.

Children

Initially, I planned to interview children as well as parents. However, in informal conversations during participant observation, several parents were reluctant to consent to this since their children had been interviewed by, in their opinion, too many professionals already as part of previous divorce mediations, court proceedings, or child welfare assessments. When I interviewed parents from the second group just before they were to participate in the group programme, several of them articulated similar concerns. The following dialogue, which is included in the introduction part of my Article 2 (Bertelsen, 2021b, p. 276), represents one of several examples of this to be found in the transcripts from research interviews:

Father: One of my goals, since the second court.... second child welfare... first child welfare case, and first... second court proceeding... first court proceeding, has been for my daughter not to be institutionalised, repeatedly having to expose herself and her family in treatment, in assessment interviews, and all that, the whole bloody time. Because it has been a lot.

Interviewer: It sounds almost like a lifestyle?

Father: Yes, growing up somewhere between a psychologist and the child welfare service. When she should just have been outside, playing.

Acknowledging this, I eventually decided not to pursue my original intentions to interview children individually, apart from brief informal conversations with some of them during my presence as an observer in the group setting (see also my discussion of this in section 5.6.1). However, the children were an essential

part of the group I took part in as participating observer. Although I consistently sat in with the parents' group (held in a separate room from the children's group), the children's presence was all over the fieldnotes. In my Article 3 (Bertelsen, 2021c), which utilised fieldnotes and data from interviews, I tried to give space to the children by articulating my observations of their actions, and via parents' and professionals' thoughts and concerns about the children and their participation in the group programme. In this way, I sought to make the children present as active subjects in the text, as opposed to being objects of care or concern.

Therapists

I interviewed 12 therapists (representing three different local teams practising after the 'No Kids in the Middle' model). Therapists were interviewed either individually (3) or in group interviews (9). The therapists interviewed individually were all employed by the Family Counselling Service. The therapists interviewed in group interviews were employed by the Family Counselling Service, a municipality family centre, and a child welfare service.

Child welfare caseworkers and judges

I did individual interviews with five child welfare caseworkers and three judges. All of these had experience either with referring families to the multi-family groups (personally, in the case of caseworkers; indirectly or by suggestion in the case of judges) or from working with families who had taken part in a group.

5.4 Data generation

5.4.1 Participant observation

Through the spring of 2018, I followed an entire sequence of a multi-family group run according to the 'No Kids in the Middle' programme at a family counselling office in Agder, Norway, focusing mainly on the work with parents. Here, the primary method for collecting data was participant observation (Madden, 2017). Methodologically, this was closer to what is referred to as 'short-term ethnography' (Pink & Morgan, 2013) than to "prototypical"

anthropological fieldwork (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Madden, 2017). As a participant-observer, I took part in all meetings in a parents' group run at one of the family counselling offices in Agder. I also sat in on therapists' preparation meetings and debriefing sessions in conjunction with each of the eight group meetings. Before each group meeting, I joined the families and therapists as they congregated in the clinic's waiting area and waited together with them until the group sessions began. At the end of the programme, I sat in on post-group evaluation meetings where the therapists met with parents and caseworkers from the referring child welfare services to discuss what participating in the programme had led to and which (if any) additional measures were called for.

I made extensive fieldnotes (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011) immediately after each session. Usually, I made these in a notebook either at the site of the group practice or in my car before driving home. The next day, I would transfer my notes onto my computer, sometimes adding associations or reflections that seemed relevant. When making fieldnotes, I tried to notice as much of what I could about what was happening, describing it in as neutral and descriptive a language as I could manage. I noted where people were sitting, their affective expressions, what was said by therapists and parents (and children, in the settings where I was present with them), and how others seemed to react to what was said and done. I also tried to write down and describe my emotional responses (which were often coloured by a sense of awkwardness in connection with my role as an observer).

5.4.2 Interviews

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim¹². In the three-tiered design of the study, the first tier consisted of participant observation, while the second and third tiers consisted of interviews. For the part of the inquiry that developed to become an institutional ethnography (Articles 1 and 2, Bertelsen 2021a; b), individual interviews with parents represented what Campbell and Gregor (2004) refer to as "entry-level data" (p. 60), representing the experiential

¹² Two parents did not agree to be interviewed face-to-face or for the interview to be audio recorded. However, they consented to being interviewed via telephone and for the interviewer to take notes to be used as research data.

reality to be explicated through inquiry. In these interviews, the purpose was to access parents' experience as well as their descriptions of actions from accounts of interactions - with their children, their ex-partner, professionals, or with themselves in inner conversations. To accomplish this, I was particularly interested in participants' accounts of their own actions and their thoughts concerning these actions. Here, I drew on advice from Campbell and Gregor (2004) to focus on specific events and try to elicit the participant's knowledge of his or her activities by dwelling on these events. I was particularly interested in their accounts of activities directly related to being part of a high-conflict divorce case (e.g., attending different kinds of institutionalised meetings, or otherwise engaging with issues brought up in, or presumed relevant for, such meetings). In interviews with the parents that I interviewed while they were under assessment for participation in the multi-family group programme, I also inquired about their hopes, expectations, and fears concerning the upcoming group, the story of their conflict, and how they came to be referred to the group.

In interviews with parents four to six months after their participation in a 'No Kids in the Middle' multi-family group, I was interested in their accounts of sequences of interaction, or events from their participation in the group, that they could remember particularly well. Their descriptions of such events were followed up with questions like "Why was this important to you?" "What did you do in the situation?" "Which other people were involved?" "What happened next?" The idea of doing repeated interviews with the same parents before and after participating in the multi-family group programme was not motivated by an aspiration to do a qualitative imitation of standardised pre-post measurement. Instead, it was a way to learn more about how parents related to their own participation in the groups – how they imagined the group would be, their hopes and worries for participation, and how they articulated their understandings of the group's institutional purpose. In post-group interviews, I reminded parents of what they had said in the first interview (or articulated as their hopes in the first group meeting) and asked them to reflect on how things had panned out, considering their initial expectations.

As is typical of many versions of ethnographic interviewing, I did not use a material interview guide or fixed set of standard questions (DeVault & McCoy,

2006; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Instead, questions were based partly on what was learnt from previous interviews and partly on my gradually accumulating knowledge of the institutional aspects of the social relations constituting the problematic under investigation – what Parlett and Hamilton (1977) refer to as ‘progressive focusing’. In the first interview with each parent (which for the parents in the group where I took part as an observer was also the only interview), a significant part of the interview would be devoted to the parent’s history of encounters with welfare, legal and therapy professionals in the wake of separation or divorce, leading up to the referral to the multi-family group therapy programme. Focusing on participants’ doings and how they understood them eventually put me on the trail of the institutional processes of which their experiences were part.

In line with the kind of prioritising of first-person accounts that the standpoint epistemology of institutional ethnography demands, I was conscious of basing the inquiry in the institutional processes and documents that the participants themselves reported to engage with. I did not ask directly whether parents, for example, were preoccupied with current public debates about the issue of shared custody or if they were worried about the other parent’s capacity to care for their children. However, if a participant raised such issues, I asked why this was a concern, how they had come to be concerned with this specifically, and by what kinds of general knowledge the concern or worry was justified. This way of interviewing sets institutional ethnographic interviews apart from many other forms of qualitative interviewing, where the object of study is the inner experience, or lifeworld, of the participant itself (DeVault & McCoy, 2006).

Interviews with therapists, child welfare caseworkers and judges provided crucial supplementary information about the organisation of professionals’ work with cases involving high-conflict divorce, concerning the local ‘No Kids in the Middle’ multi-family group practice specifically and in different institutional settings more generally. For the inquiries drawing on the methodology and vocabulary of institutional ethnography (Articles 1 and 2, Bertelsen, 2021a; b), these interviews constituted what Campbell and Gregor (2004) refer to as “level-two data” (p. 60). By this term, they refer to data that may explicate the organisational details of the situation where the problematic under study is located, revealing how the situation actually works. In addition to interviews, this

second level of data consisted of some of the key texts either directly mentioned in interviews with parents or professionals or otherwise clearly implied in what was said. For example, if a caseworker would say, “I always consult the practice guidelines,” I would ask which guideline was meant and then obtain a copy of it, if possible. I explored these texts to illuminate how the relations between parents and professionals in high-conflict divorce cases are “hooked up” in ways that make ruling possible (Smith, 2005). In Articles 1 and 2 (Bertelsen 2021a; b), such texts were analysed as an integral part of the data material.

5.5 Data analysis

5.5.1 Analysis as an iterative process

The analysis of data was not a discrete process but an iterative, integral part of the inquiry. Clifford (1983) describes participant observation as “a shorthand for a continuous tacking between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of events” in attempts to empathetically grasp a sense of specific occurrences and gestures on the one hand, while on the other taking a step back to situate these meanings in broader contexts. In this way, particular events acquire deeper or more general significance and structural rules (p. 127). The ethnographic research methods of interviewing and observation are essentially dialogical practices. The researcher’s interests are critical to the dialogue while at the same time relying on the research participants to educate the researcher about the topics under study. In this sense, any kind of social research depends on what Gadamer (1994) considers essential to dialogue, namely that the parties take the risk of being changed (Smith, 2002).

After each interview, I immediately wrote memos containing my impressions and reflections. I also made notes containing questions or ideas that arose from parallel readings. Before each interview, I consulted these memos to help me stay focused on any analytical threads under development. If relevant in individual interviews, I would sometimes share some of these analytical threads with the participant being interviewed. Brinkmann (2016) argues that qualitative interviewing should not be considered a form that unfolds naturally if only people come together to talk about lived experience. The interview is better

understood as a social practice with a history of its own. The following sequence, from an interview with one of the therapists, illustrates how these iterative qualities unfolded in the interview context¹³. The topic in this specific part of the conversation was this therapist's worries regarding how the setup of the multi-family group practice might lead to situations that would be experienced as challenging or uncomfortable by the children:

Therapist: Yes. And the child ends up in a loyalty conflict. Yes.

Interviewer: Do you think that ... do you think that there are many such situations here, during such a process? Or do you think it is more a question of awareness of ...?

Therapist: Do I think there are often situations when parents crash together in overt conflict here, during those groups?

Interviewer: Yes?

Therapist: I don't know if there are many, but it has happened. And I think, especially ... like we've had before when they came here [when families would gather in the waiting room before the group started]. That it's... not good. I'm thinking...

Interviewer: You think ... when they come ...?

Therapist: And have pizza.

Interviewer: Ok. At the start?

Therapist: Yes.

Interviewer: Some of the parents I have interviewed said that this was perhaps the most strenuous part of the programme. And that it was a relief to get started with the group activities.

Therapist: Yes, absolutely. And I think ... at least that's how it feels. I cannot speak for others, but I can sense their discomfort at times. I get this sense of unease. Ehm ... and ... you should ... be the same with everyone. Right? That's very difficult. Did I look at her too much? Did that make him suspicious? Like, yeah, 'is the therapist on *her* team now?' There are

¹³ This particular sequence also gives a glimpse of how the theme of 'waiting, breaks, and interruptions', which is a central theme in Article 3 (Bertelsen, 2021c) started to develop in interviews.

all these dilemmas. And then we observe the child as ... we interpret, everything is just interpretation.

Interviews allow us to understand the research participant's experience and attitudes - what Brinkmann (2007; Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020) refers to as 'doxastic'¹⁴ interviewing. Here, the interviewer acts as a facilitator eliciting information, ideally bracketing her perspective and knowledge (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020). Accordingly, the sharing of knowledge is taken to be unidirectional (from participant to interviewer), intended to familiarise the interviewer with the participant's lived experience. However, interviews can also take on a more reciprocal, or 'epistemic' (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020) form, where the conversation is directed more actively at constructing knowledge between the researcher and the research participant through an exchange of ideas (Brinkmann, 2007). As I believe the transcribed interview sequence above illustrates, interviews often contained elements of both these modes of interviewing.

Through engaging with the local practising of the 'No Kids in the Middle' programme in participant observation and interviews with parents, therapists, and other stakeholders, my research interest gradually transformed. From looking at this particular practice as a way of engaging with high-conflict divorce as a generic clinical phenomenon, I began to look with the participants in the study to understand the institutional structures that their struggles were part of and how their experience of taking part in the multi-family group programme could be understood in light of – or in dialogue with – this more comprehensive social architecture.

5.5.2 A pragmatic approach to analytical strategies – induction, deduction, and abduction

My choice of specific analytical concepts and strategies for data analysis was not made prior to the inquiry itself. Instead, they were negotiated as the general research problematic - the social organisation of parents' experience and knowledge in high-conflict divorce cases, and the conditions for parents to

¹⁴ The term *doxastic* derives from the Ancient Greek δόξα (*doxa*), meaning "opinion" or "belief."

engage as subjects within this organisation - was gradually formulated. The identification of analytical threads to pursue began as a work of induction, observing similarities across several singular cases and assuming this to indicate the presence of a patterned connection. From the inductively generated problematic, the research followed two separate *abductive* paths, leading me to the analytical frameworks developed by Smith and Biesta, respectively. Abduction involves reasoning by analogy and “brings to bear on the familiar a new perspective derived from another realm of inquiry” (Pribram, 1981, p. 106). In this way, singular cases are interpreted from a hypothesised overarching pattern, which, if it fits, might explain what is observed (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 4). Abduction has elements in common with both induction (i.e., going from the singular to the general) and deduction (i.e., interpreting single cases in light of established general principles). However, in focusing on underlying patterns, abduction adds a level of understanding that can be said to be lacking in both inductive and deductive strategies. Methodologically, abduction is a pragmatic, or problem-solving, approach to research. It is used to develop potentially *helpful* understandings and accounts of uncertain situations to make the situation more transparent and workable (Brinkmann, 2018).

As was the case with my choice to do as many as possible of the interviews with parents in their own homes as opposed to in a more “clinical” setting (see section 3.3 above), I strove to avoid the deductive “trap” of using the language of systems theory, psychotherapy, or developmental psychology to make sense of parents’ experience from engaging with an institutional apparatus that is itself structured mainly within these same discourses (NOU, 2019:20; van Lawick & Visser, 2015). The capacity for institutional discourse to subsume or displace descriptions based on experience, Smith (2005) refers to as “institutional capture” (p. 155). By way of abductive reasoning, I sought to counteract such institutional capture by bringing in perspectives and interpretative frameworks from other domains than the psychotherapy research literature to provide a fresh angle.

I wrote Articles 1 and 2 (Bertelsen, 2021a; b) using institutional ethnography as a framework for analysing data and under the assumption that the whole study fitted with institutional ethnography as itself a methodology for inquiry. Studying

things as they are lived, experienced, and later talked about, this way of exploring was constructed to understand why what happens, happens the way it does (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). In Article 3 (Bertelsen, 2021c), I approached the study's problematic differently, letting the sociological aspiration of the first two articles lie. Instead, I looked for a way to explore the local practising of the 'No Kids in the Middle' programme that could accommodate a dual purpose of such an intervention programme of, on the one hand, ruling (which can be said to be an integral part of any therapeutic endeavour, see for example Frank & Frank, 1993), and, on the other hand, the potential for subjective emancipation from such ruling. Abductively interpreting the 'No Kids in the Middle' programme as an educational process, using Biesta's tripartite formulation of educational purpose as an analytical tool, allowed me to illuminate how both ruling and emancipation from that ruling was at stake in the actual doing of the programme.

In the next section, I provide a brief overall account of the analytical work for the three articles. I also try to articulate how the choices of analytical foci resulted from my ongoing engagement with the data. For more detailed accounts of the analytical procedures for each article, I refer to the methods sections of the individual articles.

5.5.3 Summary of the analyses for Articles 1 and 2

In both Articles 1 and 2, I used institutional ethnography's concept of work, referring to people's doings and their expert knowledge about their doings (DeVault, 2014; Smith, 2005), as an analytical lens to start organising the data material around accounts of parents' activities. According to Smith, the practice of institutional ethnography "aims to be through and through indexical to the local sites of people's experience, making visible how we are connected into the extended social relations of ruling and economy and their intersections" (2005, p. 29). By indexicality, what is meant here are the actualities, of whatever kind, that the accounts of these actualities refer back to. As such, "the ethnography is to be interpreted as an explication and expansion of the work knowledges people have of the social terrain it claims to describe" (Smith, 2005, p. 161). Such indexing is a common strategy in institutional ethnographic analysis (Rankin, 2017). It offers an alternative to methods for abstracting themes or categories from the data. Indexing helps keep analysis grounded in the materiality and particularities of

participants' accounts of actual events and experiences. It also facilitates the process of cross-reference across local activities, people, and settings, to support the tracking of how ruling relations that are realised locally are hooked onto the local work of other people, elsewhere and at different times (Rankin, 2017).

Although the analytical strategies were not identical between the two articles, both analyses were rooted in this fundamental indexing of the data material. In Article 1 (Bertelsen, 2021a), I concentrated primarily on parents' articulations of their work knowledge, that is, how they articulated their concerns about their children as well as their reasons for staying engaged in the institutional processes that had caused them to be identified as a high-conflict divorce case (e.g., repeated mediations and court proceedings). In line with how Smith (1987; 2005) conceives standpoint as a methodological alternative to the objectified subject of conventional social research, I used parents' expert work knowledge as the entry point to the inquiry. I exclusively worked with data from interviews with parents for this article, linking their accounts to relevant textual discursive material. The parts of interviews used for this analysis were related to parents' history with family breakup and post-divorce parenting. Exploring these accounts, I looked for traces of shared discourse as well as disjunctures between parents' local work knowledge and a more formalised and impersonal understanding of post-divorce conflict integral to the jargon of the various institutions of government engaged in issues of post-divorce conflict and parenting.

The analysis led to an understanding of how the social organisation of parents' work and work knowledge in situations of post-divorce parenting builds on, and finds justification in, two particular discourses of parenting dominant in contemporary Norwegian society – gender-equal symmetry between parents and child-centric devoted parenting. In the version of the article initially submitted to the journal, I conceptualised the work processes that I found parents to be engaging in opposite these normative understandings of good parenting as a 'sharing of parenting' and a 'negotiation of presence'. One of the peer reviewers encouraged me to go an extra round with my analysis and to consult some key Nordic publications on the subject of post-divorce parenting. In this process, I found that Westerling's (2016) concepts of 'symmetry' and 'devotion' were a better way to group and formulate my findings, and I used these concepts to articulate the analysis further.

For the analysis of Article 2 (Bertelsen, 2021b), I was interested in exploring what happens to parents' concerns when they become a 'case' as part of engaging in institutionalised sequences of dialogue with professionals. I began in accounts from individual interviews with parents where they talked about meetings with professionals where some form of assessment was made or where there was talk of a referral of the people in question as a 'case' between services. I indexed these accounts according to which service was responsible for producing the assessment or referral that the individual event was related to. Nineteen of the 20 parents interviewed had experienced being assessed by child welfare services. Hence, I supplied the 'entry-level data' (Campbell & Gregor, 2004) of interviews with parents with accounts of similar encounters from interviews with child welfare caseworkers. These 'level-two data' (Campbell & Gregor, 2004) provided some of the missing organisational minutiae of how the process of making a case actually worked. Linking these accounts together under one index heading allowed me to analytically connect accounts of different local sequences of interaction in a way that did not abstract from the actualities of local experience but allowed me to understand how these local experiences came to happen as they did.

5.5.4 Summary of the analysis for Article 3

For Article 3 (Bertelsen, 2021c), I started data analysis almost entirely over. Here, my research interest lay not in mapping how things happened or why they happened as they did, but rather in understanding what was at stake in what was happening within the local setting of the practising of the 'No Kids in the Middle' multi-family programme. Setting aside the indexing approach to data organisation used for the first two articles (Rankin, 2017), I started organising sequences from interview transcripts where parents and therapists explicitly talked about experiences from engaging with the local practising of the 'No Kids in the Middle' programme. Similarly, I organised material from interviews with judges and child welfare caseworkers containing their knowledge and experience explicitly connected to this particular programme. In addition, I searched my

field notes from participant observation in the multi-family therapy group to locate my own immediate observations from the same, or similar, situations.

Engaging with these data, I initially used a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2016; 2019). Braun and Clarke (2006) distinguish between two levels of themes: semantic and latent. A semantic theme is an identifiable topical pattern across the data set. In contrast, a latent theme refers to something beyond what has been said and “starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies - that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (p. 84).

On the semantic level, I identified patterns in the material indicative of participants’ expectations concerning the multi-family group programme, their reflections about the consequences of participation, and concerns or questions they had regarding the programme. Guided by the question of what seemed to be at stake for participants, and sensitised from my work from Articles 1 and 2 (Bertelsen, 2021a; b) to the issue of the conditions for parental agency, the thematic approach to analysis resulted in the constructive identification of three areas, or themes, of particular salience. These did not represent topical summaries of data but were latent “stories about particular patterns of shared meaning across the dataset” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 592). First, all participants (parents, therapists and other professionals alike) expressed concern for the children’s situation and an understanding of the group programme as a way of responding to this concern. Second, the different activities of the group “curriculum” seemed to let the parents relate to some of the key dilemmas that the understanding of high-conflict divorce as a risk factor for children’s psychosocial health poses to parents in general, and to reflect on how this was relevant to their specific situation. Third, in parents’ accounts of experience, I found that the time spent in the waiting room before groups, or what happened spontaneously in situations related to breaks or unforeseen interruptions, appeared to be of particular importance. In these situations, parents seemed to be confronted with their existential situation differently than in the more planned or therapist-led situations that were formally part of the programme.

To be able to analytically highlight how the clinical practice was made to happen as an integrated part of a particular ruling regime aiming to guide parents

identified as being in conflict toward practising co-parenting in ways that are considered preferable to children, while at the same time prioritising participants' first-person accounts of experience, I decided to approach the local practising of the 'No Kids in the Middle' programme using an educational vocabulary instead of using concepts from the clinical literature or child developmental theory. Thus, my approach to analysis was both inductive and deductive (Braun & Clarke, 2019), but also decidedly abductive (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Applying Biesta's (2009; 2010) vocabulary for formulating educational purpose along the axes of qualification, socialisation, and subjectification let me articulate how the practice was connected to, or made sense in light of, culturally dominant understandings of conflict as an unfavourable mode of parenting. At the same time, it allowed me to look for conditions for subjectification in the situations under study, that is, for places in the data where parents appeared to relate to their situation as subjects of their own lives (as opposed to as the objects of educational or therapeutic instruction).

5.6 Credibility and trustworthiness

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe qualitative research as "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible [...] attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). These activities of sense-making are, according to Geertz (1983), "more like grasping a proverb, catching an allusion, seeing a joke – or [...] reading a poem – than it is like achieving communion" (p. 70). Accordingly, criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research are a contested topic (Rennie, 1999). Within quantitative research traditions, the terms 'validity' and 'reliability' are commonly used to assess the degree of trustworthiness of a researcher's handling of data, which is crucial for how well the findings can be presumed to be generalisable. In qualitative research, these aspects are harder to pin down (Hammersley, 1987). Some even question the relevance of concepts such as validity, reliability, and generalisation for qualitative research at all (Merrick, 1999; see also Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, pp. 275-277; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, pp. 183-185).

More than a measure of the handling of data, in qualitative research, trustworthiness is usually considered to be a dimension running through the study as a whole, reflective of the entire research process (Polit & Beck, 2017). In this respect, arguing for the truthfulness of one's accounting of other peoples' subjectivities "without recourse to pretensions to more-than-normal capacities for ego effacement and fellow feeling" (Geertz, 1983, p. 70) demands careful consideration of how the trustworthiness of the research is secured. Kvale and Brinkmann (2015; Kvale, 1996) use the validity concept for this purpose and suggest that the validity of qualitative studies can be assessed along three interconnected axes: validity as a craft, communicative validity, and pragmatic validity. In the following, I will use these three facets of the validity concept to discuss the trustworthiness of my research and the transferability of the findings.

5.6.1 Validity as craftsmanship

As an aspect of the craft of doing research, validity relates to a systematic and critical discussion throughout the research process, from beginning to end; are the research questions and basic assumptions of the study supported by theory? Does the study design hold up (not just regarding scientific rigour but also from the ethical perspective of whether the research is likely to contribute to the general betterment of the human condition)? Was interviewing and transcription, and other means for data production, done properly? Were the findings backed by sound analysis and procedures for validation proper to the study (e.g., triangulation)? Was the research communicated in a trustworthy and accurate manner?

The generic design of the study was a naturalistic case study (Abma & Stake, 2014) done within an illuminative paradigm (Parlett & Hamilton, 1977). The procedures for collecting data followed the general guidelines for illuminative evaluation (Parlett & Hamilton, 1977; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1985), beginning with participant observation and followed by in-depth interviews with participants holding different stakeholder positions within the case. This procedure also agrees with how institutional ethnographic inquiries are usually made (Smith, 2006). My use of theory was guided by attempts at making sense of the thoughts and actions articulated by participants in interviews and what I

observed in participant observation. I used the theory as a scaffolding to connect my reconstructions of people's perspectives and interpretations and make sense of them. Responding to issues raised and introduced by participants in individual interviews, I drew on insights and ideas from institutional ethnography, particularly its social ontology (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2005). This also worked to systematise the study as an inquiry into the social organisation within which I gradually came to see the case as a small, integral part.

In the work of data analysis, the main procedures for triangulation applied were looking at accounts of similar institutional processes in the data material using data from different participants' accounts, both within the same (e.g., different parents) and across different stakeholder positions (e.g., parents and therapists). Here, I sought to identify links between accounts of local action and trans-local modes of ruling happening via multiple activations of the same governing texts. An important part of this was also to accommodate variation between different participants' experience of similar encounters with institutional forms of ruling. In the data analysis for Article 3 (Bertelsen, 2021c), I drew on Biesta's (2009; 2010; 2020a; b) formulation of the threefold purpose of education to articulate what I took to be an essential aspect of the clinical practice I had studied. In addition to data from interviews with participants representing different stakeholder positions vis-à-vis the clinical practice under study, I also analysed field notes from participant observation as a separate source of data for this article.

5.6.2 Communicative validity

Communicative validity refers to the dialogical processes of argumentation - if the research and researcher engage in dialogues relevant to the study, making its arguments and critical building blocks accessible for scrutiny – both to immediate stakeholders to the study itself and relevant scientific, policy, and practice communities.

In qualitative social research, a critical process for establishing credibility is checking the understandings produced from analyses of the data material with the original research participants or others sharing their situation (Hammersley &

Atkinson, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The ethnographic nature of the research, involving progressive focusing (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Parlett & Hamilton, 1977) and the adaptation of a particular experiential standpoint (Smith, 1987; 2005), meant that the interview process itself involved a constant checking and re-checking of understanding both within each single interview and across interviews and participants. This labour also importantly involved a process of respondent triangulation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), checking inferences drawn from one set of data by gathering data from other sources.

As an expansion of this work of respondent validation, I took part in a local joint collaborative forum twice a year, where therapists working with the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ programme in Agder met together with their administrative leaders, representatives from child welfare services and the district courts. The purpose of these meetings was to share experiences and concerns and to discuss further joint efforts to improve institutional services for families in high-conflict divorce situations. By making the research part of these dialogues, I sought to maintain a conversation between the various developing strands of analysis and the people located within the same institutional circuitry as the parents I was interviewing.

An often-used strategy for establishing credibility is team research, whereby triangulation is obtained between different researchers. This is not easily obtained in ethnographic research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), where the researcher’s sustained presence in the local context where the research is conducted is a critical part of the analytical work. Still, my group of four research supervisors jointly contributed to the analysis of interviews through reading most of the interview transcripts¹⁵ and engaging in joint conversations with me about their interpretation.

In addition to the processes of validation involving those who were directly or indirectly stakeholders in the study, I regularly gave presentations at seminars and conferences both for primarily academic and practitioner-dominated audiences and as lectures for students. In these forums, I received valuable

¹⁵ All interviews were conducted and transcribed in Norwegian. Accordingly, only the three Norwegian-speaking supervisors were able to read the transcripts. My fieldnotes were written in English and were thus accessible for scrutiny by all four supervisors.

feedback and critical questions that often helped me see aspects and qualities in the material that I had not been fully attentive to.

5.6.3 Pragmatic validity

Pragmatic validity refers to various assessments of the usefulness of the research: whether the research topic is of importance, if the study can have relevance for practice, and if it is of public interest (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

As a whole, the study represents a sustained attempt at attending to the experience of a group of parents whose behaviours have been the object of much public concern and moral condemnation in the research, policy, and clinical literature, but whose subjective reasons for acting have received far less attention. Judging from responses from some of those who have read my published articles (including some of the anonymous peer reviewers) and from people who have responded to various public presentations, the perspectives developed in this research seem to articulate and speak to concerns shared by people whose experiential standpoints lie at either side of the line of fault between parents' everyday work knowledge and professional expertise. To the extent that they resonate with the experience and knowledge of others, one could say that the findings speak to a shared experiential "truth." The conclusions could thus have relevance in settings outside of the local context of the study in the sense that they might add to and expand how we think of and approach high-conflict divorce – both as a clinical problem, a topic for research, a policy issue, and an existential predicament.

5.6.4. A note on situatedness

As a study relying on ethnographic methodology, the insights it brings are situated (Abbott, 2004). Although my interpretations were reciprocally related to participants' experiences, the two are importantly not identical (Clifford, 1983). As a means for generating understanding, research is never a disembodied production of ideas but always a material and committed practice. As I have sought to demonstrate through my explication of how the research developed, my adopting a standpoint in parents' experience was not something I had planned for

or envisaged. At one level, this choice of perspective had to do with an ethical intuition, responding to parents' articulated experience of alienation. This was a finding I had not prepared for in advance. However, adopting a standpoint was primarily a strategic and scientific choice, representing my own best effort to find an angle from where to probe into, make visible, and map out the territory that I observed to exist around the line of fault between parents' subjective knowledge as embedded in the local practising of their everyday lives, and the generic image of the 'high-conflict divorce parent' implied in much of the research and policy literature that authorise clinical, social, and legal interventions in parents', and in their children's, lives.

Arguing for the inseparability of ethics and epistemology, Haraway (1997) writes that in doing research, we inevitably need to "cast our lot with some ways of life and not others." To do that, she argues, "one must be in the action, be finite and dirty, not transcendent and clean" (p. 37). Although in the articles I did not find room to elaborate on the shortcomings and risks of such situatedness, I consistently tried to make this relentlessly visible as a choice, open to the reader's critical reflection.

5.7 Research ethics

In keeping with norms for conducting social research, before commencing the study and recruiting and interviewing participants, approval was obtained from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD, project nr. 57881, Appendix A) and the Ethical Committee at the Faculty for Health and Sports Sciences, University of Agder. I also presented the project before the Regional Committee for Health and Medical Research Ethics (REK; see Appendix B), where it was assessed as exempt from further consideration since the project did not involve people in the capacity of being patients.

Kvale (1996) suggests that qualitative research involving human participants lays three kinds of ethical demands on the researcher: informed consent, confidentiality, and responsibility for the consequences of the study. All participants were given information about the research in both oral and written form and gave their informed consent to use their contributions as data (Appendices C-G). In the articles and other presentations based on the material,

confidentiality was maintained by omitting any identifying information about specific participants. By identifying the geographical and institutional context of the study, it might be possible for persons familiar with this context to identify someone as a participant. I have, however, striven to eliminate any information from specific quotations that might connect any single participant to a particular utterance. I have furthermore sought to take out any information that might cause ethical or personal dilemmas for participants (other than the ethical dilemmas that were the topic of the interviews and which were an essential part of the data material).

Outside of these distinct areas of ethical consideration, ethics was a dimension of the entire research process. As an undertaking dealing with the practice of parenthood in everyday life, and with therapeutic, welfare, and legal interventions in this domain, the concerns of the study itself can be said to oscillate between the ethical and political (in the Aristotelian sense of ethics as what serves the good of the individual and politics as what benefits the interests of the community). Whether the research contributes to better lives on the individual and communal levels is not easily assessed. However, throughout every step of the research process, I have sought to cultivate attentiveness to the fact that my presence as a researcher, and the existence of the study itself, represented a perturbation into the lives of the research participants and into moments within those lives where their identities – as parents or professionals – were at stake.

One of the findings in the study was that from the perspective of parents taking part in the institutional processes surrounding high-conflict divorce, the interventions from the various bodies of government that were mandated to intervene in their conflicts did not necessarily contribute toward the *experience* of a better life. On parents' account (representing a perspective that can, of course, be contested), engaging with many of these processes did not unequivocally contribute to the betterment of their children's lives either. In this sense, which I think is important, the research *addresses* ethical concerns that might stimulate further reflection within the ethical domain.

5.7.1 The absence of children as study participants

In terms of study participants as subjects actively invited to contribute to the perspectives developed in the study, the direct voices of children in the data material are unmistakably missing. In both legal, relational, and existential terms, children constitute a substantial part of “the heart of the matter” in parental disputes, and the children were certainly a dominant and vibrant part of the multi-family group therapy setting of the study. Including their perspectives in the analyses, particularly for Article 3 (Bertelsen, 2021c) where I explored the group process that they were part of, would have made much sense. Although my initial research proposal included the intent to make interviews with children part of the data material, I ultimately decided not to pursue this objective. This was because several parents expressed reluctance to the idea (as clarified in the paragraph about children as study participants in section 5.3.1 above). As a strategic choice made during the process of observation and interviewing, the decision not to argue against parents’ views marked a critical turning point in the research process, consequential to my abandoning of the idea of doing a multi-perspective evaluation (Melton & Zimmer, 1987) of the local ‘No Kids in the Middle’ programme practice. Adopting parents’ standpoint, I saw it as both an epistemological and an ethical necessity to accept the priority of their concerns over my initial ambitions. Making parents’ experience the starting point of the inquiry was not a trick to “establish rapport,” but a decision to cast my lot with a way of life (Haraway, 1997, p. 37). Leaving out separate interviews with children was thus, as I think of it, perhaps a methodological flaw but nonetheless a moral necessity.

Within the existing scientific and political discourse of high-conflict divorce, making parents’ standpoint the starting point of inquiry still risks playing into a dichotomising polarisation between parents and children. Much of the research beginning in the consequences of parents’ conflicts for children’s psychosocial health and wellbeing can be read as playing up to such a polarisation. Accordingly, parents are (by implication) located as the cause of their children’s despair. As I have tried to demonstrate above (in chapters 2 and 3), such a dichotomous view of parents and children can be read into the language of parent support typical of much current family policy. If read as a direct counterargument to this, my research could be interpreted as an attempt at rationalising parental

misconduct, unwittingly supporting the kind of prejudice against children that Young-Bruehl (2012) refers to as ‘childism’. Such has not been my intent - quite the opposite. My goal has been to address every person involved in the grand-scale institutional coordination of high-conflict divorce as a *subject*. I hope that it may illuminate both the institutional architecture in which the seemingly isolated relational activities of individual mothers, fathers, children, and professionals take place *and* the fact that these activities are not merely occurrences of the general phenomenon of high-conflict divorce, but sequences of coordinated actions.

5.7.2 Authority and authorship

In psychology and related health sciences, at least in Norway, articles that are part of a PhD research project usually carry the PhD candidate’s name (as the first author) and the names of the candidate’s supervisors (as secondary authors). Having a list of authors jointly vouching for the merit of the research and the truthfulness of the findings often contributes to the authority and visibility of a study upon publication. When I started doing this research, I unreflectingly assumed that this was part of the social contract of doing a PhD. When nearing the time for submitting the first article to a journal, I initiated a discussion about co-authorship with my supervisors. One of the supervisors, Gert Biesta, immediately refused the idea of being included as a co-author on these grounds. This set off a discussion about the distinction between supervision and co-authorship as different modes of involvement in research and the production of scientific texts, moving the group toward the insight that - at least in the context of this PhD project - including supervisors as co-authors was not warranted.

To my understanding, this decision followed the general guidelines of the Vancouver regulations of authorship (ICMJE, 2019), not least the principle that to be listed as an author means being held “accountable for all aspects of the work” (ICMJE, 2019, p. 2). Considering this, I judge my single authorship as both correct and appropriate. Doing a PhD is a process with an educational purpose; at the far end, a candidate must qualify for doctoral authority as a sign of having become socialised into the academic community. An essential part of this is finding a voice with which to publicise – go public with – one’s research and to come to terms with the burdens involved in this. My four supervisors all

played crucial roles along every step of the process, but they took their roles as supervisors – educators – seriously. By that, I mean that they offered up the support and resistance necessary for me to do *my* research

6. Findings

6.1 Summary of Article 1

Staying with the conflict – parenting work and the social organisation of post-divorce conflict. *Journal of Family Studies*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2020.1869578>

In this article, I analysed interviews with 20 Norwegian parents to explore the shared knowledge they drew on when justifying their continuing engagement in what was institutionally labelled as a high-conflict divorce case. From a standpoint in these parents' experience, the aim was to explore how and if their work in enduring post-divorce conflicts could be understood as related to specific socially organised ways of doing parenthood. Using the analytical strategies of institutional ethnography (Rankin, 2017), I looked for references to, and traces of, authoritative documents like laws, policies, and professional guidelines in parents' verbal accounts of everyday activities. Through their governing role in the social organisation of present-day Norwegian society, I argued that such texts functioned to structure the local ruling relations (Smith, 2005) between parents and professionals, objectifying the everyday lives of parents and children and their interactions with professionals working for the various state institutions mandated to engage with families around issues of parental disagreement.

For parents, engaging in what was identified as high-conflict divorce (pragmatically operationalised as qualifying for a multi-family group therapy programme reserved for families in a high-conflict divorce situation) did not necessarily represent a qualitatively different set of aspirations and priorities than did parenting under other, more “normal” circumstances of family life. However, the institutional dynamics of high-conflict divorce seemed to make navigating a subject position within this normative terrain of parenting difficult.

I specifically named two normative discourses that I found to be present in my material from interviews with parents. These, I referred to by terms borrowed from Westerling (2016): symmetry and devotion. Symmetry refers to the discourse of gender-equal parenting, which has a strong standing in the Nordic countries (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Eydal & Rostgaard, 2018; Forsberg, 2007; Johansson & Klinth, 2008; Plantin, Månsson &

Kearney, 2003). As an ideal, symmetry between parents after divorce is expressive of values of gender equality and fairness. By the term devotion, I referred to what several social scientists have observed to be a current cultural preference in the West for child-centred forms of parenting, strongly informed by developmental psychology and a rights-based understanding of childhood. Drawing on concepts from institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005), I argued for the presence of a disjuncture between the ‘insider’ knowledge of parents and an objectified institutional understanding of parents in high-conflict divorce cases as deviants. The article concludes that when policy and professional responses are organised around objectified accounts of post-divorce conflict as instances of parental neglect, it creates a risk for distancing policy and therapeutic and other helping initiatives from the experiences of those parents they are meant to address.

6.2 Summary of Article 2

Whose life is it anyway? Exploring the social relations of high-conflict divorce cases in Southern Norway. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 43(3), 276-289.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10591-021-09572-y>

The problematic of this study derived from an observation made by several researchers writing about high-conflict divorce issues (Anderson, Sumner, Parady, Whiting & Tambling 2019; Johnston, Roseby and Kuehnle; 2009, Treloar, 2018; 2019): although families found to be entrenched in conflict after a breakup are frequently referred to therapy by the judicial system in the hope of reducing friction and avoiding new court filings, for some parents, engaging with professionals within the institutional discourse that surrounds divorce seems to fire, not calm, parents’ conflicts.

The article builds on data from qualitative interviews with 19 Norwegian parents identified as part of a high-conflict divorce situation and interviews with five caseworkers from a child welfare service. Study participants were recruited based on their engagement in a multi-family group therapy programme for parents and children experiencing enduring conflicts after a family breakup. The study concentrates on the institutional circuit of concern, assessment, and referral that preceded a family’s entering this programme. This circuit involved the court,

child welfare services, and the family counselling service. The paper draws on the social ontology and analytic concepts of institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005). It adopts parents' standpoint to explore how their knowledge and experience were shaped through encounters with professionals in the process of being identified and assessed as a high-conflict divorce case.

The article focuses specifically on encounters between parents and child welfare caseworkers leading up to a further referral to a family therapy intervention. It seeks to map one segment of the institutional sequence through which parents in conflict encounter the institutions of the Norwegian welfare state. The focus on people's doings and their expert knowledge about their doings sets institutional ethnographic research apart from more conventional forms of qualitative inquiry that focuses on participants' inner experience and representations. The analysis highlights how a generalised professional discourse seems to permeate the work that parents and caseworkers jointly engage in, sometimes subsuming the subjective knowledge and experience of both the parents and the professionals involved. The article concludes that when the issues of life as subjectively known and experienced are different from those of the institutional discourse, there is a danger that what is important to those whose lives they concern escapes the dialogue between parents and professionals.

6.3 Summary of Article 3

Parent education beyond learning. An ethnographic exploration of a multi-family programme for families in post-divorce conflict. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/anzf.1460>

This article begins by observing that programmes for parent education or 'training' have become a favoured way for governments to implement general and more specific family policy agendas. In Norway, as in many other Western countries, this trend is also evident regarding parental conflicts. Typically, programmes targeting parents in divorce involve a mix of curricular material about child development, consequences of inter-parental conflicts, successful communication, and group discussion and practical exercises relevant to the topics introduced. In the case of post-divorce disputes, approaching the educational ambition of programmes for parents in post-divorce conflict only in

terms of the explicit content they cover or their potential for producing measurable behavioural change risks reducing what goes on to a question of learning. This obscures the existential side of parenthood: being a parent is not primarily a domain of knowledge – it is also a question of figuring out what to do and how to be, in response to the events and dilemmas that make out one's own and one's children's everyday lives. The article explores one specific programme for parents and children struggling with issues of post-divorce conflict, the 'No Kids in the Middle' programme (van Lawick & Visser, 2015), as it was practised in the Agder region of South Norway. It seeks to understand how particular practices, settings and arrangements characteristic of this programme positioned parents vis-à-vis social norms, each other, their children, and themselves as subjects of their own life.

The article builds on ethnographic, qualitative research that explored the local practising of the 'No Kids in the Middle' programme in Agder, Norway, in 2018 and 2019. The analysis draws on Gert Biesta's (2009; 2010) articulation of education as a process working along three dimensions of purpose: qualification (i.e., parents acquiring knowledge and skills), socialisation (i.e., parents gaining a specific orientation toward a set of norms and values), and subjectification (i.e., bringing the 'I' of each parent into play). The analysis draws on fieldnotes from participant observation in a 'No Kids in the Middle' multi-family group and interviews with parents, therapists, judges, and child welfare caseworkers. The findings suggest that many of the practices typical of this programme could be understood as qualifying and socialising practices, communicating the normative dominance of specific cultural understandings of good parenting as prioritising the wellbeing of children. Through the group practices of dialogue, instruction, and joint exercises, parents and therapists jointly worked toward negotiating the present situation of each family constellation and each parent vis-à-vis this normative foundation.

Using the educational dimension of subjectification as an analytic lens, I sought specifically after indications of how the issue of being an 'I' seemed to be raised and set in play in the various practices in the multi-family group setup. While most of what went on in the parents' group sessions could be interpreted as instances of qualification and socialisation, the full practising of the programme could also be seen as ways of staging encounters where parents could face the

realities of their situation and ponder how to relate to them as facts of life. In contrast to the normalising energy characteristic of practices serving the purposes of qualification and socialisation, these were practices where parents were addressed as the subjects of their *own* lives (as opposed to being students of “the good life”), denying them the “comfort” of *not* relating to their situation. I suggested that in the data material for this specific study, the potential for subjectification was most evident in the events and situations surrounding the curricular content of the programme itself: when families were congregating in the waiting room before sessions, in interruptions and unforeseen happenings during group sessions, or the commotion caused when families would move from one place to another within the material context of the clinic.

The paper concludes that programmes like ‘No Kids in the Middle’ seem to provide a broad spectrum of educational opportunities. While some of these might be intended to instruct along pre-defined normative paths in accordance with dominant understandings of preferable behaviour, such practices can also be seen as addressing parents in different, more existential, ways. Conceiving the educational aspect of parent education programmes using Biesta’s (2009; 2010) understanding of education’s purposes might offer further ideas about what practising such programmes set in motion. It might also help reimagine the goals of policies and therapeutic initiatives to bring them into closer contact with the question of what is at stake in a situation of high-conflict divorce as seen from the perspective of those whose lives it affects.

7. Discussion

“We may come to see that the relationship between the order of things and the desires of those subjugated to it is a bit more complicated than scholarly treatises realise. Perhaps that may help us to acquire a certain modesty in wielding big words and expressing large sentiments.”

(Rancière, 1989, p. Xii)

The concept ‘high-conflict divorce’ is not merely a neutral description referring to a naturally occurring interpersonal phenomenon; using it does things, that much is clear. The three articles of this thesis represent my tactical manoeuvres to wriggle my way into some of the workings of this concept as these became visible in the everyday lives of the families and professionals participating in the study. I have not sought to find the “core” of post-divorce parental conflict as *a* phenomenon. Shifting perspective from abstract ways of understanding to looking at it from a standpoint in parents’ experience, the study has instead been an attempt at empathetic diversification.

The study is not clinical in a conventional sense, since its purpose is not to generate knowledge to answer questions like how well a particular treatment model “works” in general or how best to characterise people afflicted by a specific condition. It approaches high-conflict divorce not as a coherent category of individual or family systems dysfunction but as a device for interrogation (Smith, 2005) whereby people become located in different identity positions as clients or professionals. As they participate in this process, aspects of their everyday worlds are moulded into forms that make sense and fit within a particular institutional set of categories and the spaces and vocabularies assigned to them. As such, all the three articles of the thesis can be seen as accounts of people struggling to “make good” in situations where parents and professionals met around issues labelled as high-conflict divorce.

Committed to the day-to-day lives of actual people, I have sought to build an understanding of how high-conflict divorce is organised socially. Furthermore, I have sought to make explicit what it takes for a parent to engage with the social relations through which this organisation manifests itself in the work processes

that constitute the interface between everyday life and various welfare-state institutions. Thus, I have consistently tried to anchor my analyses at the border between subjective experience and social organisation.

As I see it, the central dilemma observed throughout my analyses was this: By parents, responding to the experience of their own day-to-day concerns for their children's situation was intuited as a necessity. Their responsive engaging materialised in dialogue with conventional understandings of "good" parenting, which I suggested was articulated in the values of symmetry and devotion. When their worries were related to the other parent's ability to meet these norms, or to what they took to be initiatives from the other parent to diminish their own position as caregivers in their children's lives, they sought the assistance of institutional services. The institutional logic through which the general 'high-conflict divorce case' seemed to be built, however, relied on an objectified understanding of 'high-conflict' as an instance of parental neglect. This was consequential for how the various institutional work processes that ensued were orchestrated. Thus, there appeared to be a consistent break between parents' subjective experience of great concern on the one hand, and the institutional understanding of parents in high-conflict divorce situations as neglectful on the other.

Linking the values of symmetry and devotion to policy documents and a general parenting discourse dominant in the West, and connecting the understanding of parental conflict as a form of neglect to research demonstrating the detrimental effects of post-divorce conflicts on children's wellbeing, calls for an understanding of high-conflict divorce as the locally enacted confrontation between several discourses that do not add up. I take this to invite a view of post-divorce conflict as a *communal* dilemma that potentially involves *any* parent and not as a clinical dilemma that primarily concerns a particular group of people. This was my argument in Article 1 (Bertelsen, 2021a). In Article 2 (Bertelsen, 2021b), I attempted to show how professionals' competent engagement with institutional knowledge and logic harbour a risk for disconnecting from parents' genuine concerns as they experience them, and to make visible how this could result in alienation and a lessened sense of agency on the part of parents.

In Article 3 (Bertelsen, 2021c), I used data from interviews and fieldnotes from participant observation in a multi-family therapy group to develop a description of the therapeutic practice as a complex educational event. In addition to providing instruction along pre-defined normative paths, I concluded that such a clinical practice could be seen as a venue where parents could attend to (or walk away from) the fundamentally existential question of *what to do* given the coordinates of the social organisation of their immediate situation. Applying Biesta's (2009; 2010) vocabulary for formulating educational purposes, what in the first two articles (Bertelsen, 2021a; b) was conceptualised as ruling happening between parents and professionals as they engaged with trans-local documents and texts expressive of a particular discourse was, in this analysis, conceptualised as the therapy programme's potential for parental qualification and socialisation. Highlighting the conditions for *subjectification*, that is, for making parents relate to their situation as subjects of their own lives (as opposed to as the objects of educational or therapeutic instruction), I tried to show how the multi-family group therapy situation might provide a venue where the dilemmas drawn up in the first two articles were staged in ways that could make them more accessible as existential issues.

In the following, I will not elaborate further on the discussions already contained in the three articles. Instead, I will try to move forward from their findings and conclusions, discuss how they connect, and see how this relates to research conducted by others. Finally, I will discuss what I see as significant limitations of my study and how the study might contribute to future research and clinical practice.

7.1 Parenting in moral space

“So there was no primitive reality after all, it seemed. There was no such thing as a mother, a father. There was only civilisation.”

(Cusk, 2012, p. 20)

Underneath the three published articles included in the thesis, several more or less evolved manuscripts containing different analytical strands lie buried. Of those, the one I spent the most time and effort on was an attempt to understand

the hopes that parents brought to the multi-family therapy practice through which they were recruited for this study. For that analysis, I looked at parents' aspirations as they articulated them around the start of their participation in the therapy programme, either as recorded in my fieldnotes from the first group session or as articulated in pre-group interviews. These, I compared to what parents said in post-group interviews, building the analysis around the concepts 'reasonable hope' (Weingarten, 2010) and 'radical hope' (Lear, 2006). Between these two conceptions of hope, I imagined, it should be possible to locate an "energy" that could provide a link between parents' concerns and work knowledge and the therapeutic ambitions of the multi-family group therapy programme.

Working with the data material, I ultimately concluded that "hope" in this context represented too much of an idealised, third-person perspective idea, indicative perhaps most of all of my desire to "provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect" (Tyler, 1986). Instead, what struck me during this analytical work was the distance, or disconnection, between parents' everyday experience and the institutional logic that the therapy programme was located within and of which it was an expression¹⁶. From my fieldnotes and in the interview material, I found that what most needed to be expanded upon was not the positive hopes that parents articulated vis-à-vis a particular therapy initiative - that is, what they hoped their participation would bring about. Instead, what stood out were the negative hopes the parents conveyed about what they wanted to preserve, or *not* to change, upon entering the therapy process. This, I hypothesised, had to do with a personal commitment to one's own parenthood. The first article for the thesis (Bertelsen, 2021a) was the product of this work. Letting go of "hope" and turning instead to the concepts and strategies of institutional ethnography (Rankin, 2017; Smith, 2005; 2006), I suggested that these parents' aspirations were understandable as active engagements with the culturally shared norms of symmetry and devotion.

¹⁶ I do not mean to imply that such an institutional logic was articulated in the 'No Kids in the Middle' programme itself, or that any of the professionals interviewed necessarily subscribed to such a logic. What I mean to point out is that the existence of *such a practice*, at this location, at this time, within the institutional frame of its actual realisation, was made possible by, and was necessarily an integral part of, a specific social organisation structured around – and by the textual activation (Smith, 2005) of – the high-conflict divorce concept (see section 4.1. above).

Lee, Bristow, Faircloth and Macvarish (2014) apply the term ‘parenting culture’ to refer to the more or less formalised web of rules and codes of conduct that make up the moral space within which any parent must constantly position and reposition themselves. As breakup and divorce have become established as life transitions with a high probability for happening in any cohabiting, co-parenting arrangement, family policies have developed normative frameworks to guide parents toward preferred ways of parting (Smart & Neale, 1997). According to Faircloth, Hoffman, and Layne (2013), engaging with an identity as a parent “means being both discursively positioned by and actively contributing to the networks of ideas, values, practices and social relations that have come to define a particular form of the politics of parent-child relations within the domain of the contemporary family” (p. 2). Failing to make the transition from parenting together to co-parenting apart in ways that let one leave animosity behind and move on is, to some extent, considered a failure in moral orientation.

In a situation with the structure of an enduring post-divorce conflict, exerting agency as a parent means orienting within this discursive field with a certain level of reflexivity. It involves adopting a specific affiliation to particular ways of child-rearing backed by theory and research via dialogues with professional expertise. In the three articles of the study, I showed how this engagement structures parents’ reality in different ways. Together, they can be read as steps toward an ecology of being a parent who has become part of a high-conflict divorce case.

7.2 Productive resistance

This study does not seek to present a phenomenology of parenthood in a particular situation. Instead, it offers an illumination of the social organisation of parenthood and the existential claims laid upon parents in situations where parents cannot settle in mutual trust and respect after a family breakup. Importantly, it does not speak of high-conflict divorce as a phenomenon, or of different kinds of people or different characteristics of minds associated with it. Nevertheless, situating the experiencing and knowing subject as the locus in which, and from where, thinking and perception must begin, attending to

subjective experience and what unites and separates different subjective experiences certainly resembles phenomenological work.

Studying the work of diversity workers in higher education and the “work” of the diversity concept itself, Ahmed (2012) argues that phenomenology can function as a productive practice to make us aware of the gap between the symbolic commitments of institutions and policy and the experience of the people encompassed by these commitments. She writes that:

“We come up against the force and weight of something when we attempt to alter the conditions of an existence. But we can also come up against something in our experience of an existence. Doing diversity work is institutional work in the sense that it is an experience of encountering resistance and countering that resistance. Each new strategy or tactic for getting through the wall generates knowledge of what does or does not get across” (p. 175).

Adopting a standpoint in parents’ experience from engaging with the discourse of parenting and the ruling relations of the high-conflict divorce case might help us get a better sense of where the gap dividing the commitments of policy and parents’ experience is situated. Moreover, it might let us better appreciate what is at stake in being a parent who is “stuck on the far side” of this divide. Attending to personal accounts of encountering, and countering, the resistance afforded by this line of fault between their own actual experience and the generalised and abstract knowledge of institutions and acknowledging them as accounts of the doings of ordinary people, is not to embrace parental neglect; it is an attempt at developing an understanding as an act of solidarity.

Subject, encounter, and resistance are elements common to Smith’s project of institutional ethnography and Biesta’s existential educational perspective. While both are committed to the first-person perspective of the subject, their object of interest differs. Institutional ethnography is a “sociology for people” (Smith, 2005) that arises from the problems and puzzles of everyday life but directs its analyses toward processes of governance (DeVault, 2020; Smith, 2005).

Regarding the kind of resistance that Ahmed (2012) speaks of, institutional ethnography aims to illuminate why and how such planes of resistance arise.

Biesta’s concern, on the other hand, is to locate the conditions for relating to this

resistance as a subject. That is, as a question of what to do. In an educational sense, Biesta (2017a) argues that:

“The encounter with resistance, that is, the encounter with the fact that something or someone resists our initiatives, is a tremendously important experience as it shows that the world is not a construction of our mind or our desires, but actually has an existence and an integrity of its own. The experience of resistance is in that regard a worldly experience – an experience that we are *somewhere*, not just anywhere” (p. 14, *italics in original*).

Making parents’ local experience the standpoint of the research and attuning to the sites and moments within this experience where local embodied knowledge and abstract institutional knowledge come up against – and resist - each other, we can see both how post-divorce conflicts are part of the social organisation of knowledge and that the consequences of this organisation are material and, in a certain sense, undisputable. In this sense, the issue of concern seems less like a conflict of interests or a communication problem and more like a wound - it is located, and it locates the subject experiencing it. Once present, the issues of concern command attention and time. Thus, conflict becomes more like birth and death and love than it resembles factual disagreements or self-serving narcissism. Like lightning, it is a force unleashed.

Illich (1976) argued that the medicalisation of society contributes to a general “un-health” by taking away from people the ability to deal with their personal wellbeing. To an extent, this might also be a fitting way to understand the political tendencies of which the institutionalised encounters between families and professionals explored in this study are expressive. In a manner similar to how Illich theorises the relationship between the acts of medical professions and the development of illness in the twentieth century, services attending to conflict resolution in families in contemporary Norwegian society could be suspected of being engaged in the ideological engineering of “the dreams of reason” (Illich, 1976, p. 13) just as much as they are adequate responses to individuals’ struggles. These processes, “when the language in which people could experience their bodies is turned into bureaucratic gobbledegook; or when suffering, mourning, and healing outside the patient role are labelled a form of

deviance” (Illich, 1976, p. 13), Illich refers to as social iatrogenesis¹⁷. When professions become moral enterprises that advocate new and improved services as the universal remedy for suffering, the ability of individuals to face their reality, connect with and confront their values, and accept pain and suffering as part of the human condition easily stands to be undermined.

7.3 Different words: conflict - concern – commitment

“The mind of the informant is not simply a locus where the ideological system of his culture is inscribed; it is a force of commitment - commitment to some pieces of this system but also to his work and his manoeuvres in the network of his political and psychological relations with others.”

(Lingis, 2018, p. 57)

Speaking from the position of a mother or father subjugated to the governing order of contemporary Norwegian parenting culture, what words might resonate with subjective experience? In the therapeutic field, others have suggested several concepts that might make better sense from a first-person perspective than the nomothetic language of diagnostics and professional jargon. Frank (Frank & Frank, 1993) suggested that people seek psychotherapy not because they experience symptoms of a disorder but as a culturally sanctioned response to a subjective sense of demoralisation opposite one’s everyday world. Rober (2017) consistently speaks of “worries” and “concerns” to refer to the reasons that bring people to family therapy. While “conflict” in some sense refers to an objective entity befitting the impartial intervention of experts (representative of a third-person perspective), worries and concerns are concepts that speak to – or *from* - the first-person position of the experiencing subject. While the word “conflict” might well capture what transpires in isolated events as witnessed from above (or below), what motivates the actions executed, causes the sleepless

¹⁷ The term *iatrogenesis* refers to the “inadvertent and preventable induction of disease or complications by the medical treatment or procedures of a physician or surgeon” (Merriam-Webster, 2021).

nights, and fuels the determination to stay with the trouble despite the hardship involved, seems more complicated than what is covered by this concept.

Could we speculate even further? At the beginning of a research interview with a father, while I was informing him about the study and asking him if he was willing to participate and sign a written statement of informed consent, he sighed and said that if he could speak frankly, he was thoroughly fed up talking about his situation:

Interviewer: I take it that you don't feel a burning desire, like, yes, finally someone to talk to about this?

Father: No. I'm sorry. But, on the other hand, it has ... for almost a year now, this has been the only thing on my mind. The only thing I *want* to talk about. I feel dead inside. I can't bother to socialise because I'm just talking about that shit, anyway. So ... we can talk about it.

Frankfurt (2006) argues that being a *self* is constituted by the limits of a person's will, that is, what they cannot help caring about. We are not free, in an absolute sense, to will whatever we want. Instead, we are committed in ways that we cannot directly affect. Our desires do not change just because we will them to or because we decide that change would be for the better. In Frankfurt's work, parents' love for their children is a prime example of such 'volitional necessity'. On this view, "love is not a conclusion. It is not an outcome of reasoning or a consequence of reasons. It creates reasons" (Frankfurt, 2006, p. 25). If the necessities of love and their relative order or intensity are part of what defines the boundaries of our will, then acting against this will is ultimately an act of self-betrayal (Frankfurt, 1999; Lear, 2002). In some respects, for parents involved in a high-conflict divorce case, acting against the volitional dictate of one's love for one's children (i.e., to stay actively engaged in their situation) would entail *embodying* the gap between the institutional order and subjective experience. Not only would it represent an encounter with the resistance provided by institutions - but it would importantly also involve an attempt at countering one's self.

For many of the parents I interviewed for this study, seeing how their current situation weighed on their children while knowing that staying *with* the conflict

was itself considered a cause for concern from child welfare gave rise to an experience of entrapment leading to a constant self-reflective inner dialogue. In Article 1 (Bertelsen, 2021a), I quoted a mother describing this situation thus:

“You constantly look for new solutions. Much more than you would think. When you find yourself in a situation ... with child welfare ... and you have been through two trials in court where no one listened to you or understood anything. I was so frightened. Because I felt that ... when I can’t tell the truth ... what can I say? I have nothing more to say. There is nothing more I can do. I am powerless, then. And being powerless opposite the child that you have given birth to ...” (p. 11).

From the perspective of a mother or father, I think it reasonable to speculate that what from the outside comes across as a conflict - but is subjectively intended as the expression of deeply held concerns - could well be rooted in a commitment not simply to act in one’s child’s “best interests” but to preserve the conditions under which this commitment can be sustained. Using ‘conflict’ as an organising concept for structuring the ruling relations through which the everyday lives of not-cohabiting parents are made to match the general, and generalising, realities of institutions certainly highlights the often problematic aspects of post-divorce parental matters. Nevertheless, it might – and the findings from this study indicate that it sometimes does – push aside what makes these matters *matter* to the people who are thereby positioned as parties to the conflict.

When seen through the lens of the first-person accounts shared by the participants in the present study, what is at stake seems to be their subject-ness *as parents*. They are the ones whose personal commitments make their particular concerns for their particular children present themselves as particularly compelling reasons for action. They are singled out as the ones who *must* relate to the question of what to do in response to these concerns specifically, and to act to retain a position from where they will be able to continue to engage with whatever concerns and worries that their specific parenthood might throw in their paths. In a sense, this is what makes them into who they are. Frankfurt (2004) points out that

“Besides the fact that my children are important to me for their own sakes, there is the additional fact that loving my children is important to me for its own sake. Whatever burdens and distresses loving them may in the course of time have brought me, my life was notably altered and enhanced when I came to love them” (p. 51).

Love brings with it both the subjectification of commitment and the risk of infinite pain. Few, however, would trade a life of love and commitment and the sorrows that come with it for a life free of such risk and pain (Wolf, 2002).

Nevertheless, as experiential reality, this perspective is entirely out of sync with the neoliberal logic of accountability and risk-reduction to which most professional ideologies and guidelines are made to answer. When the adversarial logic of mediation, litigation, and other approaches to *conflict* resolution is made to provide the fundamental tone of the discourse within which the trans-local orchestration of the ruling relations through which the local encounters between professionals and parents are made to happen, ‘high-conflict divorce cases’ form at the border between social organisation, the subjective experience of concern, and moral commitment.

7.4 Limitations and possible contributions of the study

In different ways, this thesis has sought to illuminate the connections between institutional services catering to concerns over the consequences of parents’ post-divorce disputes and the everyday world of the parents addressed by these services. Adopting a research standpoint in the experience of someone has obvious consequences for the question of generalisation of the study’s findings. Vis-à-vis positivist or empiricist conceptions of research as a process of empirically grounded descriptions of the world, free from ideological bias, the kind of endeavour that this study represents falls short. Written from a particular perspective or point of view, it does not attempt to objectively mirror the world (Rorty, 1979) but only to momentarily elucidate a fragment of it from a fundamentally situated perspective. Accordingly, it adheres to an understanding

of scientific inquiry as inevitably privileging some interests to the detriment of others (Habermas, 1971).

There might be said to be a significant discontinuity between the conclusions I drew from my analyses relying on the conceptual framework of institutional ethnography in the first two articles of the thesis (Bertelsen, 2021a; b) and the existentially motivated angle of the third article (Bertelsen, 2021c). This can partly be attributed to differences between the standpoint epistemology to which the first two articles adhered and the existential and educational angle of the third. Institutional ethnography supports a critical view of the institutional arrangements in which therapeutic and other services catering to post-divorce issues are located. Its conceptual tools allowed me to zoom in on how being caught up in this circuitry seemed to deplete parents of their sense of agency. This highlighted how clinical, legal, and welfare services are part of the discursive framework wherein the ruling relations by which high-conflict divorce cases are taken up and materialised as everyday life.

The analysis in the third article all but embraced this circuitry as a fact of life. Instead of focusing on the discursive and institutional architecture explicated in the two previous articles, it represented an attempt at looking for an emancipatory potential that might exist alongside, if not in dialogue with, dominant discourse and ruling – perhaps even paradoxically as a potential of such ruling. I reckon this discrepancy can be used diagnostically to assess the researcher's capacity for stringent thought. However, I also hope that it may function as a demonstration of the performative nature of research itself. Doing research is itself a sequence of actions. Choosing one set of concepts instead of another produces different results further down the line; which theoretical vocabulary or analytical framework to use must depend on what purpose the individual work aims to serve. However, the choice of vocabulary also determines which purposes can be conceived with it.

7.4.1 Mother, father – parent?

In the data material for this study, there are several topics that I have not addressed but which would be worth an analysis. Of these, the most obvious ones have to do with conventional sociological or demographic categories like gender, class, and ethnicity. There are several reasons why I have deliberately avoided

analysing the material in light of such concepts. The most basic one is that none of these stood out as critically informing the analytical threads that developed and that I chose to follow in my working with the material. Furthermore, providing information about such demographics for individual participants would easily compromise participant anonymity.

However, my reasons for not pursuing a more gendered analytical perspective cannot be claimed to concern the question of participant anonymity since I have consistently provided information about the gender of parent participants. There are traces of gendered analysis in the articles, perhaps most clearly in my explication of how parents related to the ideal of symmetry in Article 1 (Bertelsen, 2021a, pp. 8-9). Research from the family sociology field indicates that although the ideal of inter-parental symmetry is dominant in the talk of public discourse in the Nordic countries, it is far from an accurate description of how many mothers and fathers practice everyday life in contemporary Nordic families (see, e.g., Andenæs, 2005; Forsberg, 2007; Plantin, Månsson & Kearney, 2003). However, for the present study, it was the general ideological code (Smith, 1999) of inter-parental equality and the (socially constructed) identity position of ‘parent’ that was of primary interest. This code essentially downplays gender *in*-equalities opposite the ruling apparatus of which the legal, welfare and therapeutic services relevant for the current study are part.

Within Norwegian family legislation and policy, the principle of equality has a strong standing. For example, concerning the relationship between parents, the former Minister for Children and Equality Matters, Solveig Horne, in 2016 stated that “the government wants to make it possible for both parents to have the opportunity to be equal caregivers, both during cohabitation, in the event of a breakup, and when parents have never lived together” (Horne, 2016, *my translation*). Accordingly, my interest has been to explore both ruling and subjectification as known and experienced from the position of being a mother or father subjected to this specific institutional regime. However, as a male researcher who has never lived under the conditions of divorce, I am certainly open to the possibility that a different researcher would have found, and chosen to pursue, different analytical trails.

7.4.2 The local and the general

The study should be taken as local in the sense that participants' accounts of experience are accounts from *somewhere* and involve real people, actual buildings, existing organisations, and so on. These were also necessarily located within a particular bureaucratic regime, confined to a regional and national context, in this case the Agder region and the country of Norway. Although the study is local, and although it was done within a service to which there might not be direct parallels in most other countries, a fundamental assumption running through the study nevertheless is that there are links between the experiences of a particular mother, father, or professional in Norway, and a mother, father, or professional in other places. These links are to be found in the trans-local nature of the relations of ruling, and in the existential commitments of parenthood itself.

The study, therefore, directs attention to the social organisation of high-conflict divorce in a more general sense. In the late modern, globalised economy, we relate to the same research, stream the same TV shows, and read the same self-help books. In the family policy field, most Western countries underwent similar changes at approximately the same time between the 1970s and '90s, formulating laws and policies that spoke to the same challenges and dilemmas (Parkinson, 2011). Although the Norwegian context might be unique, its national policies address a situation - the high rate of family breakup that has characterised Western societies in the past 50 years - that is felt throughout the West. These institutional aspects have, I believe, largely been left unexamined in research on high-conflict divorce, as well as in the development of professional guidelines and policies.

The way I have used both the methods and sociology of institutional ethnography and the existentially oriented educational vocabulary of Biesta, I have attempted to move beyond the specifics of the case study to reach into the trans-local ruling relations and explicate how these relations both are generalised and do generalise and standardise. As pointed out by Smith (2008), the potential for generalisation of findings from research of the kind that this thesis represents lies, in a sense, in accepting the trans-local nature of ruling itself. Generalisation thus "appears in what is described and analysed. It is there in the ethnographer's data" (p. 3). When ruling and its institutional scaffolding is obscured, on the other hand, the

gap between governmental intentions and parents' experience easily materialises as a personal lack of moral gait in individual parents. When this happens, the figure of the parent involved in a high-conflict divorce case quickly evolves into something of a Dostoevskian underground man - narcissistically neglectful and in opposition to society's preferred and dominant values.

7.4.3 Consequences of adopting a standpoint

One possibly important objection to this study is that in adopting a standpoint in parents' experience, the perspectives of the professionals who also participated are not sufficiently explored. In my data analyses, the status assigned to their utterances as 'level-two data' - as opposed to the 'entry-level' status assigned to parents' accounts (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; see sections 5.4.1 and 5.4.3 above) - illuminates their role in the relations of ruling that gave shape to parents' experience. However, it is a move that risks displacing them as knowing subjects, taking their utterances to represent a generalised social order and not hearing the words as spoken by a *someone*, not a *something*. Furthermore, not including interviews or other ways of lending voice to the children involved in the practice under study can be seen as a serious shortcoming, potentially contributing to a form of 'childism' (Young-Bruehl, 2012) in that it rationalises a continuum of parental acts that are not in the best interests of children. My choice not to argue against the insistence of many of the participating parents that I should not interview their children may well have been an example of this.

These are undoubtedly legitimate worries, and I will not argue further against them. I agree that they are among the possible consequences of this work. As stated in the section about research ethics (section 5.6.1 above), such marginalisation has not been my intention. Nevertheless, as my doing, this thesis represents not the end of a line of thought but the beginning of something of which I have limited control. My interpretations and use of other writers' work – and, not least, my interpretation of the words and doings of the people who took part in this study – might not be in agreement with their intentions. In the same vein, how and whether others pick up on *this* work is not for me to predict. As the author, my responsibility for it extends beyond my present imagination.

7.4.4 Making trouble

Rather than to clarify the high-conflict divorce concept and make it actionable, I have wanted to slow down the conversation by complicating it and making “trouble” in the sense that Donna Haraway (2016) uses the word: “‘to stir up,’ ‘to make cloudy,’ ‘to disturb’” (p. 1). My goal has been to stay with post-divorce conflict within some of its actual institutional surroundings, trying to get acquainted with it not as a clinical problem, a risk factor, or a social ill, but as a label under which a significant number of people come to live their everyday lives. Pragmatically, the study will have succeeded if it contributes to widening this conversation in the research and policy communities. In this respect, my study adds to the small but growing research literature documenting and exploring parental post-divorce disputes as issues of everyday life in contemporary society.

In addition to exploring the terrain of high-conflict divorce as first-person issues, primarily as they were known and experienced from parents’ perspective, my ambition has been to implicitly address the question of what family therapy and other institutional services might have to contribute to parents and children who find themselves entrenched as parts of a high-conflict divorce case. If the study has anything to contribute to this, I believe it is to stimulate discussion about what good services might look like and curiosity about how these services themselves are part of the institutional complex that we have come to observe as high-conflict divorce. By that, I do not mean to imply that good services do not already exist or that the therapy practice that my study was constructed around was not a good practice. What I mean to suggest is that upon entering any specific high-conflict divorce *case*, being part of the ruling apparatus necessarily gives a professional, working for a service, a different perspective than a parent (or a child). The minute we leave this awareness of situated existence behind, we enter an abstract domain of knowledge where we might agree on what is objectively true or good for everyone, yet it might not be relevant to the experience and agency of anyone.

7.5 Concluding remarks

For the initial project description of the study, I wrote that the research would be based on the assumption that activities such as the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ programme could be understood as co-creative communities of practice (Wenger, 1998)¹⁸. Such a statement rests on the idea that high-conflict divorce is a singular phenomenon and that everyone involved in addressing it within the structures of a therapeutic, welfare, or legal institution ultimately has the same goal in mind. Such an understanding is perhaps not too far from what current family policy developments in Norway and several other countries relies on. As the number of high-conflict divorce cases remains high in all the institutional services mandated to intervene, it is perhaps understandable that one is tempted to ask what to do with high-conflict divorce as an *it*. Responding with increased funding, more research, and more specialised services quickly becomes the answer. Nevertheless, as Parkinson states (2011), the tension embedded in the legal and normative frameworks regulating parenthood and divorce in most Western countries reflects the fact that, to date, no known group of people have figured out how to reliably “combine the free terminability of relationships with parenthood in a way that does not lead to disaster or discontent” (p. 277).

Perhaps it is in the ideal of trans-local reliability itself, as a factor existing external to the actual situations that are currently observed to pan out unfavourably and in unreliable ways, that the germ to the subjective experience of disjuncture from the institutional realm of litigation, child welfare, and family therapy lies. Thus, I hope that my study may stimulate a doubt about whether “bigger and better” recipes for institutional action are always preferable in questions about the interface between the subjective and the institutional in questions of post-divorce parenting. I also hope that it might further inspire discussion about how to collectively become better attuned to the question of purpose in this domain. The present study does not offer clear and articulate answers to this question. But to discuss what we ought to do, we need to be clear

¹⁸ In both my initial application for funding from the Norwegian Research Council and my application for admittance to the PhD programme at the Faculty for Health and Sports Sciences at the University of Agder, the idea of approaching the local practising of the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ programme as a community of practice was central to the way the prospective study was presented.

on what purpose our efforts are supposed to serve. In the opening of the introduction section, I quoted a mother who said that she wished we had a different word than ‘conflict’ to refer to the situation that she found herself in. I suggest that expanding this vocabulary to make space for parents’ *concerns* and *commitments* might be one place to start that conversation – not to seek a “final solution” to the problem of high-conflict divorce, but to move toward a renewed and continued engagement that locates this question as an issue to be engaged with in the everyday lives of actual people, and not universally solved by science or policies.

As current trends in the family therapy field seem to represent a push toward increased standardisation and categorisation (Carr, 2019a; b; Lorås, 2016), I believe it is more important than ever to reconnect with the realities of the people who find themselves at the receiving end of institutional services through the kind of solidarity that lies at the heart of anthropological approaches to social research (Ingold, 2018). According to Clifford (1983), under the conditions of late modernity, “it is more than ever crucial for different peoples to form complex concrete images of one another, as well as of the relationships of knowledge and power that connect them” (p. 119). This is as important *within* traditional macro-level divisions like nationality, ethnicity, gender, or class as it is between them. Acknowledging that any form of knowledge is “an engaged material practice and never a disembodied set of ideas” (Haraway, 1997, p. 124), we should see people as both themselves actively forming, and simultaneously being formed by, their projects as they engage with everyday reality. This is just as true of researcher-persons as it is of participant-persons - as it is of reader-persons. In engaging with portrayals and interpretations of the knowledge and experience of the parents and professionals that made up the group of participants for the present research, it is crucial to keep in mind that “no sovereign scientific method or ethical stance can guarantee the truth” of the findings and their interpretations. They are, like everything else, embedded in specific historical relations of dominance and dialogue (Clifford, 1988, p. 23).

In the closing paragraph of the introduction chapter, I referred to this thesis as a work of solidarity following Rorty’s (1989) understanding of this term as an attentiveness toward “the pain and humiliation of others, doubt that present institutional arrangements are adequate to deal with this pain and humiliation,”

and a “curiosity about possible alternatives” (p. 198). Toward this end, Ahmed (2012) offers an understanding of the relationship between knowledge and institutional transformation that I find more reasonable and productive than the standard causal analysis (Abbott, 2004, pp. 57-58) of interventionist rationality. “Rather than suggest that knowledge leads (or should lead) to transformation,” she proposes, “transformation, as a form of practical labour, leads to knowledge” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 173). In my project, the work of transformation has firstly been a labour that I have undertaken myself, learning to relate to the subject (in a double sense) of the study in new ways. While struggling to step out of a third-person perspective, I have attempted to formulate the issues arising as questions directed to subjects in a first-person position. I hope my efforts can contribute to a diversification of how we understand what being part of a ‘high-conflict divorce case’ entails and a renewed interest in how therapeutic and other services might be of genuine help for the actual people involved. This thesis represents my effort to leave a clear linguistic trace of the itinerary I have taken in this attempt. If successful, it should be possible to follow my tracks and see the everyday problematic of high-conflict divorce from a possibly fresh perspective.

8. References

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Staying with the conflict – parenting work and the social organization of post-divorce conflict

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Abstract

When addressed from the third-person perspective of professional and academic expertise, parents in high-conflict divorce are often described in polarized and individualized ways. This is at odds with the complex picture arising from studies exploring parents' own experience of high-conflict divorce. Inspired by the research strategy of institutional ethnography, this article explores how the work of parents in enduring post-divorce conflicts relates to particular socially organized ways of doing parenthood. It draws on interviews with 20 Norwegian mothers and fathers experiencing a high-conflict divorce situation. The analysis connects parents' experiences to dominant discourses about symmetrically shared parenting and the importance of parental devotion vis-a-vis their children. Through authoritative documents like laws, policies, and professional guidelines, these discourses are materially present in parents' everyday lives, contributing to the coordination of experience. The findings show how parents' struggles to care for their children in accordance with norms for good parenting can sometimes work to keep conflicts alive. It is suggested that organizing policy and professional responses around objectified understandings of post-divorce conflict as instances of parental neglect risks distancing policy and helping initiatives from the experiences of those parents they are meant to address.

Introduction

Research on high-conflict divorce often begins in the large-scale effects that such conflicts have on children. This literature indicates that intensity of inter-parental conflict, the way the conflict is enacted, how conflict is resolved, and whether buffers to ameliorate impacts of conflict are present in children's lives are the most important predictors for child adjustment (see, e.g. Amato, 2001; 2010; Elam et al., 2019; Emery, 1999; Fincham et al., 1994; Grych, 2005; O'Hara et al., 2020). When addressed from the third-person perspective of professional and academic expertise, parents entangled in high-conflict divorce patterns are often described in polarized and individualized ways (Treloar, 2018; 2019), positioning them as distrustful, angry, full of contempt, and focused on their own desires instead of their children's needs (Kelly, 2003; McIntosh, 2003). This discursive positioning sets out a course of coordinated actions, specifying how divorced families and professionals working within various public institutions are to engage with each other to pursue conflict reduction or resolution.

A few studies have explored how parents themselves experience and articulate their understanding of being in conflict after divorce (e.g. Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011; Gulbrandsen et al., 2018; Jevne & Andenæs, 2017; Smart & Neale, 1997; Treloar, 2018; 2019). When seen through the lens of parents' experience, the parental subjects emerging from this literature come through as 'ordinary people' trying to construct a safe and rewarding everyday environment for themselves and their children in the face of irreconcilable and long-lasting disputes. Thus, there seems to be a mismatch between the image of the parental figure based on research motivated by the need for assessing the risk for detrimental psychosocial development in children experiencing high-conflict divorces, and the image of the parent that emerges from parents' own, first-person accounts of engaging with the same issues.

In this article, which is part of a qualitative study exploring high-conflict divorce as an institutional complex, I add to the small but growing body of research that explores post-divorce conflict from the perspective of parents' experience. The article builds on qualitative interviews with 20 Norwegian parents identified as part of a high-conflict divorce situation. Beginning in the standpoint of these parents, the aim is to explore how the work of parents in enduring post-divorce conflicts relates to particular socially organized ways of doing parenthood. Drawing on concepts from the sociological work of Dorothy Smith and the research strategy of institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005), I show how a disjuncture between parents' experience and the objectified understandings that provide the basis for institutional action make it necessary for parents to do this work. I argue that this opens up new vistas for understanding high-conflict divorce that are, to a certain extent, emancipatory. In the next section, I give a brief outline of some key trends in Norwegian family policy and parenting culture, against which the problematic of the study is articulated.

Parenthood and divorce in the Nordic context

Since the 1990s, residence arrangements where childcare is shared more or less equally between parents after separation or divorce have become widespread throughout the West (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; McIntosh & Smyth, 2012; Pruett & DiFonzo, 2014; Steinbach, 2019). This development has been particularly evident in the Nordic countries (Berman & Daneback, 2020; Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011; Statistics Norway, 2015), where post-divorce solutions of shared residence with approximately equal time with both parents are now familiar (Berman & Daneback, 2020). Although national differences certainly exist (Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011), this development tangents a general normative tendency shared by family policy developments across the Nordic countries (Bendixsen et al., 2018; Gíslason & Símonardóttir, 2018). One recent example of this are several amendments to the Norwegian Children Act (1981) made effective in 2018, designed with the explicit purpose of strengthening the equality of parents' status as caregivers (Prop. 161 L [2015–2016]). Among the changes, the most hotly debated was naming shared residence first in a list of examples of available parenting schemes in the law's statutory provisions. In 2020, further amendments were asserted, strengthening inter-parental equality by granting legal parental responsibility to both parents in situations where the parents do not live together at the time of birth (Regjeringen, 2019). The Norwegian government's latest white paper on family policy (Barne- og likestillingsdepartementet, 2016) explicitly states that 'children shall experience their parents as equal, both when the family lives together and after a breakup' (p. 77, my translation).

Several studies have shown that the discourse of gender-equal parenting has had a significant impact on how parents relate to parenthood in the Nordic countries (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; Brandth & Kvande, 1998; 2018; Forsberg, 2007; Johansson & Klinth, 2008; Plantin et al., 2003).¹ Westerling (2016) refers to this as an ideal of symmetry between parents after divorce, expressing values of gender equality and fairness. In addition to this set of values, he identifies a second trend that he terms parental devotion. By this, he refers to what several social scientists observe to be a cultural preference in the West for child-centred forms of parenting, strongly informed by developmental psychology and a rights-based understanding of childhood (Andenæs, 2005; Bloch et al., 2006; Faircloth & Murray, 2015; Lee et al., 2014; Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012). Hays (1996) coined the term 'intensive mothering' to refer to a pattern of child-centred understandings of motherhood founded on the assumption that children need consistent nurturing and require their mothers to devote copious amounts of time and energy to their mothering tasks. Many argue that such a norm of devotion is currently an ideal affecting how both mothers and fathers negotiate their roles and experience (Faircloth, 2014; Forsberg, 2007; Johansson & Klinth, 2008). Although not necessarily consistently realized, such an ideal of devoted parenting is dominant within Norwegian child welfare (Skivenes, 2011) and family policy (Hennum, 2014).

In separation and divorce, the realization of the ideals of symmetrical and devoted parenting is sometimes challenged (Westerling, 2016), particularly in situations where parents find themselves caught in enduring conflict (Parkinson, 2011). Addressing post-divorce conflict as a situation that is potentially harmful for children, in 1993 the Norwegian Storting² established a mandatory mediation scheme for separating married (Marriage Act, 1991, §26) parents with children 16 years or younger, as well as for divorced parents in conflict who seek court litigation (Children Act, 1981, §51, first paragraph). In 2007, mediation was made mandatory also for non-married cohabiting parents moving apart (Children Act, 1981, §51, third paragraph). In addition to mediation services, which are primarily provided by the Norwegian public family counselling service, direct state involvement in particular instances of divorce-related conflicts is exerted through district courts and child welfare services. While mediation is purely consultative, the courts can directly regulate the domestic sphere (Ottosen, 2006). If parents exhibit a pattern of intense conflict over time, repeatedly engaging with mediation and litigation without seeming to reach an amicable solution, child welfare services are sometimes notified. This is because prolonged conflict is itself considered a reason for concern (Barne,- likestillings- og inkluderings- departementet, 2013). Although rarely implemented, an intense conflict between parents is considered a legitimate reason for promoting a care order if the conflict can be shown to seriously hamper the parents' capacity as caregivers (Child Welfare Act, 1991, §4–12).

Parents' experience as a problematic for research

In this article, I seek to explore how the knowledge and experience of parents who are part of a high-conflict divorce situation exist in dialogue with these strands of discourse about parenting and divorce. As a research problematic, this gradually developed while I was interviewing parents who were identified as being in a pattern of high-conflict after divorce or separation, as I noticed similar disjunctures in their accounts of engagements with professionals mandated to assist or intervene in their situation. The concept of disjuncture is here used to refer to 'moments when people know something from experience but are told or taught something quite different' (DeVault, 2020, p. 84). Talking about their own situation, parents frequently communicated a sense that their struggles to be good parents in challenging circumstances were misunderstood or misrepresented when the particulars of their local situations were assessed through the abstract and general vocabulary of professionals. Attuning to such disjunctures between knowledge located in the experience of individuals and the formalized, impersonal knowledge articulated to, and constitutive of, the institutions of government led to defining the problematic as exploring the work and work knowledge of parents in post-divorce conflict, and how this relates to the social organization of post-divorce parenting.

Analytical frame – institutional ethnography

The research strategy referred to as institutional ethnography, pioneered by Dorothy Smith (1987, 2005, 2006a, 2006b), offers a way to research the social world that begins in people's local experience. From this standpoint, it aims to discover the social relations and organization that coordinate people's activities across local sites and to explicate the workings of power – variously addressed as discourse, bureaucracy, or institutions – coordinating the local activities of different people with each other, trans-locally. Our everyday dealings with people and objects in our immediate surroundings, like family members, professionals we meet with, web pages we visit, or documents that we read, are local relations in the sense that they are always enacted at a particular time, at a particular place. Translocal relations connect local relations to each other. They include discourses and texts that give form to the local relations, coordinating our activities with the activities of others elsewhere (Smith, 2005, 2006b). Examples of such translocal relations are authoritative texts like laws, policies, or professional guidelines, often expressing dominant normative understandings held within a society

or group of people. To highlight their capacity for coordination, Smith (2005) refers to such translocal organization as ruling relations. Smith thus treats ‘the social’ not as an abstract realm of meanings or norms, but as what is actually happening among and between people going about their everyday lives.

In Smith’s usage of the term, experience refers to what people come to know through engaging with the world around them. For the ethnographer, traces of experience emerge as articulations in dialogue – in the interview setting, when reading transcripts or documents, or in the ethnographer’s inner self-reflective dialogue (Smith, 2005). Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Smith (1996, 2005) stresses that while subjective experience is infinitely varied and personal, the resources used for its verbal or symbolic expression are by necessity drawn from a particular discourse with definite conventions. As part of people’s everyday practices, it is empirically accessible as the concepts, theories, ideas, and terms they use to identify their own thoughts and actions and those of others. Hence, institutional ethnography represents ‘a social ontology not of meaning but of a concerting of activities’ (Smith, 1996, p. 172). The project of inquiry is to explore how the ruling relations, through their capacity for translocal coordination, provide the horizon against which a variety of experiences come to be lived.

The concept of work is a central analytical tool in institutional ethnography, generously understood as ‘anything that people do that takes time, effort and intent’ (Smith, 2005, p. 229). Pragmatically dissolving any clear distinction between paid work and other intentional activities, this helps us see how the actions of people positioned differently within an institutional complex are connected via a shared engagement with the same ruling relations. Examples of such work might be meeting with a lawyer to prepare for a possible custody trial or attending mediation or therapy services to pursue a workable parenting plan after divorce or separation. Much of what parents do can also be seen as invisible work (DeVault, 2014; Smith, 2005), which here might refer to the worrying, fearing, waiting, hoping, and despairing involved in parents’ struggles to realize an everyday for their children, their ex-partner, and themselves.

Relying on the experiential knowledge of people engaged in the work associated with the issues under investigation, the institutional ethnographer seeks to elicit their knowledge of what they do and why they do it – their work knowledge (Smith, 2005). Through assembling and mapping such work knowledge, the goal is to make visible how translocal ruling is produced locally, so as to ‘expand the scope of our knowledge of what we are part of’ (Smith, 2001, p. 161).

Methods

Participants and data production

The data material consists of qualitative, open-ended individual interviews with 20 parents (ten mothers, ten fathers) representing 12 co-parenting pairs from the Agder region of Southern Norway. Interviews were conducted over 18 months, beginning in January 2018. Participants’ age ranged from mid-twenties to early fifties. The level of education ranged from vocational training to master’s degree from university. Nine fathers and five mothers were in full-time employment, while five mothers and one father were not employed and were under some form of work assessment scheme via the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration. All parents were divorced or broken up from a heterosexual relationship with a partner with whom they had one or more dependent children under 16. All breakups had happened during the past one-and-a-half to five years before the interviews. All had been repeatedly to mandatory divorce or conflict mediation. Most had been through at least one round of court litigation concerning conflict about residence, custody, and visitation rights. In nine out of the 12 parenting pairs, some version of shared residence was practiced, referring to arrangements where the child spent at least 30% of the time with each parent and where the parents had joint decision-making authority (Pruett & DiFonzo, 2014). In two of the pairs, both legal and primary physical custody was with the mother, while in one, such custody was with the father. In these three cases, the parent with secondary physical custody had visitation every other weekend.

Parents were recruited through their participation in a multi-family group therapy programme for parents and children identified as part of a high-conflict divorce situation.³ The programme was run by professionals from family counselling centres and hospital-based outpatient child and youth mental health services. These teams of practitioners worked closely with child welfare services and district courts. As an institutional sequence, the multi-family group intervention programme fitted into a line of parenting support services coordinated by the child welfare services.⁴

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All participants gave their informed signed consent to the use of the interview material for this research. The research project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD, project nr. 57881) and the ethical committee at the Faculty for Health and Sports Sciences, University of Agder.

Data analysis

The parts of interviews used for the present analysis related to parents' history with family-breakup and post-divorce parenting. Exploring these accounts, I looked for traces of common discourse as well as for disjunctures between local work knowledge and a more formalized and impersonal understanding of post-divorce conflict integral to the jargon and governing structures of the various institutions of government engaged in issues of post-divorce conflict and parenting. In addition to interview transcripts, I kept memos of my impressions and reflections immediately after each interview, and memos containing questions or ideas that arose from parallel readings. Before each interview, I consulted these memos to help me keep focused on any analytic threads under development. I successively shared and discussed transcribed interviews with two of my research supervisors (a practicing mediator and family therapist and an associate professor in psychosocial health) to generate ideas, concerns, and themes to be explored in coming interviews.

In parallel with doing interviews, I started indexing accounts from interview transcripts to help keep analysis grounded in actual accounts (Rankin, 2017). As a first step, I used the concept of work as an analytical lens to start organizing the data material around parents' accounts of activities. One example of such an index heading was 'encounters with professionals,' under which I grouped accounts of parents' dealings with professionals as part of their engagement with post-divorce conflict issues. Another index heading was entitled 'parenting philosophies,' where I grouped parents' articulations of concerns about their children, as well as the reasons they gave for staying engaged in the work processes that had brought them to be identified as a high-conflict divorce case. As a second step, I recorded texts or other discursive material that were directly mentioned, or clearly implied in parents' accounts, under the same index headings. As a third step, I looked for possible links between parents' experience and work knowledge and the discursive material mentioned or implied. Rooted in the standpoint of parents, I thus sought to look with the research participants, to discover how their experiences related to the ruling relations they engaged with.

Findings

Applying Smith's (2005) concept of work, I begin this section by establishing a subject position in parents' everyday activities as they engaged in post-divorce struggles. From this standpoint, I link their work to ruling relations (Smith, 2005) surrounding post-divorce parenting. Prioritizing the work knowledge that parents presented as reasons for staying with the conflicts (despite the burden this placed on them and their children), I first explore how parents engaged with the ideal of symmetrical gender equality. Second, I show how parents' accounts could be understood to draw on a general discourse about child development, and an ideal of intensive or devoted parenting. I argue that negotiating a workable middle ground accommodating these two ideals constituted a significant part of the background against which parents' experience and knowledge were formulated. Finally, I show

how parents were placed in a difficult situation when professionals addressed their struggles from a position within the discourse of post-divorce conflict as neglectful or harmful parenting.

Parenting work

In the analysis of interviews with parents, the sheer volume of work related to post-divorce conflict – both within the relations of formalized interchanges with various professionals (e.g. family therapists, lawyers, mediators, expert psychologists, health nurses, child welfare caseworkers, teachers, etc.) and in their everyday exchanges with their children – was substantial. A critical aspect of this was logistics – setting up a meeting, travelling to and from it, preparing for it in advance, and balancing this vis-à-vis paid work, childcare, and other obligations. Several parents pointed out that what might appear as a 60-minute appointment in a professional's calendar could easily take four hours of the parent's time to realize. One father estimated that throughout the last three years, he had spent the equivalent of a third of his working hours on the domestic situation, engaged in meetings with professionals, face-to-face or on the phone, reading reports, or writing documents. Some of the parents were not in paid work at the time of the interviews. The explanations they provided for this were all partly linked to their struggles with being good parents in a difficult post-divorce situation. While some said that they currently prioritized doing their work as parents over finding paid work, others attributed the cause of their absence from the labour market directly to the toil, hardship, and sometimes trauma from being in a post-divorce conflict.

Equally consuming were the various kinds of emotional labour associated with accomplishing the formalized interchanges between the divorced family and representatives of the different professional institutions. One mother, talking about her experience of preparing for the multi-family group therapy meetings she had taken part in, said:

Mother: I sit there, constantly building myself up to go downtown for that meeting, to be in the same room as him. And when I get there I have to keep building even more, because I don't even know if [he] is coming or not. [...] That was awful. It was so painful. And I think about the others too, what must they think of me?

Interviewer: It sounds like it took you all day to build yourself up to those meetings?

Mother: Not day. Days.

Acknowledging as work the plethora of activities that parents did to realize an everyday life for their children and themselves, as best as they saw feasible, allows us to approach their actions as attempts at doing good parenthood under difficult conditions. This also lets us approach their encounters with professionals as something more than being recipients or users of welfare and other public services; through this work they contributed to realizing the institutional complex surrounding high-conflict divorce. This establishes a subject position from where to begin an exploration. From this standpoint, parents' experience and work knowledge appeared to draw on two textually organized discourses concerning the normative practice of parenting.

The ideal of symmetry

When asked to describe their continued engagement in conflicts about custody and time with their children, all participants engaged with the vocabulary of gender-neutral parenting, equal rights for mothers and fathers, and the benefits for children from contact with both parents. Within the present analytical frame, they all could be said to locally activate the translocal political rationale for promoting inter-parental equality and shared residence, as expressed in Norwegian governmental policy. How they engaged with these relations of ruling differed somewhat according to gender and custody status.⁵

The fathers who were practicing shared residence all expressed strong convictions about the value of equality between parents. Some referred to how they had practiced family life before separation as 'modern' or 'gender equal,' describing how they and their partners had divided the work of childcare evenly. One father, explaining why he had sought court litigation to get shared residence for his daughter when the mother had denied him visitation, said that 'I wanted my daughter, fair and square. I love her, and I missed her.' When asked if he had ever considered the consequences of conflict to outweigh the benefits of father-child contact, he answered, 'no, not even one percent of the time. I will have my daughter. She's got no right to take her away from me. I'll stand ... and I'll fight.' Such statements can be seen as expressing a sense of natural entitlement to an equal share in one's children's upbringing. Unless guilty of transgressing the limits of what is considered appropriate parental behaviour (which, like this father, several mothers and fathers interviewed said that they had been accused of by the other parent), refraining from asserting one's rights to an equal presence could be seen as giving up on one's obligations as parent.

Many mothers and fathers described their work knowledge as in agreement with the advice that had been communicated to them by professionals. By some, this was expressed as concern about the possible negative consequences of their children spending more than half the time with the other parent. One father said that even though he acknowledged that his daughter both loved and needed her mother, he considered that he was providing a 'counterweight' to what he saw as harmful or irresponsible parenting from the mother. He said he had defined a 50/50 sharing of time as the lowest he would ever be willing to go: 'and that is what the expert psychologists have written in their reports, too. If things don't improve over there, then you leave. With the kid. That's what they say – with the kid.' Sensing a congruence between the legal system's norms, professional expertise, and his own experience, he said, gave him the confidence to stay the course. If the court's ruling had not been within the bounds of what he considered appropriate, he would have kept bringing the case to court once a year until they were assigned a 'real' expert psychologist.

As I interpret it, this father's experience and knowledge corresponds with what Westerling (2016) refers to as a framework for good parenthood as symmetry. As a relation of ruling, symmetry implies equality or a kind of alignment in parents' involvement with their children, which assumes a significant level of sameness between parents concerning their children (pp. 133–134). As mentioned in the introduction, according to Norwegian family policy, 'children shall experience their parents as equal, both when the family lives together and after a breakup' (Barne- og likestillingsdepartementet, 2016, p. 77, my translation). In a sense, fighting for inter-parental symmetrical alignment is thus a way to actively engage with, and realize, a particular parenting ideal embedded in the social organization of parenthood.

Mothers also related to the ideal of symmetry, responding to any claim that the children should be less than half the time with them as a wrong that should not be left unchallenged. To some mothers who experienced that their children were reluctant to be with their fathers, implementing any parenting scheme at all involved much deliberate work. One mother, who had sole legal and primary physical custody of her children, described how every week she would work to make her children agree to go for visitation with their father:

And that thing with spending the night has been ... gradually, the children started to dread it. Every night when they went to bed, they would cry and say 'do we have to go this weekend? Can't we stay home? Can we at least come home to sleep?' It became one of those daily things that were always on their minds. But then again, he is their father, and I want them to have contact with him and for there to be visitation.

For this mother, her concerns were related to upholding the children's contact with the father, following the parenting plan they had agreed on. As such, her experience, too, relates to the ideal of symmetry. For her, this involved disregarding her children's expressed wishes, finding ways of talking them into seeing their father, and keeping from the father the children's reluctance.

The ideal of devotion

The other discursive domain of ruling that parents' experiences were related to was organized around ideas about parent-child attachment bonds and their importance for parenting quality and children's well-being. While the local and material links to the ruling discourse of inter-parental symmetry were primarily to be found in overt or implicit references to legal documents, policies, and dealings with professionals in mediation or the court, the links to this second discursive domain primarily came to expression in talk of child-rearing practices and parenting philosophies. Several parents reported previously attending parenting support programmes organized to promote healthy parent-child attachment. Some talked about attachment theory as being part of their vocational training. Others had familiarized themselves with it by interacting with healthcare and welfare professionals as part of their work in dealing with post-divorce parenthood. One mother referred to internet discussion forums for parents and to a general interest in research on parent-child relations that she would find online. However, most parents conveyed this knowledge simply as a natural state of affairs, that is, as general knowledge about 'what is good for children.' One of the fathers said:

'When it comes to the children, it is all about emotions, and about ... how can I put it, your place in life, kind of, if I can use such a strong term. Because, that's kind of what it's all about....So, when it comes to the children...if it had only been a feud, in a way, between us grown-ups ... but it is about what is in the child's best interest, it's about ... challenges that the children have, stuff ... like trauma, cognitive stuff ... things that make you truly worried about their well-being. And about their future, how it will turn out. You go around constantly thinking about that.'

As I interpret it, this father's work knowledge was informed by generalized knowledge about child development and trauma and the significance of parental presence and choice of parenting strategies. He traced his knowledge to meetings with therapists, child welfare professionals, and a specialist psychologist appointed by the court. He said engaging in these relations had provided opportunities to learn how to be a better parent.

Westerling (2016) argues that placing children's needs or 'best interests' at the centre of attention represents a normative framework of good parenting as exhibiting a continuous devotion towards the child. When parents identify themselves as a 'we' – either when living together or in some form of effective post-divorce co-parenting arrangement – the practices of devotion and symmetry might, to some degree, be thought to balance off each other, although they are, in principle, not immediately compatible. In situations of post-divorce conflict, however, this opposition might easily amplify. For many participants in the present study, negotiating a continual devotion towards their children within the confines of a strictly regulated parenting plan, often limiting their possibilities for connecting with the child when in the custody of the other parent, was experienced as incredibly difficult.

One mother, who practiced shared residence based on a court ruling, said that 'as a mother, my main job is to take care of my child. Make sure she has food, is clean, warm, safe. And I take it very seriously.' However, the fact that she was not in a position to practice these tasks on a daily basis made her feel like a 'failure [...]. It makes you feel so powerless.' Many participants said that the sense of being intermittently absent from their children's everyday lives was a primary concern and that their engaging in what was identified as the conflict had much to do with trying to establish a sense of constant emotional presence despite their partial physical absence. One father said:

Just to know that if there was something the matter, that [the mother] would have told me. ... I am a father all of the time. So ... just knowing that I'll be notified if something happens, or be allowed to be there for my daughter if something happens, that would have helped a lot.

Sparman et al. (2016) show how, when cohabiting families engage in child-centred activities, 'togetherness' is often done through a complex interdependence of proximity and distance. Thus, physical proximity and an experience of real-time cohesion are not always characteristic of how parents and children who are not part of a high-conflict divorce situation practice their lives. They also

show how parents and children often remain connected through the use of material objects such as mobile phones, or how parents occupy themselves to provide room for their children to enjoy activities on their own. The use of non-material entities such as patience and trust are also essential for maintaining what they refer to as ‘the ontological choreography of good parenthood.’ In post-divorce conflict situations, it could be argued that it is precisely the means for such a local, parent–child choreography that is sometimes lacking. The means for engaging with the translocal ruling norm of continuous devotion, in the sense of attending to what one takes to be the best interests of one’s child at all times, is made locally unfeasible.

Conflicting ruling relations

Some parents described how negotiating the ideals of symmetry and devotion were particularly difficult in situations where their own sense of what was needed was brought into conflict with what professionals advised them to do. Many described the experience of interacting with different branches of the institutional complex as an uncoordinated assembly line where professionals would refer families on to the next service using standard formulations and referral forms, without parents having a sense that the front-line professionals would ever actually talk to each other. For many, seeing how the present situation was weighing on their children, and knowing that inter-parental conflict was itself considered a cause for concern by child welfare, gave rise to an experience of entrapment as well as to a constant self-reflective inner dialogue. A mother described this situation thus:

You constantly look for new solutions. Much more than you would think. When you find yourself in a situation ... with child welfare ... and you have been through two trials in court where no-one listened to you or understood anything. I was so frightened. Because I felt that ... when I can’t tell the truth ... what can I say? I have nothing more to say. There is nothing more I can do. I am powerless, then. And being powerless opposite the child that you have given birth to ...

One mother, who had lost legal and primary physical custody of her children to their father in court, said that it was particularly difficult if something happened at her children’s school. The other children’s parents would call her, and not the father, because, as she explained it, they knew that she would respond and that he would not. She said:

Child welfare tells me to stay away. ‘It is the father’s responsibility now. You need to back off and let him prove that he is capable.’ But it’s not that simple. You can’t just tell me to close my ears and don’t look. When I know that he won’t fix anything ... I just cannot do that. ... I can’t turn my back and tell my kids that ‘you know what, your father has to fix that for you.’

The knowledge that her intervention and presence were needed came into conflict with actions prescribed in the parenting plan from the court ruling, which said that it was the father (as custodial parent) who was to do what the mother was asked to do by the other parents but discouraged from doing by the child welfare caseworkers. When parents would find themselves in situations where their experience and work knowledge told them one thing, and representatives of the institutions of power told them the opposite, they were placed in a difficult situation. Understood as a disjuncture between what they knew and what they were told, these two mothers’ experience arose in a field of tension between their local work knowledge and the ruling relations, but also perhaps between the ruling relations of symmetry and devotion themselves. In both instances, from a standpoint in parents’ experience, staying with the conflict had to do with finding ways to remain engaged as responsible and devoted parents – to speak out about perceived injustice, or to help one’s children in a difficult situation at school. When enacted in a situation defined as high-conflict, such acts of devotion bumped up against both the ideal of symmetry and fairness, and against an objectified understanding of continued engagement with conflict as precisely a failure to devote to one’s children.

Discussion

Starting from parents' experience allows for approaching high-conflict divorce not as an abstract clinical phenomenon or legal dilemma, but as biographical realities. The findings show how parents' work is intricately connected to texts and documents expressing ideas from dominant discourses of parenthood in present-day Norwegian society. They also show how, from the standpoint of parents, engaging in, and staying with, the issues that eventually result in them being labelled as high-conflict involved actively engaging with the ruling relations. This produces a picture that differs from the ones we get when starting in pre-existing scientific knowledge and categories. Mapping the landscape of high-conflict divorce from the standpoint of parents pulls the organization of the translocal ruling relations into the actual sites of people's living. Through regulations, concepts, theories, and ideologies, certain forms of social organization get replicated locally as parents, children, and professionals – at different locations and at different times – engage with the same ideas and concepts in their everyday work of dealing with dilemmas of post-divorce parenting.

The discourses of symmetry and devotion facilitate and bring forth something while simultaneously constraining what can be expressed and excluding what cannot. Through their itinerary from cohabitating co-parenting through separation and beyond, families frequently come into contact with various professionals in different institutional positions. In such interchanges, parents are repeatedly confronted with the demand to reflect upon their own parenting as they encounter the relations of ruling and the discourse surrounding parenthood and divorce. In the present study, parents' efforts to negotiate their own and their co-parent's presence in their children's upbringing, and their work to realize a permanent emotional availability vis-à-vis their children despite their own regularly recurring physical absence were found to constitute two gravitational points. What from the perspective of parents was experienced as a continuing work of negotiation between symmetry and devotion was likely what others – professionals, and perhaps also children – would experience as conflict. The findings show how authoritative discourse can be seen as entering into a circuit where the struggles of divorced or separated parents to care for their children under challenging circumstances, while also living up to norms for good parenting, can sometimes work to keep the conflict alive.

The principle that the child's best interest be considered the bedrock of all processes concerning parenting after divorce is pivotal in Norwegian family legislation (Children Act, 1981; Marriage Act, 1991) as it is in many other countries (Parkinson, 2011). While challenging to disagree with in principle, a paradoxical consequence of how this normative idea can be taken up as practice is that it polarizes and simplifies the experience and knowledge of the actual people engaging with it (Kjøs et al., 2015). Based on the findings from the present study, one could argue that classifying enduring post-divorce conflict as an instance of neglect obscures the field of tension that exists between different relations of ruling that work to coordinate divorce and parenthood across time and place. As with other abstract concepts used to make sense of people's doings for the sake of building theory, devising policy, or designing clinical interventions, there is perhaps a disjunction at the heart of the concept of high-conflict divorce itself. This tension is between the third person, translocal, and abstract view of scientific-political reasoning and the first-person view of experience that is always local, material, and temporal. Locating parents' concerns within the discourses of symmetry and devotion, as Westerling (2016) proposes, makes visible how, in the wake of family breakup, conflicts between parents about their children are dialogically situated within wider political discourses concerning gender and parenthood. This places parents' concerns and the preoccupations of legislators, bureaucrats, and professionals 'on the same side,' so to speak. They are users of the same language, engaging with the same ruling relations.

Although nowhere near exhaustive as an index of the present-day, normative matrix for parenting, I suggest that the ruling relations of symmetry and devotion discussed in this article seem to demarcate

part of the relational architecture within which Norwegian parents are currently called to orient themselves. Acknowledging what parents in high-conflict divorce situations do as the intentional work of engaging with a common set of translocal ruling relations, as opposed to seeing it as acts of negligence and self-centeredness, invites a communal – instead of a clinical – approach to the phenomena we commonly refer to as high-conflict divorces.

Concluding remarks

What might the implications of this inquiry be for clinical and consultative practice? One lesson to draw is that treating what parents do in post-divorce conflict as deliberate parenting work, instead of seeing it as symptoms of parental failure or dysfunction, invites us to dissolve the ‘us-and-them’ ethos underlying the logic of much policy and intervention literature. Far from being an argument for a return to a ‘parent-centred’ set of priorities, I believe institutional ethnography offers a vocabulary for doing research that acknowledges the profoundly social, relational, and political nature of parenthood. This makes visible how the local and material relations between parents, children, and professionals are embedded in a larger web of social organization, and how what they all do is related to, and gather shape from, the ruling relations surrounding parenthood and divorce. Approaching high-conflict divorce in this way, as a problematic of everyday life instead of as a societal ill or a clinical problem, does not help explain underlying causal connections of particular patterns of behaviour. Neither does it offer clear suggestions for policy development or the invention of new intervention procedures. However, it might help us to better understand the actions of parents who find themselves in high-conflict divorce situations, by rendering visible some of the reasons why they might act as they do.

Notes

1. While research on parenting values in the Nordic countries generally portray women and men as endorsing an ideal of gender equality, the studies referenced above also highlight a discrepancy between ideology and practice in these questions (i.e., parents do not necessarily behave in accordance with these values). For the purpose of the present study, however, it is the general ideological code (Smith, 1999) of inter-parental equality that is of primary interest.

2. The Norwegian Parliament.

3. The groups were run according to the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ model, which is a structured and time-limited (eight group meetings lasting for approximately two hours), multi-family group therapy model for families in post-divorce conflict, originally developed in the Netherlands. The program is based on ideas and practices from systemic and narrative family therapy, dialogical philosophy and trauma psychology (van Lawick & Visser, 2015).

4. In a separate article, currently in review, I explore the institutional circuit (Griffith & Smith, 2014) of concern and assessment leading up to the referral of families to these groups as itself a part of the ruling relations.

5. Many researchers have explicated gendered aspects of parenting and family policy (see e.g., Andenæs, 2005; Forsberg, 2007; Lee et al., 2014; Plantin et al., 2003). The present analysis aims at the social organization against which such gendered patterns are enacted. Thus, gender is not consistently applied as an analytical category.

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Data availability statement

The interview transcripts for this study will not be made publicly available. They have been de-identified, but the content is still personal and cannot be made fully anonymous without changing the content.

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Article 2



Whose Life is it Anyway? Exploring the Social Relations of High-Conflict Divorce Cases in Southern Norway

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Abstract

The paper reports on findings from an empirical study based on qualitative interviews with Norwegian parents identified as part of a high-conflict divorce situation and interviews with caseworkers from a child welfare service. The site of study is an institutional circuit of concern, assessment, and referral involving the court, child welfare services, and a public family therapy service. The paper draws on the social ontology and analytic concepts of institutional ethnography and adopts parents' standpoint to explore how their knowledge and experience are shaped through encounters with professionals in the process of being identified and assessed as a high-conflict divorce case. The focus on people's doings and their expert knowledge about their doings sets institutional ethnographic research apart from more conventional forms of qualitative inquiry that focus on informants' inner experience. The paper highlights how a generalized professional discourse seems to permeate the work that parents and caseworkers jointly engage in, sometimes subsuming the knowledge and experience of those involved. When the issues of life as subjectively known and experienced are different from those of the institutional discourse, there is a danger that what is important to those whose lives they concern escapes the dialogue between parents and professionals.

Keywords Experience · High-conflict divorce · Institutional ethnography · Institutional circuit · Parents

Introduction

Father: "One of my goals, since the second court... second child welfare... first child welfare case, and first... second court proceeding... first court proceeding, has been for my daughter not to be institutionalized, repeatedly having to expose herself and her family in treatment, in assessment interviews, and all that, the whole bloody time. Because it has been a lot."

Interviewer: "It sounds almost like a lifestyle?"

Father: "Yes, growing up somewhere between a psychologist and the child welfare service. When she should just have been outside, playing."

This piece of dialogue comes from a research interview with a father, conducted a few days before he was to start participating in a multi-family group therapy program for parents and children living with high levels of conflict between parents after divorce. It shows a disjuncture between his local, parental desire to provide his daughter with a 'normal' childhood and how he had come to publicly enact his fatherhood by engaging with professionals in court proceedings, child welfare assessments, and other institutional services. This points to a key finding in the present paper, which is part of a study based on qualitative interviews with Norwegian parents identified as part of a high-conflict divorce situation. Their individual trajectories towards becoming high-conflict divorce *cases* involved repeated encounters with welfare and other public services. For some, this resulted in a process of alienation where they experienced a detachment from values subjectively held as central to their parenthood. For others, it provided opportunities to develop and grow as parents. Irrespective of the consequences in each particular instance, their stories collectively illuminate a side of high-conflict divorce that is less debated in the family therapy literature than is the search for effective clinical interventions and public policies. This

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has to do with how the social relations of governance and bureaucracy not only provide guidelines and venues for helpful exchanges between parents, children, and professionals; they also afford directions and limits for understanding, thus orchestrating people's lives in specific, objectified ways. This paper aims to provide an empirical exploration of how this sometimes comes to happen.

Separation and Divorce in the Norwegian Context

In Norway, between 30 and 40 percent of all children presently experience family break-up or have never lived together with both parents (Statistics Norway, 2020). Beginning in the 1990s, the number of disputes about child-related issues that ended up in court rose considerably in Norway (Koch 2008; Vimblemo, Tobra, Knutsen, Olsen, Gleinsvik & Bush 2016), as it did in many other Western countries (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Parkinson, 2011). For separating and divorcing families, a standard estimate is that between ten and 15 percent will end up in a pattern of entrenched conflict between parents (Haddad, Philips & Bone 2016; Helland & Borren, 2015; Hetherington, 2002; Mahrer et al. 2018; Wiik, Kitterød, Lyngstad & Lidén 2015). The concept of 'high-conflict divorce' refers to situations where parents remain in patterns of interaction characterized by long-lasting and bitter disputes over child-related concerns for several years after separation (Anderson et al. 2010; Birnbaum & Bala, 2010). Research has consistently demonstrated that such prolonged conflicts between parents after divorce can be detrimental for children's well-being and psychosocial health (Amato, 2000; Amato & Keith, 1991; DeBoard-Lucas et al. 2010; Emery, 1999; Fincham et al. 1994; Grych, 2005; Lansford, 2009; Visser et al. 2017).

In Norway, mediation is mandatory for separating parents with children below the age of 16, whether they are married (Marriage Act, 1991, § 26) or cohabiting (Children Act, 1981, §51, third paragraph). Mediation is also mandatory for parents seeking court litigation over issues concerning the care of their children after divorce or breakup (Children Act, 1981, § 51, first paragraph). The Norwegian mediation scheme's main intention is to promote cooperation through assisting parents in reaching an agreement regarding future care for their children (Barne- og familiedepartementet, 2006).

In this context, mandatory mediation facilitates direct governmental involvement in all instances of parental breakup involving children. This situates the family counseling offices responsible for mediation as part of an institutional complex that further involves the courts and sometimes the child welfare services. Mediators' main task is to function as consultants for parents towards preparing a written agreement concerning the future joint care for their children (Barne- og familiedepartementet, 2006). If parents

cannot agree on a joint parenting scheme during mediation, they can seek court litigation. The court's judicial authority allows for direct regulation of the domestic sphere (Ottosen, 2006). When the court accepts a parental dispute for litigation, the judge must decide whether a settlement is likely to be within reach, in which case a court mediation process is initiated. If not, or if court mediation is first attempted but proves unfruitful, a main hearing is held where the judge ultimately makes a judicial ruling (Children Act, 1981, chapter III; Domstoladministrasjonen, 2019). If parents repeatedly engage with these institutions without seeming to accomplish a de-escalation of conflict, child welfare services are sometimes notified. This is because prolonged conflict is itself considered a reason for concern for the well-being of children.

In 2013, the Norwegian government issued a guideline clarifying the child welfare services' responsibility in cases of concern for ongoing inter-parental custody disputes (Barne-, likestillings- og inkluderingsdepartementet 2013). In such cases, caseworkers must investigate the child's situation in both homes and offer voluntary supportive measures to one or both parents if deemed necessary. The guideline states that while caseworkers cannot directly intervene to alter any functioning custody or visitation agreement between parents (regulated in the Children Act, 1981), they may still advise parents on these same issues. Although rarely implemented, in extreme cases when parents are involved in a severe and prolonged conflict this can be considered a failure to meet the child's needs and may provide sufficient grounds for promoting a care order (regulated in the Child Welfare Act 1992). Thus, while child welfare services cannot dictate which solution parents should opt for in resolving custody disputes, the fact that conflict between parents is regarded as potentially harmful to children mandates caseworkers to demand that parents do *something*.

High-Conflict Divorce as a Problematic for Research

From a sociological perspective, Ottosen (2006) argues that both counseling, mediation, court proceedings, and child welfare procedures can be understood as expressions of the welfare state's aversion to interpersonal conflict and the state's power to discipline parents into cooperation. Although families found to be entrenched in conflict after a divorce are frequently referred to therapy by the judicial system in the hope of reducing conflict and avoiding new court filings (Anderson, Sumner, Parady, Whiting & Tambling 2019), Johnston et al. (2009) argue that the rhetoric of lawyers, child welfare caseworkers, and other professionals often provide nourishment to parents' conflicts.

This paradox, between the expressed intentions behind policy and intervention strategies and the claim that the same policies and interventions sometimes contribute to

produce or conserve the very phenomena they were made to prevent, marks the point of departure for the present paper. Drawing on data from a qualitative study consisting of interviews with parents and child welfare caseworkers, its goal is not to test or develop a set of theoretical assumptions about parenthood and high-conflict divorce. Nor is it to produce a phenomenological or thematic understanding of the psychological or inter-subjective aspects of a high-conflict divorce situation. Instead, the paper aims to provide an empirical exploration of how parents' knowledge and experience get shaped through encounters with the institutions of the state, and how this is connected to the way post-divorce parenthood is socially organized through Norwegian policy and professional guidelines. Focusing specifically on encounters between parents and child welfare caseworkers leading up to a further referral to a family therapy intervention, the paper seeks to map one segment of the institutional sequence through which parents encounter the institutions of the welfare state because of concern for ongoing conflict. The research question guiding the paper is: *how are parents' knowledge and experience shaped through encounters with caseworkers in the process of becoming a high-conflict case?* To this end, the paper draws on the sociological research strategy known as institutional ethnography (Smith, 1987, 1990a, 1990b, 1999, 2005).

Institutional Ethnography

As outlined by Smith (2005), institutional ethnography (IE) is a theorized empirical approach developed to explore the social relations that organize institutions as people participate in them, *from their own perspectives*. IE begins in the actualities of people's everyday activities, with a focus on how they participate in institutional relations. Treating people as expert knowers of their own lives, "it explores with people their experience of what is happening to them and their doings and how these are hooked up with what is beyond their experience" (Smith, 2005, p. 41). IE aims to generate knowledge about the ways in which taken-for-granted forms of governance work to rule everyday life. To do this, researchers must assemble what they learn from *different* perspectives and explore what connects them.

Compared to qualitative research approaches geared towards generating abstract theoretical explanations, institutional ethnography requires both an ontological and an epistemological shift (G. W. 1990b; Smith, 1990a, 2005, 2006). The ontological shift involves keeping analysis embedded in the everyday worlds of people's actual practices and activities. Hence, inquiry begins in an embodied standpoint, rather than in abject theory, and remains connected to this standpoint when tracing how peoples' activities and doings are socially organized and coordinated. Epistemologically, IE strives for ways of knowing that are experiential, from the

inside, not for objective or ideological truths (Hussey, 2012; Kearney et al. 2019). Taken together, this positions institutional ethnography as a non-positivist approach; it does not seek to uncover reality as it 'really' is, and it avoids the kinds of causal logic that often lead to decontextualized analyses. Instead, IE invites reflexive ways of knowing that relate to a common world shared by researchers and research participants (Kearney et al. 2018).

IE's social ontology assumes that one person's activity "necessarily implies the presence and doings of others caught up in and participating in relations" that coordinate what is happening (Smith, 2005, p. 43). The term *ruling relations* (Smith, 1987, 2005) articulates how this coordination works to orchestrate the social relations of institutions. In modern societies, texts are principal instruments of ruling. Through policy documents, guidelines, forms, standard letters, computer fields, etc., social relations get replicated and circulated *trans-locally*, that is, across time and place (Rankin, 2017; Smith, 1990a, 1990b). At the local sites of people's experience, these texts appear as material artifacts. Engaging in what Smith (1990a, 1990b, 2005) refers to as *text-reader conversations*, people's use of texts gives ruling relations a material form. As they enter into and coordinate people's doings (as, for instance, when otherwise unrelated parents independently work out their parenting plans using the same template downloaded from the same government website), this materiality makes the ruling relations accessible as empirical data. It enables us to see them as embedded in social relations. Relying on these material forms of social organization, IE offers insights into the everyday work of ruling by tracking institutional sites that govern people's practices in local settings (Rankin, 2017). When organized around a specific function, different relational modes of ruling—like state authority, professional guidelines, and professional discourse—intersect to constitute the relational complexes referred to as institutions (Griffith & Smith, 2014; Smith, 2005, 2006).

One of the things that distinguish IE from other critical modes of inquiry is its ability to explicitly discuss the situation on the front-line between service providers and service users and how this relates to outside organizing forces (Kearney et al., 2019). Griffith and Smith (2014) use the term *institutional circuit* to refer to sequences of institutional action where texts are produced by selectively choosing from actualities to build an account that accords with an authoritative or 'boss' text (like law, policy, or the frames of a particular discourse) in such a way that an institutional course of action can follow. Institutional circuits are not assumed to be objects to study. It is an analytical concept providing "a method of looking for how people coordinate what they do with one another" (Griffith & Smith, 2014, p. 12). Within the institutional complex surrounding family policy and family therapy services, institutional hierarchies and regulations

abound. This makes the field well suited for institutional ethnographic investigation.

Methods

Participants and Recruitment

Parents

Nineteen parents, representing a total of 11 co-parenting pairs,¹ were interviewed.² They consisted of nine mothers and ten fathers, divorced or broken up from a heterosexual relationship with a partner with whom they had one or more dependent children under 16 (totaling 17 children). Age ranged from mid-twenties to early fifties. The level of education ranged from vocational training to post-graduate university education. Nine fathers and four mothers were in full-time employment outside the home. Five mothers and one father were not employed but were under some form of work assessment scheme via the Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration.

All parents had been to mediation at least once in the separation phase, and many had repeatedly sought both counseling and mediation at a family counseling office to help resolve issues of inter-parental disagreement. All parents reported having undergone assessment by child welfare services based on concern for an ongoing conflict. Twelve parents had been part of one or more court proceedings to settle disputes about custody or access. Five parents reported seeking psychotherapy or other professional counseling to deal with stress and trauma related to their current situation. Six of the children had been referred to hospital-based outpatient mental health services as part of their parents' and local professionals' responses to a concern for their well-being after their parents' separation. Most children had seen some form of first-tier consultation (e.g., health nurse, school social worker) either individually or as part of structured groups for children with parents in separate homes.

Parents were recruited through their participation in a multi-family group therapy program for parents and children who had been identified as part of a high-conflict divorce situation,³ which at the time of the study was run at two

family counseling offices in the Agder region of Southern Norway. Parents were interviewed either before they participated in such a group (4),⁴ both before and after (7), or only four months after they had taken part (8). The program was run by professionals from family counseling centers and hospital-based outpatient child and youth mental health services. All parents had been referred to the program by caseworkers in the child welfare service, based on a concern for their children's situation in an ongoing conflict between the parents. As such, the multi-family group intervention program was part of an institutional sequence of parenting support services coordinated by the child welfare service. Contact with parents was made via the local therapists running the groups.

Professionals

Five child welfare caseworkers were interviewed. The caseworkers were not recruited based on their association with any particular case, and no attempt was made to link the experiences of particular parents and caseworkers. Instead, these interviews provided crucial supplementary information about the organization of professionals' work in cases involving high-conflict divorce. Caseworkers were recruited by contacting the director of a public child welfare service in the Norwegian Agder region.

In addition to interviews with parents and child welfare caseworkers, the study that this paper draws on included interviews with three judges and 12 family therapists. These were all recruited via direct contact. The interviews with therapists and judges were not used directly as part of the data material analyzed for the present paper. Still, they provided essential sources of knowledge about the institutional organization and local practices.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Most parents (14) were interviewed in their own homes. Some (3) were interviewed at a family counseling office, and some (2) by telephone.⁵ Caseworkers were all interviewed at their workplaces. Interviews lasted from 30 min (by telephone) to two hours. All participants gave their informed

¹ For one of the participating parents, their co-parenting ex-partner did not take part in the study.

² In the study that the paper draws on, a total of 20 parents were interviewed. Of these, 19 had experience with the child welfare services and were included in the data material used for this paper.

³ The groups were run in accordance with the 'No Kids in the Middle' model, which is a multi-family group framework for dialogical, systemic, and experiential therapeutic work with parents and children who live with long-lasting and high inter-parental conflict levels after

Footnote 3 (continued)

divorce (van Lawick & Visser 2015). In the Agder region, this group program has been practiced since 2014.

⁴ Four parents interviewed before taking part in the multi-family group ended up not taking part in the group program but still agreed to participate in the study. Since the 'No Kids in the Middle' program itself is not the subject of study in this article, only the access point for contact, the interviews with these four parents were included in the material.

⁵ Two parents did not agree to be interviewed face-to-face or for the interview to be audio recorded. They consented to being interviewed via telephone and for the interviewer to take notes.

signed consent to the use of the interview material for this research. The research project was approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD, project nr. 57,881) and the ethical committee at the Faculty for Health and Sports Sciences, University of Agder.

Data Production

Interviews were conducted as semi-structured, open-ended conversations (DeVault & McCoy, 2006). As is common to many versions of ethnographic interviewing (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), in IE research, a material interview guide or fixed set of standard questions is seldom used (DeVault & McCoy, 2006). In individual interviews, questions were based partly on what was learned from previous interviews and partly on the researcher's accumulating knowledge of the social relations constituting the problematic under investigation. The parts of transcripts of interviews with parents used as data in this paper centered around each participant's history of encounters with welfare, legal and therapy professionals in the wake of separation or divorce. From transcripts of interviews with caseworkers from the child welfare service, data consisted of their accounts of experience from working with parents and children living with high levels of inter-parental conflict after divorce. In addition, I draw on texts that were either directly referenced in interviews or otherwise clearly implied (e.g., when a participant referred to "the legal framework," I searched for the legal texts appropriate to the situation referred to). I explored these texts to illuminate how the relations between parents and professionals in high-conflict divorce cases are "hooked up" (Smith, 2005) via trans-local ruling processes.

Data Analysis

Memos

After each interview, I wrote a memo containing my immediate impressions and reflections. I made notes of themes or issues that seemed to occur in several interviews to start tracing trans-local coordination patterns. Before each new interview, I consulted all existing memos to keep focused on developing analytic threads. I successively shared and discussed transcribed interviews with two of my research supervisors (a practicing mediator and family therapist and an associate professor in psychosocial health), widening the field of reflection and collectively generating ideas, concerns, and themes to be explored in coming interviews.

Indexing

In parallel with doing interviews and writing memos, I indexed accounts from the interview transcripts. As detailed

by Rankin (2017), indexing is a strategy that helps keep analysis grounded in the materiality and particularities of actual accounts, as opposed to abstracting categories and themes from the data. Indexing helps the process of cross-reference across local activities, people, and settings. Guided by the research problematic, as the first step of the analysis, I scrutinized transcribed interviews with parents for accounts of meetings with professionals where some form of assessment was made, or where there was talk of a referral of the people in question as a 'case' between services (e.g., from child welfare to family counseling). These, I indexed according to which service was responsible for producing the assessment or institutional text that the individual event was related to. As a second step, I looked for each parent's accounts of experience from these encounters, how they responded to the events (i.e., if they appreciated or opposed what was done), and the knowledge they applied when responding. As the third step, I analyzed interviews with professionals, looking for their accounts of parallel work processes. For example, several parents found that professionals did not take their concerns regarding violence seriously. Thus, working with transcripts of interviews with child welfare caseworkers, I looked for accounts of work related to assessing and categorizing incoming concerns or referrals where there was mention of violence. Grouping different participants' accounts of the same type of event under the same index heading allowed for the assembling of interconnected accounts of experiences and knowledge from different subject positions. As the fourth step of the analysis, I searched within each index heading for references (explicit or by implication) to trans-local organizing texts, such as assessment forms or professional guidelines, and located them where possible.

Throughout the analysis, the emphasis was kept on people's doings and their expert knowledge about their doings—what in IE terms is broadly referred to as 'work' (Smith, 2005). This focus on work sets IE apart from more conventional forms of qualitative inquiry that focus on informants' inner experience. It is participants' expert work knowledge that provides the entry point into the inquiry.

Findings: Mapping the Institutional Circuit of Concern, Assessment, and Referral

In this section, I seek to explicate how the institutional procedures governing child welfare caseworkers' engagement with families in high-conflict divorce situations gave shape to parents' experience, and how this work was related to, and contingent upon, the work of other professionals situated elsewhere. Alternating between parents' accounts of encounters with professionals and data from caseworkers' accounts of work related to the same kind of encounters, I

show how parents' and caseworkers' doings were related to specific text-mediated ruling relations.

I begin by outlining the institutional circuit (Griffith & Smith, 2014) of concern, assessment, and referral that is the study's focus. I then establish a standpoint in parents' experience inside this circuit to show how what is happening 'on the ground' is organized to happen as it does, more or less irrespective of the parents' knowledge and experience. I turn to data from interviews with child welfare caseworkers to explore how parents' experiential standpoint related to textually governed processes taking place beyond the immediately observable local setting. Focusing on one particular disjuncture (Smith, 1990a, 1990b) between the perspective of experience and the perspective of ruling, I then explore parents' experiential knowledge of how concerns about the other parent's capacity to provide proper care seemed to disappear or slip away once a situation was labeled as a high-conflict case. This, I connect to caseworkers' accounts of handling such concerns, showing how labeling a case as 'high-conflict' seemed to create barriers that complicated the articulation of other concerns. Finally, I show how engaging with this institutional circuit over time, for some parents, was associated with a sense of alienation and inertia.

The Institutional Circuit

Of the parents interviewed, all had been through a process of assessment by child welfare, resulting in a referral to a family counseling office for participation in a multi-family group therapy program (where they were re-assessed for suitability for the group). Some parents had initially contacted the child welfare service themselves due to concern for the other parents' ability to provide proper care. For others, the letter of concern had come from a mediator or therapist at a family counseling office or from a specialist psychologist working for the court (as part of a settlement agreement or following a main hearing).

In most cases where child welfare had been notified by a representative from either the court or a family counseling office, the particular multi-family group program from where parents were recruited to this study was explicitly mentioned in the letter of concern. According to the therapists, judges, and child welfare caseworkers interviewed, the locally negotiated set of procedures for referral to the multi-family group explicitly stated that a referral from child welfare was preferable. This was to establish the security of an active child welfare presence should the group therapy process not result in some form of meaningful improvement. This was in keeping with the governmental guideline describing the work of child welfare services vis-a-vis inter-parental conflict, which specifies that high-conflict divorce is considered legitimate grounds for opening a child welfare assessment (Barne-, likestillings- og inkluderingsdepartementet 2013).

Thus, a local institutional circuit existed, hooking the work of children, parents, therapists, child welfare caseworkers, judges, and others, onto each other. This was accomplished through a local formal policy agreement between services, anchored in professional guidelines (Barne-, likestillings- og inkluderingsdepartementet 2013) and law (Child Welfare Act 1992; Children Act, 1981). In the two next sections, I show how this ruling relation became visible in interviews with parents.

Identifying a Standpoint in Parents' Experience

During the two years since their separation, Robert⁶ and his ex-wife had repeatedly sought mediation at the local family counseling office. They were not in disagreement about custody or access for their two children (which was shared equally between the parents). However, they experienced enduring difficulties with agreeing on essential questions regarding priorities in their children's upbringing and resolving financial issues. At some point, a mediator at the family counseling office suggested they should join a multi-family therapy group for children and parents living with high levels of post-divorce conflict. When this was suggested, Robert thought that this group for "high-conflict families" would not be a good fit for them since he did not consider their conflict as "high," just stuck. Still, he and his ex-wife agreed to a referral to the therapy group. As a standard procedure in this process, the mediator at the family counseling office sent a letter of concern to the child welfare service articulating a worry that enduring conflict between the parents would threaten their children's psychosocial well-being. Robert described the meeting with a caseworker from the child welfare service, in conjunction with the caseworker making an assessment based on the letter of concern, as unsettling. In the assessment process, each parent was interviewed separately, and then the children were interviewed briefly. Based on the interviews, the caseworker wrote a report:

"There was a report. Which was ... she ended up setting the mother and me up against each other in that report. And that just made the conflict escalate. So, I called the caseworker and said that "this isn't right." And the mother called her too and said that the report isn't correct. It is entirely wrong. I told the caseworker that "you have to take it out." However, she had already locked the report, so there was nothing she could do."

This account shows a disjuncture between Robert's experience and knowledge about his life and the professionals' dealings with the same issues based on institutional

⁶ Interview transcripts are anonymized. Parents have been given fictitious names.

procedures that worked to objectify him, the mother, and their children as a case of a particular kind for which a specific set of procedures applied. In this process, a preordained set of local procedures for interaction between the family counseling office and the child welfare service provided direction for what the professionals should do and how. Investing in these relations of ruling (in this case to be found in the letter of concern, the standardized assessment protocol, and the letter of referral to the group), collectively working as operationalizations of the government guideline (Barne-, likestillings- og inkluderingsdepartementet 2013), seems to have made the actual experiences and knowledge of the people under assessment seem less relevant. Nevertheless, the parents invested in this; they agreed to the referral and accepted the offer of therapy (even though the offer was based on the report they objected to).

Other parents described a sense of relief and comfort that there existed a set of guidelines and procedures for how professionals were to deal with parents in enduring post-divorce concerns. Anna said that she had felt relieved when her general practitioner had told her that she was “not supposed to struggle with this alone,” and referred her to the child welfare service. Anna said that before this, she had felt very alone with the dilemmas associated with co-parenting with a father whose lifestyle she described as “criminal” at the time. Learning to formulate her worries as concerns about inter-parental conflict let her access the help that she felt she needed more readily: “it was much easier to go to child welfare and ask for help when you knew what you were supposed to ask for help with.” After the latest round of assessment, she said that the caseworkers in child welfare “really wanted us to accept a referral” to the multi-family group therapy program at the family counseling office. Although she described the relationship between the father and herself as good at this time, she trusted that the professionals knew what would be best for them. Hence, she was happy to accommodate their suggestions. However, this trust was not based on an interpersonal relationship with a caseworker developing gradually over time, as there would be new people in charge of their case “every time.” Although this progression along an institutional sequence of actions was not grounded in her experience in an obvious way, I interpret her account as communicating a sense of being cared for and acknowledged.

Emma, too, had experienced child welfare services as a source of support during the time after the divorce. Her family had initially come into contact with child welfare because her son showed behavioral problems in school:

“And then, luckily, the caseworker understood that there was a conflict there, too, affecting the children, in addition to the challenges that our son had. And

then she suggested we attend a conflict group. The father was skeptical (...), but I accepted the offer right away. I ... I accept everything that might be of help. Because I have tried so many things, I think. The health nurse, family counseling, but nothing has really been of help thus far.”

Emma and Anna placed their trust in the welfare system and expressed gratitude that their situation was defined as a high-conflict case since this opened the possibility for being referred to therapeutic services that they hoped would contribute to making life better.

Some parents said that agreeing to professionals’ suggestions for further referrals was all part of a more comprehensive give-and-take negotiation between the parents and various bodies of government. Some parents had responded to the suggestion made by professionals to refer both parents to a multi-family group therapy program by demanding that the other parent be referred individually to a separate service (e.g., psychiatric assessment, a parenting group focusing on parent–child attachment, or an anger management program). Others described such referrals as something they felt they had to agree to because of some prior accommodation (e.g., previously having experienced that one’s concerns were taken seriously by child welfare), or in the hope that it would bring about a specific governmental response in the future (e.g., hoping that exhibiting a positive attitude by accepting a referral at this point might prove critical in a future court proceeding). Ole said that his reason for accepting a referral to the particular multi-family group therapy program where the parents for this study were interviewed, was simply that the child welfare service had recommended it. Since he was the one who had initially contacted this service for help, he felt obliged to accept. “Otherwise, asking for help would make no sense. Thus, I feel somewhat pressured, out of respect, because I have been happy with the child welfare service. ... Nevertheless, I don’t believe that anything good will come of it.”

Although diverse, these parents’ experiences can be understood as originating within a generalized sequence of action (Smith, 2005), or institutional circuit, grounded in knowledge and decisions originating outside of the local context of experience. The parents’ participation in these discursive practices brought them into connection with the trans-local ruling relations of text-based forms of knowledge. To understand some of these complex trans-local processes informing parents’ experiential standpoint, I now turn to material from interviews with child welfare caseworkers to explore how this related to textually governed processes taking place beyond the immediately observable local setting.

The Work of Child Welfare Caseworkers

Because of the legal framework regulating the Norwegian child welfare service (Child Welfare Act 1992), other services or institutions cannot request a specific structured response from this service in a particular case without presenting the request as a letter of concern. Several of the caseworkers interviewed explained that receiving a letter of concern about inter-parental conflict, suggesting a referral to a particular intervention outside of the child welfare service itself, would place them in a difficult situation. On the one hand, in each particular case, this meant that a decision about the suitability of the intervention in question had been made elsewhere and that what was essentially called for was the bureaucratic continuation of this decision. On the other hand, as specified in the "Routine Manual for Child Welfare Services" (Barne- og likestillingsdepartementet 2006), the child welfare service cannot initiate a referral to a particular program or any other parenting support measure without first making an independent assessment of the conditions of care that supports (or not) the likelihood of a causal relationship between the measure proposed and the amelioration of the particular issues of concern. Furthermore, unless by the decision of the County Social Welfare Board (Child Welfare Act 1992, §4–4), any family support initiative is conditioned on both children's and parents' voluntary participation.

Referring in particular to instances where the child welfare service would receive such a letter of concern in the wake of a court proceeding, where a decision to participate in a particular therapeutic program was part of either a settlement or a court ruling, one caseworker explained:

"We often feel ...restrained by what the court asks for. You see, it doesn't fit the system. [...] According to the Child Welfare Act, we can't just pass it on to [the team working with] family support. We have to investigate. And what are we to investigate, then? We can choose to simply let the assessment consist of the court ruling, one conversation with each of the parents and the children, and then proceed. However, perhaps we should be much more exact on the need to speak thoroughly with the children, to make sure they know what has been decided. [...] But that means initiating a full investigation, which involves a lot of work before the case can move on to family support."

Similarly, from the standpoint of child welfare caseworkers, as a standardized procedure, it seemed overly cumbersome when a therapist at the family counseling office would send a letter of concern requesting that the child welfare service refer a particular family back to them for participation in a program that the family counseling office was already administering. "If I was a parent in that situation, at the family counseling office," one caseworker said, "I would

have thought 'why do I have to go through child welfare? I am already here! I accept the offer to attend the program, but I don't see why you have to report me to child welfare.' That's how I would think."

The request to make a referral formulated in the letter of concern, combined with the need to make an assessment that would meet the formal demands of child welfare legislation, including the condition that participation in a family support intervention initiated by child welfare needs to be voluntary on the part of parents, left caseworkers with a sense of having very little room for maneuvering in these particular cases. Often, one caseworker said, they saw that their work in the assessment process was experienced as stressful by parents and that this would often make the conflict escalate. In this situation, several caseworkers said that spending too much time with one parent one-on-one (as opposed to only speaking to parents together) involved a risk of the caseworker either subjectively choosing a side in the conflict, or else at least providing the other parent with a reason for suspecting them of partiality. While the caseworkers interviewed all had limited experience with referring families to specific programs outside of their own service, all had ample experience with "losing" cases due to accusations from one parent that a child welfare assessment was not made from an objective stance. As such, the institutional circuit of concern, assessment, and referral between the institutions involved a sequence of institutional boundaries that worked to complicate the actualization of other concerns than those directed at the conflict as a phenomenon in itself, from personal disquiet into some form of conversational reality.

In the next section, I focus on one concern that stood out when analyzing interviews with parents. This particular concern had to do with the experience that knowledge of violence or parents' drug abuse seemed to disappear or slip away once a situation was labeled as a high-conflict case.

Silencing Concerns

Among the parents who said that violence was an important issue of concern for them, a shared experience was that their talk of violence had been categorized as false allegations or otherwise merely had not registered with professionals.

Accounting for his way into the multi-family group program in conjunction with which he was interviewed, Ole described a complex parental custody dispute that had evolved over several years. His story involved three separate rounds of court litigation, activating contact with several community health and welfare services and him suspecting the other parent of using illicit drugs and accusing her of violence before the break-up. In his experience, this situation was interpreted by professionals in child welfare and family counseling as a "traditional quarrel." By this, he referred to the situation being described as one where each parent

wrongly accused the other of poor parenting, jointly failing to shield the child from hearing these accusations. Based on this, he said, the situation was defined as “high-conflict” and referred by the child welfare service to the family counseling office for assessment for group therapy participation. There, they were met as two parents equally contributing to and thus equally responsible for the conflict. In his words, this view was communicated via statements like “you have some things to tidy up between the two of you,” “you need to take hold of this situation,” and “you can’t continue like this.” He said that he could understand the logic behind this perspective and that it would have been much preferable if what they needed to do was to sort out practical issues and agree to treat each other with a higher level of decency:

“And not the other stuff with lies, violence, drugs, and all that. And then the child welfare service says, “we recommend the family counseling office.” But that is like ... it is either that or promoting a care order. They really don’t have much more they can say. Still, I have decided to go along with it because I was happy with the therapists we met. They seemed very professional and objective and balanced.”

Although the definition of their situation as one where both parents were mutually responsible and equally contributing did not fit with his own experience, he still stepped into and chose to invest in the generalized high-conflict divorce case’s social relations.

Randi, a mother interviewed four months after she had participated in the multi-family group, explained that the group, for her, presently marked the endpoint of a long series of engagements with professionals in what she described as her work for “saving” her children. This had been her main focus ever since the children told her that their father was sometimes physically abusive towards them when they stayed with him (which was every other week). However, the father denied the occurrence of violence, turning the situation into one of “word against word.” In her experience, the lack of tangible proof of violence directed the professionals’ attention away from the contents of her concern, turning it instead towards the heated and insistent manner in which the concerns were communicated. Her previous attempts at seeking help included repeated mediation, therapy from mental health services for both herself and her children, and assessment and subsequent parenting advice and support from child welfare services:

“I didn’t feel that mediation or any of the other stuff helped me. It sounds so grand: “we listen to the children.” The youngest one came to mediation and said, “I want to stay with my mother” – no one did anything. “It is the conflict; it is the conflict,” they say. OK. I haven’t had a quarrel with that man for a long time.

Still, he throws my kid on the floor. So, don’t come dragging with the conflict.”

In this mother’s experience, her talk of the father’s violence was interpreted as a false allegation. For the various professionals meeting them, this seems to have made the dynamics of the relationship between her and her ex-husband fit with a “typical” high-conflict divorce pattern, thus appointing high-conflict as an objectified phenomenon to be the problem, and not the actual material, localized doings of people. Within this social organization, priority was given to particular conflict behaviors at the expense of the issues that these behaviors, as understood by the parent as acting subject, were experienced as responses to.

The Work of Child Welfare Caseworkers

In interviews with child welfare caseworkers, several participants endorsed the same dilemmas that parents brought up, particularly the possibility of misjudging information about violence or drug use as unfounded accusations. “But because the case is [defined as] high-conflict, we don’t go into it,” one caseworker said. She described the dilemma as one between firing up the conflict if they were to act on the information versus overseeing instances of actual abuse if they did not. Describing how a typical high-conflict case would enter the child welfare system if the letter of concern was sent by one of the parents themselves, one caseworker explained that:

Caseworker: “In those cases, ... often, the letter of concern will mention issues of mental health or drug use. Claims about the other parent using drugs. In some cases, the issues will be more about the other parent not doing things in the appropriate way ...”

Interviewer: “Like following up on homework, perhaps...”

Caseworker: “... or that the child always wears dirty clothes after being with the other parent, a lot of details, which of course might prove important, but where they... well, it is... these are cases that can weigh heavily on you. Because [parents] get so caught up in the details and not ... [...], and I think that is the point when we might begin to understand it as an instance of a lack of insight, or as a lack of ability to see oneself as contributing to the situation.”

In this account, a disjuncture can be hypothesized as the event where the content of parents’ expressed concerns become subordinated, while the general rhetorical form in which the concerns are communicated comes to take center stage. This shift makes what occurs actionable as a high-conflict case (as opposed to a case where one parent is suspected of failing to provide proper care).

When child welfare caseworkers would refer families to particular family therapy interventions, a de-escalation of conflict was not considered the sole possibly valuable outcome of the process. An unfavorable outcome, meaning that the therapeutic efforts did not lead to the desired change, could work to build a child welfare case towards a possible care order or encourage one parent to initiate a custody case in court. Describing the Child Welfare Act as strict and rigid, and the power to place children in care as a latent threat frightening many parents from cooperating with the child welfare services, one caseworker described that the family counseling service, in his understanding, was a more welcoming and service-minded institution. If a caseworker would refer a family to the family counseling service and then later get a letter of concern in return, describing one or both parents as refusing to cooperate with the family therapists, this would contribute to building the case about neglect as a result of conflict between the parents. "When you get it served, when people wish you nothing but well and just want to help you, and you refuse—who are you then? How do you think?" one caseworker said.

The above examples illustrate how a specific textualized ruling discourse about post-divorce parenting and inter-parental disagreements worked to position both parents and professionals. Engaging with each other through textually organized sequences of interaction, they entered into and actively participated in the ruling practices contained in the texts. Within the specific institutional circuit explored here, describing an interpersonal relational dynamic as 'high-conflict' would catch the local moment into a set of discursive relations organized around an understanding of conflict as a malfunctioning mode of parenting. This created barriers complicating the articulation of other concerns, like worries about ongoing violence and drug abuse.

Paranoid Parenting

Several parents articulated a sense of being under constant surveillance due to being identified as part of a high-conflict divorce case. Some used the word "paranoia" to describe what living within this situation over time was doing to them. After eighteen months of contact with child welfare as a consequence of concern for the effects of conflict on his children, Martin explained that "for the last year-and-a-half, my whole life, and my children's lives, have been put under a magnifying glass. [...] Poof, everything is affected." Ivar described his experience with being under assessment by child welfare as "being evaluated up and down [...] without ever getting any feedback, they just evaluate ... you get stuck in an enduring evaluation where you just sit around feeling like the worst father in the world, like, what am I doing wrong since they never back off, in a way?" Maria explained that:

"Everyone who has been in contact with child welfare or been through a custody trial says the same thing. Suddenly you think ... when your child does whatever: how does this look from the outside? What will my child say about this when someone asks her about it? Most families never have to consider such things. And then I think: *that* is freedom."

Linda had spent the two years since separation in dialogues with child mental health services, school psychology services, health nurses, and her own and her children's general practitioner before taking part in the multi-family group program in relation to which she was interviewed. She explained that the sense of not being taken seriously or understood by professionals, particularly in the child welfare service, had led her to keep documentation of almost everything that happened in her and her children's lives. "I just put it all in binders. Everything ... I can get. But still, that makes ... a lot of hours that I could have spent otherwise." She believed that it would have been much better for her children to have spent her energy on them instead of becoming exhausted over documenting their misery. "And on ... public services that haven't really proven to be useful ... or helpful ... for the children."

Discussion

Using the concepts and mode of inquiry of institutional ethnography, I have sought to explore a small segment of the social organization of high-conflict divorce as it came into view when seen from the standpoint of Norwegian parents engaging with services catering to post-divorce concerns. The purpose of the institutional procedures studied was to help identify families struggling with high-conflict divorce and establish a reasonable and professionally sound offer of family therapy services. Focusing on disjunctures between subjective experience and institutional knowledge, the analysis has brought into view how parents' and professionals' actions are shaped by engaging with the social organization built into the procedures constituting this particular institutional circuit. Sometimes, this invites paths of action that come into conflict with what the individual agents themselves know and care for.

This particular study should not be interpreted as a critique of the work that professionals do. Nor does it provide an argument against state involvement in family affairs. Instead, it points to the intricate entanglement of individual experience and organizational order that characterizes the social organization of post-divorce conflict. While some of the parents interviewed for the present study valued the services provided by professionals, many said that engaging with institutional services had not contributed to the

resolution of conflict or the betterment of life. In some cases, it had led parents to gradually adopt a third-person perspective of ruling vis-à-vis themselves, documenting their own and their children's misfortune in lack of any viable alternatives that would count as an action within the institutional order.

In a systematic literature review of qualitative research on parents' experience of high-conflict co-parenting relationships after divorce, Francia et al. (2019) summarize that concerns over differing parenting styles, or the other parent's ability to care for the child adequately, were among the most common ingredients in parents' descriptions of conflicts. The experiences and expressed motives of the parents interviewed for the present study mostly fit these descriptions. The present findings further highlight the risk of losing from sight the concerns that bring people to seek welfare or therapeutic services in the first place. Treloar (2018, 2019), interviewing Canadian adults who had experienced a high-conflict divorce, found that while many of her participants saw themselves as having done what was within their power to make the best of the situation for themselves and their children, they still experienced being stereotyped, judged, boxed in and labeled by professionals. The present study suggests that approaching such experiences in terms of the ruling relations that hook parents' concerns onto legal, welfare, and therapy services can broaden our understanding of how this comes to happen. Moving along institutionalized sequences of encounters where institutional texts get produced, personal lived experience is abstracted and translated to be intelligible within a professional discourse, sanctioned in official guidelines and in legal and scientific authority. This works to categorize people's situations and concerns in ways that make them institutionally actionable as high-conflict cases. However, the subsequent institutional action can sometimes be experienced as irrelevant or even alienating.

From Family Systems to Societal Entanglement

The particular model for multi-family therapy in which all families in the present study either were about to participate or had already participated (the 'No Kids in the Middle' program, see No Kids in the Middle 2020; van Lawick & Visser, 2015), encourages therapists to consider inter-parental conflict as a systemic phenomenon extending beyond the children-parents nucleus. Therapeutic work adhering to this model includes one or more network meetings where members of families' private networks, like grandparents, siblings, or new partners—and sometimes the children's teachers or parents' colleagues, can be invited. The rationale for this is that members of the network are often actively involved in conflict by taking sides, thus contributing to a conflict dynamic rather than de-escalation or resolution (van Lawick & Visser, 2015).

The present study supports an even more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of inter-parental conflicts. It points to how the trans-local, ruling relations of policy documents, professional guidelines, and local procedures sometimes work to raise institutional boundaries that keep parents and professionals alike from relating to issues of dispute and concern as anything other than a reciprocal high-conflict divorce pattern. Johnson, Roseby, and Kuehnle (2009) argue that professionals' rhetoric sometimes promotes the growth of the same phenomena that it addresses in the hope of resolution or prevention. The present study shows how this sometimes happens in situated interchanges between parents and professionals. I suggest that this can be understood as subjective responses to the objectified, or ruling, social relations brought into being as trans-local ruling relations are repeatedly activated in local settings where professionals follow procedure. This raises the question of what fuels the pervasive distrust, poor communication, disregard, contempt, polarization, and imperviousness to rational positions or arguments (Kelly, 2003) that professionals sometimes observe in parents in high-conflict divorce cases (McIntosh, 2003).

For practitioners in this field, this suggests that it is crucial to consider 'high-conflict divorce' not only as a useful concept referring to a particular type of interpersonal dynamics; it can also be understood as a regulatory frame (Smith, 2005), organizing the trans-local social relations within (or against) which it is locally realized and experienced. As professionals, one's involvement—why to engage, how to approach, when, where, and how to intervene (or abstain from it)—is already part of this institutional complex. Thus, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish helpful intervention from continuation or even reinforcement of the processes that work to uphold and fuel conflicts.

Implications for Practice

McIntosh (2003) urges that research documenting the negative consequences of post-divorce conflict for children should warn professionals that "continuing to practice in ways that do not actively create a child focus can no longer be regarded as good practice in primary dispute resolution." The present study presents a complex portrait of what goes on when parents and professionals engage with each other to realize such an agenda. As professionals knowingly and competently produce the practices that are called for and make sense within their respective institutional settings (Rankin, 2015), the subjective experience and knowledge of the individual people that jointly constitute each high-conflict divorce case risk being overlooked. Sometimes, this seems to lead to a sense of alienation and lack of agency on the part of parents that it is hard to imagine as a positive outcome for anyone—let alone the children. Nevertheless, the

trans-local ruling relations that these practices are informed by, in the shape of practice guidelines, policies, and legal regulations, are all explicitly prepared with the “best interests of the child” as an ultimate concern.

This study highlights the importance of seeing the actions of the people involved—family members as well as the professionals in adjoining institutional services that families come into contact with – not only as expressive of fixed positions, intra-personal characteristics, or inter-personal patterns of communication. We can also understand them as responses bounded by trans-local ruling relations that organize the very situations in which help is sought and offered. Awareness of this might make visible how engaging with the ruling relations that organize these exchanges sometimes erect institutional boundaries that make any other response than going along seem unattainable. This invites a reflective kind of practice where practitioners should be mindful of and engage parents and children in dialogues about their own and each other’s positions within the institutional circuitry.

Coda—Local Action

Since its beginning (in September 2017), part of the motivation behind the research project that this paper is a part of has been to contribute to the conditions for such a local reflective practice. To this end, as a researcher, I took part in a joint collaborative forum twice a year. There, therapists working with the particular multi-family intervention program from which all parents participating in this study were recruited (the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ model (van Lawick & Visser, 2015)) in the Agder region of Norway, together with their administrative leaders, met with representatives from child welfare services and the district courts to share experiences and concerns and to discuss further joint efforts to improve institutional services for families in high-conflict divorce situations. At these meetings, information about the research process and the emerging findings was provided and discussed with the participating professionals. Four therapists from one of the family counseling offices coordinating the multi-family group practice in Agder read the first draft of the manuscript for this paper and took part in a discussion of the findings. They responded that the concerns raised in the manuscript resonated with their own experiences and with concerns they had felt but not always found productive ways for articulating. As a result of these discussions, it was decided to initiate a monthly forum for dialogue around institutional services to parents and children struggling with enduring conflicts and other concerns after separation or divorce. There, therapists from this family counseling office and the citizens, organizations, and public services in the communities served by it will be invited to share experiences, thoughts, and ideas concerning what good institutional services in this particular field should involve.

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Data Availability The interview transcripts for this study will not be made publicly available. While the transcripts have been de-identified, the content is still personal and cannot be made fully anonymous without changing the content. If made publicly available, participants would therefore be able to recognize themselves, as well as possibly recognizing each other.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author reports no conflict of interest.

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Article 3



Parent Education Beyond Learning: An Ethnographic Exploration of a Multi-family Program for Families in Post-divorce Conflict

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The paper builds on ethnographic, qualitative research that explores the 'No Kids in the Middle' program for high-conflict divorce families, as practiced in the Agder region of South Norway. Parent education programs targeting parents in divorce are generally found to be 'effective' in the sense that parents learn about the pitfalls of conflict and become socialised into less negative patterns of co-parenting. However, a narrow understanding of the potential of such programs as vehicles for the transfer of knowledge fails to attend to the relational sides of both education and therapy, and the existential sides of parenthood. Drawing on Gert Biesta's articulation of education as a process working along three dimensions of purpose, the paper approaches the 'No Kids in the Middle' program as an educational practice. It aims to explore whether the educational ambitions of the 'No Kids in the Middle' program should be understood primarily in the general terms of qualification (i.e., parents acquiring knowledge and skills) and socialisation (i.e., parents gaining a specific orientation toward a set of norms and values), or if there were practices or elements that seemed directed at subjectification or bringing the 'I' of each parent into play. Analysing field notes from participant observation in a 'No Kids in the Middle' multi-family group and interviews with parents, therapists, judges, and child welfare caseworkers, the paper concludes that programs like 'No Kids in the Middle' provide a broad spectrum of educational opportunities. While some of these might be intended to instruct along pre-defined normative paths toward understanding and behaviour, such practices can also be seen as addressing parents in a different, more existential, way. In the particular local practice studied, the dimension of subjectification was perhaps most clearly in play in the informal settings surrounding the program itself.

Keywords: ethnography, high-conflict divorce, No Kids in the Middle, parent education, subjectification, first-person perspective

Key Points

1. The field of parent education programs currently lacks a vocabulary for attending to the existential dimension of its practices.
2. Gert Biesta's work on the tripartite purpose of education offers one way to bring forth essential aspects of such programs, particularly regarding the vital but lucid dimension of subjectification.
3. 'No Kids in the Middle' is an innovative program for families in high-conflict divorce that utilises the format of multi-family therapy combined with narrative, dialogical, and other perspectives from the family therapy field.
4. 'Reading' this program as an educational practice opens new vistas to understand some of its emancipatory potentials.

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A sustained, uncoercive rearrangement of desires with no guarantees, that is what I'm talking about.

(Spivak, in Sharpe & Spivak, 2003)

Conceived as something that parents *do*, post-divorce conflict is sometimes considered a form of parental neglect and, thus, a form of parental 'failure' (Barne & likestillings- og inkluderingsdepartementet, 2013; Smart & Neale, 1997). In recent years, programs for parent education or 'training' have become a favoured way for governments to implement general and more specific family policy agendas (Gillies, 2005; Hopman & Knijn, 2015; Widding, 2011). Typically, programs targeting parents in divorce involve a mix of curricular material containing information on child development, how inter-parental conflicts affect children, communication skills, and group discussion and practical exercises relevant to the topics introduced (Jerwell et al., 2017; Kramer et al., 1998). Such programs are generally considered to be effective. For instance, comparing two different versions of 'The Children First Program,' Jerwell et al. (2017) found that providing parents with information regarding the effects of divorce on children, conflict resolution, and communication led to increased scores for parents on a questionnaire measuring knowledge, attitudes, and likelihood of adaptive co-parenting. Adding explicit training in adaptive co-parenting behaviours (e.g., role play) further increased such scores.

Several authors have argued that there is an educational element in all forms of psychotherapy. Frank and Frank (1993) refer to the therapist's role as 'a teacher who provides new information in an interpersonal context that enables the patient to profit from it' (p. 45). Haley (1996) states that '[w]hen a therapist educates a client, the premise is that the person lacks knowledge about something or does not know how to behave' (p. 105). In the case of post-divorce conflicts, the idea that the successful transfer of knowledge and skills should be considered the desired outcome of any educational or therapeutic intervention, in every case, might seem attractive and evident at first glance. However, approaching the educational ambition of programs for parents in post-divorce conflict only in terms of the explicit content they cover, or their potential for producing measurable behavioural change, risks reducing the process of what goes on merely to a question of *learning*. This shrouds what we might call the *existential* side of parenthood: being a parent is not primarily a domain of knowledge – a question of 'getting it right' (although this can certainly be an essential part of it, see below). It is always (also) a question of figuring out what to do, and how to be, in response to the events and dilemmas that mark out one's own and one's children's everyday lives.

In the case of conflicts, this existential side might be said to be productive in the sense that it comes with opportunities to orient and (re-)connect individual subjects to what matters most to them. It also provides opportunities to confront social problems that might otherwise appear oblique or distant. Acknowledging that interpersonal conflicts carry with them such a potential to engage us as *subjects*, Christie (1977) suggests considering conflicts as peoples' rightful 'properties.' In other words, interpersonal conflicts primarily matter from a *first-person* perspective. When they are considered solely from a third-person point of view, that is, as general phenomena treated independently of any particular people, most of what makes them *matter* disappears from view (Bertelsen, 2021).¹ Partly in line with such an argument, Johnson,

Roseby, and Kuehnle (2009) argue that professionals' rhetoric sometimes promotes the growth of the same conflicts that it addresses in the hope of resolution or prevention. Through objectifying conflicts and turning them into questions about what is ultimately correct or just (Hampshire, 2000), institutional procedures always carry with them a potential for turning conflict into a primary phenomenon, severing its ties to the dilemmas and problems of everyday life that provide it with relevance.

In this paper, I explore one program for parents and children struggling with issues of post-divorce conflict, the 'No Kids in the Middle' program (van Lawick & Visser, 2015) as it is practiced in the Agder region of South Norway, looking for how particular practices, settings, and arrangements position parents in relation to social norms, each other, and their children, and to themselves as subjects of their own life. Ethnographic material from participant observation and interviews with parents, therapists, judges, and child welfare caseworkers who had worked with families who took part in the program form the empirical material for the study.

In the following, I give a brief overview of the 'No Kids in the Middle' program, before introducing the theoretical perspectives used as an analytical frame for the study. Next, I discuss my engagement with the practice and the methods used in the research. I then explore the local practicing of the program in the Agder region of South Norway, using data from fieldnotes and interviews. Finally, I provide a discussion highlighting how including the first-person, or existential, dimension when exploring the merits of programs such as 'No Kids in the Middle' makes visible some essential aspects of practice that might otherwise pass unnoticed.

The 'No Kids in the Middle' program

The 'No Kids in the Middle' program (van Lawick & Visser, 2015) offers an innovative approach to therapeutic work with enduring high-conflict divorce issues, utilising a multi-family group therapy format. During the past decade, the program has spread from its site of origin in Haarlem in the Netherlands to many countries in Europe. In Norway, it has been in use in a few locations (Høigilt & Bøe, 2021; Thuen, 2017). As the name indicates, the primary intention is not to steer parents toward conflict resolution. Instead, it is arranged to foster a more in-depth understanding in parents of the consequences that ongoing conflicts have for their children. Using experiential exercises and joint activities between parents and children, the program seeks to facilitate open dialogues about how to make the children's situation less hurtful.

Each multi-family group involves up to six pairs of parents and their children. These come together for eight bi-weekly group meetings lasting for about two hours. The program is not strictly 'manual-based', but a brief instructional document outlining a suggested plan for each of the eight group meetings has been developed. Parents' and children's groups are usually led by two therapists each. In parents' group sessions, therapists provide information, prompt discussions, give assignments, and initiate experiential exercises. Children's groups are more loosely structured but are focused on the general theme of being a child when parents are fighting. During the final sessions of the eight consecutive group meetings, the children present their parents with a collective formulation of their concerns, often as a creative or artistic performance. The parents respond by communicating to the children what they take with them from participating in the group.

The key normative principles underlying the model are that parents in conflict must be mindful of how conflict affects their children, that legal processes running in

parallel with the group must be avoided if parents are to be open to change in the therapy setting, and that parents and children need to be afforded a space where they are free to interact with each other. Drawing from systemic, narrative, dialogical, and trauma-informed traditions, the group format is utilised to facilitate different kinds of dialogues and dynamics than what individual or single-family therapy formats allow. Recognising that families' social networks can play a significant role in both preserving conflict and supporting change, families are encouraged to invite key members of their network to one or more Network Information Evenings held in conjunction with the program (van Lawick & Visser, 2015; No Kids in the Middle, 2020).

'No Kids in the Middle' is explicitly intended as a *therapeutic* program, seeking to provide dialogical spaces where parents and children can encounter each other and the impasses of their current situation (van Lawick & Visser, 2015; No Kids in the Middle, 2020). Relying more on active participation in open dialogue and exercises than on the transmission of knowledge and cultivation of skills, it departs from many other programs currently available for this particular population (see, e.g., Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). In the next section, I argue that approaching this program as an *educational* practice can illuminate some of its emancipatory potentials. To do this, I lean on a broad understanding of the purpose of education as found in the work of educational theorist Gert Biesta.

Education beyond learning

While it is common to consider learning to be the 'point' of education, Biesta (2015) argues that what distinguishes an educational situation from other situations has little to do with learning or any other readily measurable outcomes. Instead, he suggests, it is defined by the act of *teaching*, which he describes as the attempt 'to catch and direct the attention of another human being' (Biesta, 2020a, p. 2). While it is possible to learn about parenting in many ways (e.g., through trial and error, consulting one's own experiences from growing up, the self-help literature, TV-shows, talking with friends), what is unique about parent education programs could be said to be that they are designed to direct parents' attention toward specific issues of public concern.

Biesta (2009) suggests that education always works along three dimensions of purpose: qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. Qualification concerns the presentation and acquisition of knowledge and skills (e.g., knowing that parents' conflicts can cause trauma in children, or rehearsing cooperative co-parenting behaviours). Socialisation refers to the element of education concerned with the presentation of traditions and practices typical to a particular culture or society, including the norms and values that are part of those (e.g., orienting toward child-centred parenting practices, see Hennum, 2014). In public discourse, these two domains are often treated as synonymous with education. In the field of parent education, they certainly have an important place (think only of public information campaigns on issues like the dangers of belly-sleeping for babies, or the importance of breast-feeding). The subject position at stake here is that of comprehension, of 'getting it right.'

However, Biesta (2009, 2020b) argues that, ultimately, the most significant dimension of education is often forgotten – the domain of *subjectification*. By this term, he refers to the encounter between a subject and 'reality.' The subject position at stake here is not that of understanding the world, but of *responding* to it. Drawing on Levinas and Bauman, Biesta (2017a,b) argues that it is in the event of being called

upon by the other that my subject-ness – the fact that I am an ‘I’ – starts to matter. This is a question ‘about what we do and about what we refrain from doing. It is, in short, not about *who* we are, but about *how* we are or, more realistically, how we are trying to be’ (Biesta, 2018, p. 15, italics in original). Understood thus, what is at stake in parent education is not (at least not only) the acquiring of new skills or knowledge (e.g., communicating more effectively or gaining a better understanding of child development), or the realising of new identity positions (e.g., becoming a ‘mentalising’ parent). It is also, always, the question ‘What do I do now?’ vis-a-vis a reality that is not first and foremost known but *encountered* (Biesta, 2015). This process of meeting not only the world, but also oneself in relation to the world as something that is radically other, Biesta has referred to as what makes *the arrival of the ‘I’* possible – the realisation that ‘[t]he “I” has to be its own “I”, so to speak, and no one can do this for the “I” (Biesta, 2020c, p. 1018). In public discourse, what is collectively considered ‘good’ – in parenting as in any other domain of life – is something that, at least to some extent, is constantly in flux. History and democratic politics teach us that following tradition does not ensure that what is done is necessarily ‘right.’ Sometimes, what is needed is precisely the opposite – someone saying, ‘wait a minute . . .,’ refusing to go along with what is expected of them. Importantly, such a judgement can only be made by an ‘I,’ by someone willing to take the consequences of their own actions.

Building from Arendt’s (1977) claim that ‘[e]ducation is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it’ (p. 285), Biesta (see particularly Biesta, 2017a) refers to what is at stake for the ‘I’ in education as the question of ‘existing in and with the world in a *grown-up* way.’ By this term, he refers to the ability (or willingness) ‘to make and ponder the distinction between one’s desires and their possible desirability’ (Biesta, 2017a, p. 18). Grown-up-ness is not something we can learn or possess (nor does it belong to a particular age or developmental trajectory). It is something that is ‘always at stake and always in question’ (Biesta, 2017a, p. 15) when we attend to something that it is up to us to say yes or no to, stay with or walk away from, succumb to or try to resist. Thus, education’s existential potential is not concerned with teaching us what to think and do, but to *summon* us as (already) thinkers and doers (Biesta, 2017b).

Drawing on Biesta’s concepts, this paper aims to explore whether the educational ambitions of the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ program, as practiced in the Agder region of South Norway, should be understood primarily in the general terms of qualification (i.e., parents acquiring knowledge and skills) and socialisation (i.e., parents gaining a specific orientation and a set of norms and values), or if there were particular elements of the practice that seemed directed at subjectification, that is, bringing the ‘I’ of each participant into play.

Methods

Background and access

My first encounter with the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ program happened at a conference on dialogical practices in Leuven, Belgium, in 2013. There, the program’s principal architects, Justine van Lawick and Margreet Visser, held a workshop that I did not attend, but a good friend and colleague of mine did. I vividly remember meeting

him during a break between two conference sessions as he came out from the workshop, appearing both moved from taking in the utter despair of being a child or a parent caught in a situation of high-conflict divorce, and uplifted by what he described as the workshop presenters' creative and humane ways of engaging with this problematic issue. Upon returning home to Norway, my colleague initiated a collaboration between the family counselling service and the child and youth mental health clinic at the regional hospital to implement the 'No Kids in the Middle' program in the Agder region of South Norway. Eventually, this initiative resulted in three separate teams of therapists practicing this program in this region: two city-based teams (catering to a combined population of approximately 270,000), and one team serving mainly a more rural population (of about 40,000 inhabitants).

Holding a position as a psychologist and family therapist in both the family counselling service and the hospital-based mental health clinic for children and adolescents responsible for running the program, I followed the process of implementation from the sidelines. I did not participate in the training sessions for therapists (organised as several intensive workshops with experienced therapists from The Netherlands), but occasionally attended open seminars held for interested colleagues in conjunction with the training sessions.

In parallel with the implementation of the program in Norway, a large international multi-site research project on the 'No Kids in the Middle' program was planned. When the Norwegian engagement in this, at the university level, was stranded (on the grounds of practical and bureaucratic concerns), I applied for funds to conduct an ethnographic and qualitative study of the program as it was practiced in the Agder region in South Norway. Being an employee at two of the institutions responsible for running the program and being familiar with it through my previous encounters enabled me to quickly gain access to the practice. Not being a part of the teams of therapists working with the program allowed me to approach it with a relatively 'fresh' perspective.

Participant observation and interviews

I employed a qualitative and ethnographic study design (Creswell, 2007; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), following two separate multi-family groups at two different locations between February 2018 and June 2019. The primary method for collecting data was participant observation (Madden, 2017) throughout an entire run of one multi-family group (focusing mainly on the work with parents). I took part in all meetings in a parents' group run at a family counselling office in a city in South Norway (not the same office where I was employed myself) and sat in on therapists' preparation meetings and debrief sessions connected with each of the eight group meetings. I joined families in the waiting area, waiting together with them and the therapists for the group sessions to begin. At the end of the program, I sat in on post-group evaluation meetings between parents, therapists, and caseworkers from the referring child welfare services. During the observation period, I made extensive fieldnotes immediately after each session.

To supplement observational data, I conducted individual and group interviews with parents, therapists, and external referring professionals (judges and child welfare caseworkers).² Of the 20 parents taking part in two separate multi-family groups (the one I participated in and a second group conducted at one of the other sites), 16 agreed to individual interviews. To get their perspective on taking part in the program

after some time had passed, all 16 were interviewed four to six months after groups had ended. Additionally, in the second group, I interviewed eight of these same parents within the last two weeks before their first group meeting. This was to understand the attitudes and expectations they brought to the program.

I interviewed 12 therapists (representing the three different local teams practicing after the 'No Kids in the Middle' model) individually (three) or in group interviews (nine). To bring in perspectives from some of the stakeholders not directly involved in the group practice (Abma & Stake, 2014), I interviewed five child welfare caseworkers and three judges. These had experience either with referring families to the groups or working with families who had taken part in a group.

Interviews with parents were conducted either in participants' homes or at a family counselling office. Therapists, judges, and caseworkers were interviewed at their workplaces. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, similar to a natural conversation (Abma & Stake, 2014; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Interviews with parents and therapists analysed for this paper consisted of questions concerning each participant's experience with the 'No Kids in the Middle' group practice. Questions developed through 'progressive focusing' (Parlett & Hamilton, 1977), as I gradually became more knowledgeable about various aspects of the group experience from different subject positions.

Prior to recruiting and interviewing participants, approval was obtained from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD, project nr. 57881) and the Ethical Committee at the Faculty for Health and Sports Sciences, University of Agder. All participants gave their informed signed consent to using the data material for this research.

To organise the data, I coded the material using headings and subheadings demarcating particular areas of interest, progressing toward the construction of interesting and meaningful categories (Charmaz, 2006). Throughout the research, I continually re-examined the coded interview transcripts and fieldnotes, in dialogue with emerging patterns and ideas for possibly productive typologies (Madden, 2017). This process eventually led me to analyse the program as an educational practice and to use Biesta's (2009) three dimensions of educational purpose (qualification, socialisation, and subjectification), as an analytical lens.

Findings: Core Features of the Program as an Educational Practice

The analysis of interview transcripts and fieldnotes resulted in three key themes. First, all participants articulated a special concern for the children's situation. This concern was systematically harboured and conserved through several group practices. Second, the curriculum-based methods of dialogue, instruction, and exercises provided opportunities for parents to relate to how to be parents in a grown-up way in the situation in which they currently found themselves. Third, the time spent in the waiting room before groups, and events related to breaks and interruptions, seemed to be of at least equal importance in offering opportunities to relate to one's situation as did the specific 'curriculum-based' activities in group sessions. In the following, I unpack each of these themes in turn.

Negotiating the parent–child relationship: the kids in the middle

In interviews, parents said they hoped that taking part in the group program would improve their children's situation. Many hoped that their children would meet other

children in a similar situation to their own and that this would help them feel secure, be more at ease with being themselves, and find a safe space from where to articulate their concerns to their parents. However, many parents also worried that the group experience would be disruptive for their children, counteracting or postponing a return to 'normal everyday life' (as expressed by one father). Several parents articulated a hope that their participation in a separate parents' group (as opposed to programs exclusively for children) might demonstrate that they were trying their best and that their children would recognise the effort that went into this. Some of the parents who had little everyday contact with their children, or otherwise said they felt estranged from their children, expressed a hope that doing this group *together* might improve their parent-child relationship.

In interviews with judges and child welfare caseworkers, all expressed a hope that taking part in the group would help parents realise that their actions affected their children in negative ways. They articulated this through expressions like 'lifting their gaze,' 'letting things sink in,' and 'becoming aware of how one affects one's children.' Judges and caseworkers understood the group practice as relying heavily on experiential approaches and hoped this would make parents 'feel it in their stomachs.'

In the local practice setup, the children's position as the pivot point of the group process was symbolised in several ways. As part of the preparation for taking part in the group, each parental pair had been asked to contribute a picture of each of their children. In the room where the parents' group took place, the therapists had mounted these pictures on the wall. At the beginning of the first meeting, each parent was asked to present themselves by their given name and tell a bit about their children and what they enjoyed doing together.

Some therapists said they might sometimes improvise and place a children's chair in the middle of the room (if tension was building in the parents' group) and either sit on it themselves or invite parents to do so. They used this to remind parents that their actions and the emotional atmosphere between them were an integral part of their children's everyday worlds. The fact that the children were physically present in the building, parents seeing them before the separate group sessions, in breaks, and after group, also worked as a constant reminder of their presence in the situation. The dramaturgy of the whole group process was engineered to lead up to the final two meetings, where a large portion of time would be spent with parents and children together in two staged sequences. In the first of these, the children would present a collective message to their parents in whatever format the children preferred (e.g., as a slide show, a theatre performance, a film, a sequence of poems). In the next group meeting, parents would present a message, or a response, to the children in return.

Group practices: dialogue, instruction, exercises

In the parents' group, practices could be grouped under two broad headings: dialogue and instruction, and experiential exercises.

Dialogue and instruction. By dialogue, I refer to relatively open group conversations. When managing these conversations, therapists said they were conscious of 'asking forth' change, that is, what parents were presently doing (or what they saw happening) that was not the same as it had been before, and that they took to be a development in the desired direction. The following excerpt from a fieldnote depicts such a sequence:

The therapists initiate a round of situation reports among the parents – where are you at this point concerning the conflict? The first three parents report no change, very little hope for the future, and few ideas about how they could act differently. The fourth parent, a mother, says that she has seen some clear changes in how she and her ex-husband communicate and cooperate since they started in the group. When asked what she makes of that, she says that it is ‘strange, but nice.’ She speaks quietly, tears running from her eyes. Next up is a father. He also speaks about experiencing some positive change. He thinks that both his ex and he have managed to show some confidence in each other. He talks mostly about himself – how he has felt the need to be in control when it comes to the children’s belongings, how his ex and he probably see and experience things differently, and how they have been unable to acknowledge these differences as something other than maliciousness. He says that he sees this pattern in other areas of his life and that this is something he needs to work on – to risk letting go and let other people take responsibility for their actions.

(Fieldnote, fifth group meeting)

Providing space for such positive narratives was a key concern that some therapists articulated in interviews. At the same time, they were mindful of acknowledging the hurt and the sense of stagnation or impasse that many parents felt. In group conversations, they would dwell on issues that seemed to catch the group’s interest and move forward if an issue raised by the therapists did not seem to resonate well with the group.

Group conversations would often be informed by more formalised sequences of therapist-controlled instruction. Here, therapists would transmit factual or theoretical knowledge, like ‘the vulnerability cycle’ (Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004) or neurobiological theories about how inter-parental conflict might affect children’s brains. Sometimes, therapists would show a music video dealing with the issue of conflict between parents as a way to invite parents to reflect on their children’s situation:

The therapist turns off the T.V. when the music video ends. She doesn’t initiate a conversation but keeps silent for a few minutes before saying that they will now do an exercise with the aim of getting to know how children might feel when parents fight. She leads the group across the corridor to a different room, where they have already set out chairs in a circle around three small children’s chairs.

(Fieldnote, second group meeting)

Experiential exercises. Although not utilised in every group meeting, all participants considered experiential exercises a defining characteristic of the program. The therapists said they valued this mode of working as one of the group format’s unique features. Some of these exercises were elaborately staged, intended to induce particular sensations and provide opportunities to enact and reflect on problematic issues and behaviours. In their original paper outlining the program, van Lawick and Visser (2015) describe an exercise used in the group I took part in, devoted explicitly to letting participants experience how parents’ fighting might feel from a child’s point of view. In this exercise, three parents were assigned the role of children and placed on child-sized chairs in the centre of the room. To ‘play’ the role of parents, six others were divided into two opposing lines standing on each side of the seated ‘children’ and asked to shout accusations at each other. When the therapists subsequently interviewed the ‘children,’ they reported feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and emptiness, their sympathies leaning toward the parent that they perceived as getting the harder beating.

In interviews, several parents highlighted that exercises where they were placed in the children's position helped them understand more about what their children were going through. It also provided opportunities for experiencing oneself and others in unfamiliar roles. Reflecting on witnessing her ex-husband participating in various group exercises, a mother communicated her experience of 're-discovering' him as the father of her children:

Listening to what he had to say, I suddenly felt that "Hey, I know this man!" You see, when you have lived with a conflict for so long, it is difficult to see or even remember the things you once valued in that person.

(Mother, Group 2, post-group interview)

Others described such exercises as 'meaningless' or as 'children's games.' In the experience of one father,

It was like a theatre play. Fifteen people sitting in a circle, talking like child psychologists about everything we had to be mindful of when it came to the children, and "yes, of course," and blah blah. Like fifteen psychologists. . . . It was like a theatre.

(Father, Group 2, post-group interview)

Waiting, breaks, and interruptions

Pre-group pizza. The groups were held after working hours, and many parents and children would arrive for the group directly from work or school during the half-hour before the group was scheduled to begin. To make them feel welcome and to make sure no-one would have to start the group activities on an empty stomach, therapists offered pizza and lemonade for the participants to supply themselves with while waiting for the group sessions to start. In addition to the aspect of nutrition and hospitality, therapists described this setting as a way for parents and children to attune to each other if there had been little or no contact between them since the last time. One consequence of this arrangement was that all parents and children would have to relate to the time spent in the waiting room as an event, itself a venue of reciprocal engagement, before proceeding to the more structured and programmed context of the group sessions. Several therapists described this situation as providing an opportunity for children to see their parents together in the same room, which some children in the groups might not have experienced in a long time. 'If the parents manage to sit beside each other and not fight, for some children, that can be a nice experience in itself,' one therapist said. However, she also acknowledged that this was probably the worst part of the whole group experience for some parents and children, remarking that 'this is not your average pizza party.' Before the third group meeting, I made the following observations in the waiting area:

The initial pizza session passes as last time, with hesitant chatter. It seems like each family has found their regular place in the meeting room by now, even their personal chairs. The children who are present start together with their parents, getting their clothes hung on the coat stand and sitting by their parents for a pizza slice. When most families have arrived, a boy and a girl hesitantly step into the corridor, glancing through it lengthwise to measure if it is still suitable for running. I see the boy walking up to another boy of about the same age, whispering. Within 30 seconds, they start running. Soon, three or four kids are scrambling up and down, turning out the lights, laughing and shouting. A mother asks to speak with one of the parent group therapists as she enters (a bit later than the father and the children), and she and the therapist

disappear for ten minutes. Another mother arrives and notices that her kids and their father haven't arrived yet. As the time nears for the session to start, she asks one of the therapists if they have heard anything. One father sits in a chair, staring gloomily into the air in front of him, arms folded across his chest.

(Fieldnote, third group meeting)

In separate interviews, many parents described the waiting room experience as a significant part of their engagement with the multi-family group. Many found this sequence to be among the most challenging elements of the group program. One mother explained that:

I always came without my children, and I never knew when they would arrive. They were always between 20 and 40 minutes late. All the other children would ask me where they were and when they would come, and I had to say, 'You know what, I don't know if they're coming or not.' Once, they didn't show up at all. ... For me, that was an awful experience. Because ... when you sit there, in the waiting room, not knowing if your children will come or not ...

(Mother, Group 1, post-group interview)

A father described the period of assembling and waiting before group sessions as:

... exhausting. Because I ... I don't like to draw attention in a crowd like that. I'd rather be left alone. And the kids can sense that. But with their mother, it's the opposite entirely. So, you know ... the children flock to her, and everything is just all nice and dandy. For me, that was not a good experience. At times, it was right out painful. But after a few times, it loosened up a bit. The kids would come over to me and sit on my lap a lot of the time. Especially my daughter. So that was nice. But ... you can feel it in the ambience in the room. I don't think anyone wanted to be there.

(Father, Group 1, post-group interview)

For others, these sequences provided the opportunity to reflect on change vis-a-vis their conflict. One mother explained:

We would sit beside each other most of the time, or near each other, and ... the kids didn't have to dread the breaks, either. Some children seemed to find the pizza time and the breaks especially hard because their mother and father would sit at opposite ends of the room. But with us ... it was just very natural to sit together with the children, I think. That was never a problem. And that was ... in a way ... kind of a good thing to notice. I mean, that this was something that we managed to do.

(Mother, Group 2, post-group interview)

A second mother said:

I see him as a stranger in so many ways. Right? He has maltreated me, and he has removed himself almost entirely from my life. And that has been his choice. ... At the same time, it was peculiar to see him like that, because, of course, I know that he is no stranger. He is the father of my child. So ... at that moment, when we would eat that pizza, it was somewhat pleasant, actually. Our daughter would sit between us. That was nice. ... and I guess she must have appreciated having each parent on either side of her, for once. Her father even passed me the ketchup bottle once, I think ... and that was, like, wow!

(Mother, Group 2, post-group interview)

Breaks and interruptions. Apart from congregating in the waiting area before group sessions began, the fact that the children's group was held in a room just a few doors

down the corridor from where the parents' group was held allowed for the children's potential physical presence at any moment during group meetings. The timing of mid-session breaks during the two-hour sessions usually depended on when the children's group would take a break:

As the exercise session draws out, we can hear the children running in the corridor. When some children open the door to peek inside, one of the therapists says that this is a good thing; it is only natural that the children wonder where and how their parents are and have enough sense to check it out. He says that this often happens in these groups and that it is not to be discouraged.

(Fieldnote, second group meeting)

A few times during the eight group meetings I took part in, children would leave the children's group and knock on the door to the room of the parents' group, asking to speak with one or both of their parents. One mother remembered one such incident as the most significant moment during the whole program:

When my daughter knocked on the door and asked for her father to come out into the corridor, and he went out ... and I went out as well. I simply asked if it was ok for me to leave the room after he left, and ... it ended up being entirely ok for my daughter. Her father re-entered the group, and I stayed a bit longer with her in the corridor. That was ... in a sense, that moment made me feel like ... a mother. That is sort of ... what I remember best from it all. That I had the courage to do that.

(Mother Group 1, post-group interview)

In one of the last group sessions (the sixth meeting in the group I took part in), according to the 'No Kids in the Middle' curriculum (van Lawick & Visser, 2015), a ceremonial session where the children's group collectively make some form of performance or collective statement addressing their parents is staged. For this session, the children would come to get their parents in the room where the parents' group was held after the children had made the necessary preparations for their presentation. The children would then lead the parents down the corridor to where the presentation was to take place. The following fieldnote captures some of the tension in this situation:

When the group starts, it takes longer than expected for the children to invite the parents. There is some discussion, and some waiting in silence, the therapists having prepared for less time than what they end up having. When the children finally come to get their parents, a few of them immediately try to organise the walk so that they move together as a family. In other families, siblings split up and take care of one parent each. Together with the children's group leaders, the children have rearranged the meeting room where the children's group is usually held in an auditorium, with three rows of six chairs each. Several parents initially find seats far apart from each other but are called together by their children who invite them to sit one parent on each side.

(Fieldnote, sixth group meeting)

Discussion

This exploration of the practice of the 'No Kids in the Middle' multi-family group therapy program shows that there was much more going on than instructing parents in how to better deal with conflict. From an educational perspective (Biesta, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2020a, 2020c), the program appeared to not only facilitate the

transmitting of specific knowledge and cultural norms or developing particular skills. It also provided a 'scene' on which parents were repeatedly challenged and interrupted in their habitual practices.

Rather than highlighting issues relevant to questions about whether the program 'worked' or not in the sense that parents 'learned' what they came – or were sent there – to learn, or whether the children's situation or wellbeing improved relative to some dimension of externally determined criteria, the lens of education allows the illumination of some of the ways in which the issue of being an *'I'* (Biesta, 2020c), or of relating in a grown-up way (Biesta, 2017a), was raised and set in play in various practices in the multi-family group setup. Most of what went on in the parents' group sessions could be seen as ways of directing attention toward the children's situation – the pictures of the children posted on the wall, the themes brought up in group conversations, the placing of parents on children's chairs, and, not least, the final two communal performances where children collectively expressed their concerns and the parents responded. Interpreted as acts of *teaching*, these could all be seen as socialising gestures (promoting specific child-centred norms). But they could also be seen as ways to stage situations where parents could encounter the realities of their situation and ponder how to relate to them as facts of life. Understood in this way, these practices could be said to work as interruptions, addressing parents as the subjects of *their own* lives and denying them the 'comfort' of *not* relating to their own situation.

Seen under the light of education, such a group program might not primarily teach solutions but offer *resistance*. For many parents who find themselves caught in patterns of continuing conflicts after a break-up, the institutional and judicial trajectories available gradually position them in ways that let them 'know' each other in more or less fixed and stereotypical ways without having to confront this knowledge continually (see Johnson, Roseby, & Kuehnle, 2009; Kelly, 2003; Parkinson, 2011). Organised as an orchestrated sequence of repeated sessions, the group provided participants with opportunities to stumble upon situations where they would encounter things that did not fit the narratives they were currently living ('Hey, I *know* this man!'). Perhaps one could say that these issues were not always set in motion *in* or *by* the particular practices or exercises, but rather emerged in their wake. As the observations from the fieldnotes suggest, the 'noise' or interruptions surrounding the programme itself – the waiting before sessions, the constant possibility of being interrupted by the children, a knock on the door, an impulse to get up and leave the room, the surprise at discovering that one can sit beside one's ex and eat a slice of pizza – appear as perhaps the most critical aspects of the practice. Through interrupting identity formation, growth, or even learning, the educational element of such situations might be that they offered up a resistance to which parents and children needed to relate as *subjects*, as *'I's'*.

But this focus on existential affordances should not be romanticised to the extent that whatever would result from encountering resistance be considered 'good.' One father described his experience of the group thus:

There were no openings for personal stories or problems. That was considered as disturbance, provocation, noise. They just wanted to get through their curriculum; "Let's talk about how you communicate; now you shall write a common divorce story, together." That's when I said "You know what? I can't write that story. Not until I get

to tell my true story.”

(Father, Group 2, post-group interview)

Utterances like this indicate that far from all parents were happy with the program or judged the consequences of participation to have been altogether positive. Yet, the statement itself can be taken to express the workings of an ‘I,’ a refusal to go along with something in the face of the expectation to do the opposite.

Conclusion

In the paper where they outline the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ program, van Lawick and Visser (2015), write that, in their experience, in every group some parents and children find the group experience itself to be of significant help, some find it useful but will still be struggling, and some do not find it very helpful. Post-divorce conflict being one of the defining potentials of present-day parenthood (see Parkinson, 2011; Smart & Neale, 1997), laying claim to vast societal resources (Neff & Cooper, 2004), this is, in a sense, an optimistic and credible estimate when seen from the perspective of what it means, and *takes*, to subject oneself to such a program as a parent or a child entrenched in a prolonged situation of conflict. In interviews with parents four to six months after taking part in the program, I asked them what they remembered best from the group experience. The most common response to this question was for parents to say that they remembered instances of interpersonal connectedness and affirmation. One said that ‘hearing others say out loud what they experienced and how they would think, was for me . . . that made it possible to speak *my* mind as well.’ Another said that ‘what helped me was . . . just sitting there, hearing that other people had the same problem as me.’ Describing what she was left with after taking part in the group, one mother said that she had come to realise that ‘I cannot change the situation, even if I want to. But I can better accept that the situation is what it is.’

Treloar (2018, 2019) places high-conflict divorce in a life course perspective and writes that the fact that meaning-making is an ongoing process across the life course is currently missing from dominant understandings of policies and practices addressing high-conflict divorce. I believe that the perspectives made available through looking at practices like the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ program through the lens of education might contribute toward furthering ideas about what engaging as professionals with parents and children caught up in high-conflict divorce situations sets in motion. It might also help reimagine the goals of policies and therapeutic initiatives, to bring them into closer contact with the question of what is at stake in a situation of high-conflict divorce as seen from the standpoint of those whose lives it affects.

In this perspective, a therapist’s most important task when working with families in situations of post-divorce conflict is not to create a space in which parents can *become* free – as in being freed from ignorance through learning how to parent ‘better,’ or as in creating a ‘safe space’ within which family members can express themselves authentically. Instead, or in addition to these, the therapeutic setting importantly allows for creating an environment in which parents can *encounter* their freedom. This has nothing to do with fostering competencies or capabilities, providing answers, or suggesting solutions. It involves directing parents’ attention toward the reality of their situation and the question of what to do with it. More than inviting consideration of the specific activities initiated, therapeutic techniques applied, or issues discussed, this

highlights how a therapeutic setting can function as a venue where parents are summoned to attend to the essential question of ‘what to do now.’ This is not a question that can be answered from the third-person perspective of a curriculum or a treatment manual. It is a thoroughly existential question that can only be answered from the first-person position, articulated in a sentence beginning with ‘I will.’

Notes

- ¹ Christie (1977) refers to such processes of professionalisation in the handling of interpersonal conflicts as ‘stealing conflicts’ (p. 4).
- ² Originally, I planned to interview children as well. However, in informal conversations during participant observation, several parents were reluctant to consent to this due to the fact that their children had been interviewed by, in their opinion, too many professionals already as part of previous divorce mediations, court proceedings, or child welfare assessments. Acknowledging this, I eventually decided not to ask parents’ permission to interview children individually, apart from brief informal conversations with some of them during my presence as observer in the group setting.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Appendix A: approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data



Bård Bertelsen
Serviceboks 422
4604 KRISTIANSAND S

Vår dato: 26.01.2018

Vår ref: 57881 / 3 / LH

Deres dato:

Deres ref:

Tilråkning fra NSD Personvernombudet for forskning § 7-27

Personvernombudet for forskning viser til meldeskjema mottatt 19.12.2017 for prosjektet:

57881	<i>No kids in the middle - co-creating supportive initiatives for parents and children living with severe conflict after divorce</i>
Behandlingsansvarlig	Universitetet i Agder, ved institusjonens øverste leder
Daglig ansvarlig	Bård Bertelsen

Vurdering

Etter gjennomgang av opplysningene i meldeskjemaet og øvrig dokumentasjon finner vi at prosjektet er unntatt konsesjonsplikt og at personopplysningene som blir samlet inn i dette prosjektet er regulert av § 7-27 i personopplysningsforskriften. På den neste siden er vår vurdering av prosjektopplegget slik det er meldt til oss. Du kan nå gå i gang med å behandle personopplysninger.

Vilkår for vår anbefaling

Vår anbefaling forutsetter at du gjennomfører prosjektet i tråd med:

- opplysningene gitt i meldeskjemaet og øvrig dokumentasjon
- vår prosjektvurdering, se side 2
- eventuell korrespondanse med oss

Meld fra hvis du gjør vesentlige endringer i prosjektet

Dersom prosjektet endrer seg, kan det være nødvendig å sende inn endringsmelding. På våre nettsider finner du svar på hvilke [endringer](#) du må melde, samt endringskjema.

Opplysninger om prosjektet blir lagt ut på våre nettsider og i Meldingsarkivet

Vi har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet på nettsidene våre. Alle våre institusjoner har også tilgang til egne prosjekter i [Meldingsarkivet](#).

Vi tar kontakt om status for behandling av personopplysninger ved prosjektslutt

Ved prosjektslutt 31.08.2025 vil vi ta kontakt for å avklare status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Se våre nettsider eller ta kontakt dersom du har spørsmål. Vi ønsker lykke til med prosjektet!

Dokumentet er elektronisk produsert og godkjent ved NSDs rutiner for elektronisk godkjenning.

Vennlig hilsen

Marianne Høgetveit Myhren

Lise Aasen Haveraaen

Kontaktperson: Lise Aasen Haveraaen tlf: 55 58 21 19 / Lise.Haveraaen@nsd.no

Vedlegg: Prosjektvurdering

Personvernombudet for forskning



Prosjektvurdering - Kommentar

Prosjektnr: 57881

FORMÅL

Formålet med prosjektet er å utforske implementering og praksis i intervensjonsprogrammet "Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten". Programmet retter seg mot familier som over tid har levd med høy konflikt mellom foreldre etter samlivsbrudd, og består av parallelle grupper for foreldre og barn.

REK har vurdert at prosjektet faller utenfor helseforskningsloven (ref. 2017/2539 C REK sør-øst) .

UTVALG OG REKRUTTERING

Utvalget består av:

- barn og ungdom som deltar i tiltaket "barn ut av foreldrekonflikten"
- foreldre som deltar i tiltaket
- terapeuter som jobber i tiltaket
- medlemmer av familiens sosiale og familiære nettverk
- ledere av virksomheter som samarbeider om tiltaket (dvs. familievernnet, ABUP, barnevern og Tingrett)

Det tas direkte kontakt med ledere av virksomheter som samarbeider om tiltaket, og med terapeuter som jobber i tiltaket. Familier (foreldre og barn) og deres nettverk får informasjon om studien av ansatte i tiltaket på første gruppemøte. Personvernombudet forutsetter at frivillighet, taushetsplikt og konfidensialitet blir ivarettatt under rekruttering av utvalget.

METODE

Prosjektet består av to deler:

1. Deltakende observasjon i gruppemøter for én foreldregruppe og én barnegruppe
2. Fokusgruppeintervju med de ulike deltakergruppene. Informantene som vil delta i intervjuene blir bedt om skrive et refleksjonsnotat som vil være utgangspunkt for intervjuet. Notatet vil inngå i datamaterialet.

INFORMASJON OG SAMTYKKE

Dere har opplyst i meldeskjema at utvalget vil motta skriftlig og muntlig informasjon om prosjektet, og samtykke skriftlig til å delta. Foresatte vil samtykke på vegne av barn/ungdom under 18 år. Vår vurdering er at informasjonsskrivene til utvalget er godt utformet, men det må legges til at prosjektet er et samarbeidsprosjekt og hvilke institusjoner som er med, samt at gitte opplysninger vil bli delt med forskere ved Brunel University London.

BARN I FORSKNING

Deler av utvalget i prosjektet er barn og unge, og det er foreldrene deres som samtykker til deltakelse. Likevel bør barna få informasjon om prosjektet som er tilpasset deres ordforråd. Det er også viktig at barna og ungdommene får informasjon om at de kan velge å ikke delta i prosjektet hvis de ønsker det, selv om foreldrene

har samtykket.

SENSITIVE PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Deltakerne i prosjektet er familier som over tid har levd med høy konflikt etter samlivsbrudd, noe som kan ha innvirkning på deltakernes helse. Vi tar derfor høyde for at det kan registreres sensitive opplysninger om informantenes helseforhold.

GRUPPEINTERVJU

I gruppeintervju er det spesielt viktig å tenke på om spørsmålene er utformet på en slik måte at de kan besvares i plenum (f.eks. dersom det er snakk om veldig personlige eller sensitive spørsmål). Det kan noen ganger være relevant at de som deltar undertegner en gjensidig taushetserklæring.

OBSERVASJON

I meldeskjemaet er det krysset av for at personopplysninger skal samles inn ved observasjon. Personvernombudet legger til grunn at det informeres og innhentes samtykke fra dem som observeres, dersom det skal registreres personidentifiserende opplysninger fra observasjon.

TAUSHETSPLIKT

Terapeuter og andre ansatte som jobber med tiltaket har taushetsplikt. Det er derfor viktig at intervjuene gjennomføres slik at det ikke samles inn opplysninger som kan identifisere enkeltpersoner eller avsløre taushetsbelagt informasjon. Vi anbefaler at dere er spesielt oppmerksom på at ikke bare navn, men at også identifiserende bakgrunnsopplysninger må utelates, som for eksempel alder, kjønn, tid, diagnose og eventuelle spesielle hendelser. Vi ber om at dere opplyser informantene om dette i forkant av intervjuene.

Vi forutsetter også at dere er forsiktig ved å bruke eksempler under intervjuene. Personvernombudet legger med dette til grunn at dere ikke innhenter personopplysninger om enkeltpersoner som deltar på tiltakene, og at taushetsplikten ikke er til hinder for den behandling av opplysninger som finner sted.

SAMARBEIDSPROSJEKT

Dere har opplyst i meldeskjema at prosjektet er en internasjonal samarbeidsstudie, hvor Universitetet i Agder er behandlingsansvarlig for den norske delen av prosjektet. Personvernombudet forutsetter at ansvaret for behandlingen er avklart mellom institusjonene, og anbefaler at dere inngår en avtale som omfatter ansvarsfordeling, hvem som initierer prosjektet, bruk av data, og eventuelt eierskap.

INFORMASJONSSIKKERHET

Personvernombudet forutsetter at dere behandler alle data i tråd med Universitetet i Agder sine retningslinjer for datahåndtering og informasjonssikkerhet. Vi legger til grunn at bruk av mobil lagringsenhet er i samsvar med institusjonens retningslinjer. Dersom sensitive og/eller konfidensielle opplysninger skal sendes pr epost, bør de sendes i kryptert form.

PROSJEKTSLUTT OG ANONYMISERING

Prosjektslutt er oppgitt til 31.08.2025. Det fremgår av meldeskjema/informasjonskrav at dere vil anonymisere datamaterialet ved prosjektslutt. Anonymisering innebærer vanligvis å:

- slette direkte identifiserbare opplysninger som navn, fødselsnummer, koblingsnøkkel
- slette eller omskrive/gruppere indirekte identifiserbare opplysninger som bosted/arbeidssted, alder, kjønn
- slette lydopptak
- slette eller sladde bilde- og videoopptak

For en utdypende beskrivelse av anonymisering av personopplysninger, se Datatilsynets veileder:

<https://www.datatilsynet.no/globalassets/global/regelverk-skjema/veiledere/anonymisering-veileder-041115.pdf>

Appendix B

Appendix B: Copy of evaluation from the Regional Committee for Health and Medical Research Ethics

Emne: Ikke framleggingspliktig
Fra: post@helseforskning.etikkom.no
Dato: 18.04.2017 16:00
Til: tore.d.boe@uia.no
Kopi:

Hei.

Viser til din forespørsel om fremleggingsvurdering for prosjektet "No kids in the middle - en kvalitativ studie av et tilbud til familier som lever i høykonflikt etter samlivsbrudd" (vår ref. 2017/826).

Formålet med studien er å undersøke foreldre og barns opplevelser og erfaringer med programmet «Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten», et tilbud som Familievernkontorene på Agder driver.

Komiteens leder vurderer at prosjektet ikke vil gi ny kunnskap om helse og sykdom som sådan. Det er deltagerens opplevelser og erfaringer med programmet som er fokus. Prosjektet faller derfor utenfor REKs mandat etter helseforskningsloven, som forutsetter at formålet med prosjektet er å skaffe til veie "ny kunnskap om helse og sykdom", se lovens § 2 og § 4 bokstav a).

Det kreves ikke godkjenning fra REK for å gjennomføre prosjektet. Prosjektet kommer inn under de interne regler som gjelder ved forskningsansvarlig virksomhet.

Jeg gjør oppmerksom på at konklusjonen er å anse som veiledende jfr. forvaltningsloven § 11. Dersom du likevel ønsker å søke REK vil søknaden bli behandlet i komitémøte, og det vil bli fattet et enkeltvedtak etter forvaltningsloven.

Med vennlig hilsen

Silje U. Lauvrak
Rådgiver
REK Sør-Øst
Tlf: 22 84 55 20

Appendix C

Forespørsel om deltakelse i forskningsprosjekt

Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten - samskaping av hjelpsomme tiltak for foreldre og barn som lever med høy konflikt etter samlivsbrudd.

BAKGRUNN OG FORMÅL

Formålet med studien er å utforske hvordan “Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten” oppleves av dem som deltar. Prosjektet har tre målsettinger:

- 1) Undersøke hvilke håp, ønsker og erfaringer deltakere i programmet har når det gjelder selve programmet.
- 2) Legge til rette for dialog mellom de ulike deltakerne.
- 3) Etablere beskrivelser av hvordan «Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten», slik det praktiseres på Agder, kan forstås.

Prosjektet er en doktogradsstudie ved Universitetet i Agder. Det er finansiert av Norges Forskningsråd, Familiekontoret i Aust-Agder og Avdeling for barn og unges psykiske helse (ABUP), Sørlandet Sykehus.

Den første delen av studien gjennomføres våren 2018, og er et feltarbeid i en foreldregruppe ved Familiekontoret i [xxxx]. Det vil si at jeg som forsker vil være til stede i foreldregruppa som deltakende observatør. Alle foreldre som har takket ja til å delta i denne gruppa, blir spurt om å delta.

Andre del av studien (høsten 2018) vil være en tilsvarende deltakelse i en barnegruppe.

I tredje del av studien (våren 2019) vil noen foreldre, barn, støttepersoner, terapeuter og enhetsledere bli invitert til gruppeintervjuer (et eget intervju for foreldre, et for barn osv.). Det er ikke nødvendigvis de samme som har vært med på observasjonsdelen av studien, som vil bli spurt om å være med på gruppeintervjuene. Det er fordi jeg ønsker å snakke med så mange som mulig av dem som deltar.

HVA INNEBÆRER DELTAKELSE I STUDIEN?

Du spørres nå om å delta i den delen av studien som er et feltarbeid i en foreldregruppe. Formålet med feltarbeidet er å forstå hvordan gruppene fungerer, og hvilke prosesser som skjer der – både i korte sekvenser i løpet av et gruppemøte, og langsgående prosesser gjennom hele gruppeprogrammet. Feltarbeidet innebærer at jeg som forsker er til stede på gruppemøter, og kan spørre om å få snakke med deltakere om ting som skjer der - underveis, i pauser, eller på telefon utenom gruppemøtene. I disse samtalen vil jeg enten ta skriftlige notater, eller spørre om å få ta lydopptak. Det vil ikke bli samlet inn informasjon om deg utover dette.

Samtykkesjema feltarbeid - foreldre

HVA SKJER MED INFORMASJONEN OM DEG?

Alle personopplysninger vil bli anonymiserte, og bli behandlet konfidensielt. Det er kun jeg som forsker og mine veiledere som vil ha tilgang til materialet. Underveis vil alle opplysninger, notater og opptak bli lagret i låsbart skap. I løpet av studien vil jeg skrive vitenskapelige artikler som bygger på funnene. Det vil ikke være mulig å gjenkjenne noen av deltakerne i disse.

Prosjektet skal etter planen avsluttes 31. august 2025. Alle lydopptak fra samtaler vil da bli slettet.

FRIVILLIG DELTAKELSE

Det er frivillig å delta i studien, og du kan når som helst trekke ditt samtykke uten å oppgi noen grunn. Dersom du trekker deg, vil alle opplysninger om deg bli anonymisert. Det får ikke innvirkning på ditt forhold til gruppeledere, terapeuter eller andre dersom du ikke ønsker å delta i studien eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Dersom du ønsker å delta eller har spørsmål til studien, ta kontakt med Bård Bertelsen, tlf 99271512.

Studien er meldt til Personvernombudet for forskning, NSD - Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS.

Samtykke til deltakelse i studien

Jeg har mottatt informasjon om studien, og er villig til å delta

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Appendix D

Forespørsel om deltakelse i forskningsprosjekt

Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten - samskaping av hjelpsomme tiltak for foreldre og barn som lever med høy konflikt etter samlivsbrudd.

BAKGRUNN OG FORMÅL

Formålet med studien er å utforske hvordan “Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten” oppleves av dem som deltar. Prosjektet har tre målsettinger:

- 1) Undersøke hvilke håp, ønsker og erfaringer deltakere i programmet har når det gjelder selve programmet.
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- 3) Etablere beskrivelser av hvordan ”Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten”, slik det praktiseres på Agder, kan forstås.

Prosjektet er en doktogradsstudie ved Universitetet i Agder. Det er finansiert av Norges Forskningsråd, Familiekontoret i Aust-Agder og Avdeling for barn og unges psykiske helse (ABUP), Sørlandet Sykehus.

Den første delen av studien gjennomføres våren 2018, og er et feltarbeid i en foreldregruppe ved Familiekontoret i [xxxx]. Det vil si at jeg som forsker vil være til stede i foreldregruppa som deltakende observatør. Alle foreldre som har takket ja til å delta i denne gruppa, blir spurt om å delta.

Andre del av studien (høsten 2018) vil være en tilsvarende deltakelse i en barnegruppe.

I tredje del av studien (våren 2019) vil noen foreldre, barn, støttepersoner, terapeuter og enhetsledere bli invitert til gruppeintervjuer (et eget intervju for foreldre, et for barn osv.). Det er ikke nødvendigvis de samme som har vært med på observasjonsdelen av studien, som vil bli spurt om å være med på gruppeintervjuene. Det er fordi jeg ønsker å snakke med så mange som mulig av dem som deltar.

Parallelt med dette, vil jeg følge noen familier, og fagpersonene som de samarbeider med, gjennom et forløp i Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten. Hensikten med det er å utforske hvordan det oppleves å ha kontakt med tiltaket Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten, og se på om denne opplevelsen endrer seg over tid. Det innebærer at jeg vil snakke med foreldre og barn i enkeltfamilier, med de som henviser til tiltaket (barneverntjeneste og/eller tingrett), med terapeutene som arbeider i tiltaket Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten, og med de medlemmene av foreldrenes sosiale nettverk som de selv inviterer til å delta i samarbeidet, på tre ulike tidspunkt: I forbindelse med henvisning, midtveis i gruppeprosessen, og etter at gruppeprosessen er avsluttet. Den informasjonen jeg vil samle inn handler ikke om sensitive eller identifiserende opplysninger, men om hvilke håp, bekymringer og dilemmaer de ulike involverte opplever underveis. Å finne ut av dette vil være viktig for å bedre forstå hva som er til hjelp, og hva som ikke er det, i tiltaket Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten.

HVA INNEBÆRER DELTAKELSE I STUDIEN?

Du spørres nå om å delta i den delen av studien som består av å følge et forløp gjennom deltakelse i Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten. Det innebærer å gjennomføre et intervju der du blir spurt om dine opplevelser, forventninger og bekymringer underveis i gjennomføringen av tiltaket Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten. Jeg vil helst ta opp intervjuet på lydopptak, slik at jeg er sikker på at jeg får med meg det som blir sagt akkurat slik det er ment. Hvis lydopptak ikke lar seg gjøre, vil jeg ta notater underveis i intervjuet. Det som blir tatt opp eller skrevet ned, blir sett på av meg som forsker og mine veiledere etterpå.

HVA SKJER MED INFORMASJONEN OM DEG?

Alle personopplysninger vil bli anonymiserte, og bli behandlet konfidensielt. Det er kun jeg som forsker og mine veiledere som vil ha tilgang til materialet. Underveis vil alle opplysninger, notater og opptak bli lagret i låsbart skap. I løpet av studien vil jeg skrive vitenskapelige artikler som bygger på funnene. Det vil ikke være mulig å gjenkjenne noen av deltakerne i disse.

Prosjektet skal etter planen avsluttes 31. august 2025. Alle opptak og fra samtaler vil da bli slettet.

FRIVILLIG DELTAKELSE

Det er frivillig å delta i studien, og du kan når som helst trekke ditt samtykke uten å oppgi noen grunn. Dersom du trekker deg, vil alle opplysninger om deg bli anonymisert. Det får ikke innvirkning på ditt forhold til gruppeledere, terapeuter eller andre dersom du ikke ønsker å delta i studien eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Dersom du ønsker å delta eller har spørsmål til studien, ta kontakt med Bård Bertelsen, tlf 99271512.

Studien er meldt til Personvernombudet for forskning, NSD - Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS.

Samtykke til deltakelse i studien

Jeg har mottatt informasjon om studien, og er villig til å delta

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Appendix E

Forespørsel om deltakelse i forskningsprosjekt

Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten - samskaping av hjelpsomme tiltak for foreldre og barn som lever med høy konflikt etter samlivsbrudd.

BAKGRUNN OG FORMÅL

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- 3) Etablere beskrivelser av hvordan ”Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten”, slik det praktiseres på Agder, kan forstås.

Prosjektet er en doktogradsstudie ved Universitetet i Agder. Det er finansiert av Norges Forskningsråd, Familiekontoret i Aust-Agder og Avdeling for barn og unges psykiske helse (ABUP), Sørlandet Sykehus.

Forskningsprosjektet består av deltakende observasjon i grupper, og intervjuer med deltakere, terapeuter og ansatte ved de virksomhetene som samarbeider om tilbudet Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten.

HVA INNEBÆRER DELTAKELSE I STUDIEN?

Du spørres nå om å delta i den delen av studien som består av intervjuer. I intervjuet vil du bli spurt om hvordan du opplever å ta del i tilbudet ”Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten”. Hvis du er villig til det, ønsker jeg å intervju deg igjen ved oppstart i gruppeprogrammet (hvis du takker ja til å delta i gruppeprogrammet), midtveis i gruppeprogrammet og etter at det er slutt. Hensikten med å snakke med deg flere ganger er for å forstå om din opplevelse av programmet og din egen situasjon forandrer seg underveis.

Intervjuene tas fortrinnsvis opp på lydfil, og blir så skrevet ut som tekst. Grunnen til at lydopptak benyttes, er for å være sikker på at det du sier kommer med, slik du mente å si det. Hvis du ikke ønsker at det gjøres lydopptak, vil jeg heller notere for hånd underveis.

HVA SKJER MED INFORMASJONEN OM DEG?

Alle personopplysninger vil bli anonymiserte, og bli behandlet konfidensielt. Det er kun jeg som forsker og mine veiledere som vil ha tilgang til materialet. Underveis vil alle opplysninger, notater og opptak bli lagret i låsbart skap. I løpet av studien vil jeg skrive vitenskapelige artikler som bygger på funnene. Det vil ikke være mulig å gjenkjenne noen av deltakerne i disse.

Prosjektet skal etter planen avsluttes 31. august 2025. Alle opptak og fra samtaler vil da bli slettet.

FRIVILLIG DELTAKELSE

Det er frivillig å delta i studien, og du kan når som helst trekke ditt samtykke uten å oppgi noen grunn. Dersom du trekker deg, vil alle opplysninger om deg bli anonymisert. Det får ikke innvirkning på ditt forhold til gruppeledere, terapeuter eller andre dersom du ikke ønsker å delta i studien eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Dersom du ønsker å delta eller har spørsmål til studien, ta kontakt med Bård Bertelsen, tlf 99271512.

Studien er meldt til Personvernombudet for forskning, NSD - Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS.

Samtykke til deltakelse i studien

Jeg har mottatt informasjon om studien, og er villig til å delta

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Appendix F

Forespørsel om deltakelse i forskningsprosjekt

Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten - samskaping av hjelpsomme tiltak for foreldre og barn som lever med høy konflikt etter samlivsbrudd.

BAKGRUNN OG FORMÅL

Formålet med studien er å utforske hvordan “Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten” oppleves av dem som deltar. Prosjektet har tre målsettinger:

- 1) Undersøke hvilke håp, ønsker og erfaringer deltakere i programmet har når det gjelder selve programmet.
- 2) Legge til rette for dialog mellom de ulike deltakerne.
- 3) Etablere beskrivelser av hvordan ”Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten”, slik det praktiseres på Agder, kan forstås.

Prosjektet er en doktogradsstudie ved Universitetet i Agder. Det er finansiert av Norges Forskningsråd, Familiekontoret i Aust-Agder og Avdeling for barn og unges psykiske helse (ABUP), Sørlandet Sykehus.

Den første delen av studien gjennomføres våren 2018, og er et feltarbeid i en foreldregruppe ved et familievernkontor. Det vil si at jeg som forsker vil være til stede i en foreldregrupp som deltakende observatør. Alle foreldre som har takket ja til å delta i denne gruppa, blir spurt om å delta.

Andre del av studien vil være en tilsvarende deltakelse i en barnegruppe.

I tredje del av studien (høsten 2018) vil noen foreldre, terapeuter og henvisere bli invitert til individuelle intervjuer.

HVA INNEBÆRER DELTAKELSE I STUDIEN?

Du spørres nå om å delta i den delen av studien som består av individuelle intervjuer. I intervjuet vil du bli spurt om hvilke forventninger du har til ”Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten”, hvilke erfaringer du har gjort i ditt arbeid tilknyttet tiltaket. Du vil også bli spurt ditt arbeid i saker der barn og foreldre lever med høy konflikt etter samlivsbrudd generelt, hva du gjør i slike saker og hvilke vurderinger du gjør underveis.

HVA SKJER MED INFORMASJONEN OM DEG?

Alle personopplysninger vil bli anonymiserte, og bli behandlet konfidensielt. Det er kun jeg som forsker og mine veiledere som vil ha tilgang til materialet. Underveis vil alle opplysninger, notater og opptak bli lagret i låsbart skap. I løpet av studien vil jeg skrive vitenskapelige artikler som bygger på funnene. Det vil ikke være mulig å gjenkjenne noen av deltakerne i disse.

Prosjektet skal etter planen avsluttes 31. august 2025. Alle opptak og fra samtaler vil da bli slettet.

FRIVILLIG DELTAKELSE

Det er frivillig å delta i studien, og du kan når som helst trekke ditt samtykke uten å oppgi noen grunn. Dersom du trekker deg, vil alle opplysninger om deg bli anonymisert. Det får ikke innvirkning på ditt forhold til kolleger, eller din institusjons forhold til andre institusjoner, dersom du ikke ønsker å delta i studien eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Dersom du har spørsmål til studien, ta kontakt med Bård Bertelsen, tlf 99271512.

Studien er meldt til Personvernombudet for forskning, NSD - Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS.

Samtykke til deltakelse i studien

Jeg har mottatt informasjon om studien, og er villig til å delta

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Appendix G

Forespørsel om deltakelse i forskningsprosjekt

Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten - samskaping av hjelpsomme tiltak for foreldre og barn som lever med høy konflikt etter samlivsbrudd.

BAKGRUNN OG FORMÅL

Formålet med studien er å utforske hvordan "Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten" oppleves av dem som deltar. Prosjektet har tre målsettinger:

- 1) Undersøke hvilke håp, ønsker og erfaringer deltakere i programmet har når det gjelder selve programmet.
- 2) Legge til rette for dialog mellom de ulike deltakerne.
- 3) Etablere beskrivelser av hvordan "Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten", slik det praktiseres på Agder, kan forstås.

Prosjektet er en doktogradsstudie ved Universitetet i Agder. Det er finansiert av Norges Forskningsråd, Familiekontoret i Aust-Agder og Avdeling for barn og unges psykiske helse (ABUP), Sørlandet Sykehus.

Den første delen av studien gjennomføres våren 2018, og er et feltarbeid i en foreldregruppe ved Familiekontoret i Vest-Agder. Det vil si at jeg som forsker vil være til stede i foreldregruppa som deltakende observatør. Alle foreldre som har takket ja til å delta i denne gruppa, blir spurt om å delta.

Andre del av studien (høsten 2018/våren 2019) innebærer intervjuer av foreldre før og etter deltakelse i et gruppeforløp, samt deltakelse i en barnegruppe.

I tredje del av studien (våren 2019) vil noen terapeuter og henvisere bli invitert til gruppeintervjuer. Det er ikke nødvendigvis de samme som har vært med på observasjonsdelen av studien, som vil bli spurt om å være med på gruppeintervjuene. Det er fordi jeg ønsker å snakke med så mange som mulig av dem som deltar.

HVA INNEBÆRER DELTAKELSE I STUDIEN?

Du spørres nå om å delta i den delen av studien som består av gruppeintervjuer. I gruppeintervjuet vil du bli spurt om dine erfaringer med og tanker om "Barn ut av foreldrekonflikten" Gruppeintervjuene vil bli dokumentert med lydopptak. Det er fordi jeg som forsker vil lede intervjuene, og derfor ikke få anledning til å ta notater underveis.

HVA SKJER MED INFORMASJONEN OM DEG?

Alle personopplysninger vil bli anonymiserte, og bli behandlet konfidensielt. Det er kun jeg som forsker og mine veiledere som vil ha tilgang til materialet. Underveis vil alle opplysninger, notater og

opptak bli lagret i låsbart skap. I løpet av studien vil jeg skrive vitenskapelige artikler som bygger på funnene. Det vil ikke være mulig å gjenkjenne noen av deltakerne i disse.

Prosjektet skal etter planen avsluttes 31. august 2025. Alle opptak fra samtaler vil da bli slettet.

FRIVILLIG DELTAKELSE

Det er frivillig å delta i studien, og du kan når som helst trekke ditt samtykke uten å oppgi noen grunn. Dersom du trekker deg, vil alle opplysninger om deg bli anonymisert. Det får ikke innvirkning på ditt forhold til gruppeledere, terapeuter eller andre dersom du ikke ønsker å delta i studien eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Dersom du ønsker å delta eller har spørsmål til studien, ta kontakt med Bård Bertelsen, tlf 99271512.

Studien er meldt til Personvernombudet for forskning, NSD - Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS.

Samtykke til deltakelse i studien

Jeg har mottatt informasjon om studien, og er villig til å delta

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)