DETERMINING THE ANTECEDENTS THAT LEAD TO HIGH CONFLICT
DOMESTIC DISPUTES IN COUPLES WITH CHILDREN

by

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ABSTRACT

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The aim of this research is to determine the antecedents that cause domestic disputes to devolve into high conflict domestic disputes in couples with children. Research in this area has focused on reactive interventions that occur once the high conflict dispute already exists, in addition to outcomes for the children involved in these disputes. However, current literature does not specifically focus in on the aspects that are present in high conflict relationships that set them apart from those who engage in the regular conflict that occurs at the end of a relationship. Participants included individuals employed as Custody and Parenting Time Specialists, who work regularly and closely with individuals embroiled in high conflict disputes. Using a qualitative, grounded theory approach, this dissertation develops a theory that identifies the antecedents that cause regular conflict to devolve into a high conflict domestic dispute. The study found that there were ten antecedent categories, which were then organized and condensed into three concepts that were either external or internal to the parties involved in domestic disputes: systemic influences, outcomes of childhood experiences, and relationship influences.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Every relationship has conflict. Whether it be a personal, professional, or romantic relationship, there is most often an element of conflict that arises at some point. Conflict in romantic relationships can be particularly complicated as these relationships may well lead to marriage and/or involve children. Romantic relationships also involve elements of interpersonal communication, interaction style, as well as past issues that may arise such as attachment style or difficulties with differentiation of self. Difficulties with any number of interpersonal or intrapersonal conflicts within the relationship can reach a level where it is damaging. When this occurs, it may be considered a high conflict dispute.

There are many negative repercussions of high conflict disputes for both the couple and their children. Fortunately, these adverse repercussions may be mitigated or avoided if the antecedents that lead to romantic relationships becoming high conflict could be determined. With this information in hand, counselors could better approach the couple and use specific interventions intended to target the issue or issues causing the dispute to be high conflict. For example, if the antecedent that leads to the conflict is interpersonal, or based in the couples' inability to communicate with one another, then a couples or family intervention may be best. If, on the other hand, the antecedent to the high conflict dispute is found to stem from the intrapersonal difficulties of one partner or the other, an individual intervention targeting the attachment issues may be most

effective. This information could even lead to more specifically targeted remedies that provide the early interventions necessary to avoid the negative consequences that arise when conflict escalates into high conflict disputes.

In this chapter, the repercussions of high conflict domestic disputes will be discussed, as well as how conflict applies to those involved in a domestic partnership. Domestic partnership is defined herein as a couple who is or has been married, is or has been in a romantic relationship, or shares a child or children in common. The impact of high conflict relationships on the couple and the children involved will be examined, as will the impact of these situations on counselors. The statement of the problem will be articulated, and the purpose of the study will be made clear. In addition to the research question, the methodology and definitions will also be addressed.

Background

Currently in the United States, approximately 40% of marriages end in divorce (National Center for Health Statistics, 2021). The conflict that leads to divorce can have a great impact on the individuals involved. They can experience negative effects such as anger, depression, anxiety, grief, hurt, shame, and guilt (Cohen & Levite, 2012). They can face various psychological difficulties such as lower life satisfaction, depression, and increased mortality risk (National Institute on Aging, 2011). Physically, there has been found to be a higher prevalence of cardiovascular disease for both men and women who have been in conflictual, disrupted marriages as opposed to those in long term harmonious marriages (Hughes & Waite, 2009).

For the children of parents involved in high conflict disputes, the stakes are just as high. The longer the child is involved in the long-term conflict of their parents, the greater the likelihood of long-term damage (Smyth & Moloney, 2019). Children of high conflict disputes face negative effects such as low academic achievement, poor conduct, difficulty with psychological adjustment, low social competence, and difficulty with self-concept (Amato & Keith, 1991). One study by Warmuth et al. (2018) found that destructive marital conflict of the parents can lead the children of the marriage to experience behavioral dysregulation, emotional insecurity, and various forms of psychopathology. Despite the best efforts of a couple to keep their conflict away from their children, the children are still present and aware, and may have to become more involved once the couple begins the court process.

When the partners are married or have children in common, the end of the relationship means that the couple will likely have to interact with the court system so that a legal end to the relationship can be determined. The couple must come to a settlement on issues of property, finances, and most importantly, issues related to the children. The Court relies on the Friend of the Court to assist with dilemmas related to children. To help the individuals reach a settlement, the couple works closely with a Custody and Parenting Time Specialist at the Friend of the Court to resolve issues of custody and parenting time so that they may come to a resolution that is most beneficial to all involved. For some high conflict couples, this dispute can be ongoing for a great deal of the child's life. The conflict in domestic partnerships clearly affects not only the couple, but those that surround them as well, leading to a great deal of distress and chaos for those in the orbit of the conflict.

Conflict in Relationships

The idea specifying conflict present in a domestic partnership as a separate theory was initially introduced by Hammond (1965). Hammond believed that conflict between two individuals should be viewed in a purely cognitive manner and should not take values or motivation into consideration. Deutsch (1973) took Hammond's work a step further to include variables that trigger the appearance of conflict between individuals. These variables include: 1) contact and visibility of differences: People or groups who have little or no contact with one another are not likely to get into a conflict; 2) perceived incompatibility of attitudes, beliefs, goals, values, ideologies, interests, and resources; and 3) perceived utility of the conflict (Deutsch, 1973). The conflict that exists between individuals in a domestic partnership similarly takes Hammond's theory of conflict on a purely cognitive level and includes concrete differences, incompatible goals, beliefs, ideologies, and values. Although the conflict between two individuals may include specific triggers, the way in which individuals behave and interact with regard to the conflict can vary widely (Deutsch, 1973; Hammond, 1965). Particularly in domestic partnerships, there are a multitude of feelings involved, complicating the conflict with strong emotions. Both individuals have a history and way of communicating that impacts the way that they each relate to and interact with others.

Today, experts recognize that conflict between two individuals tends to fall in one of two categories: interpersonal or intrapersonal (Brock & Lawrence, 2014). Interpersonal conflict occurs when individuals are unable to communicate with one another and is the actual interaction between the two. Hocker and Wilmot (1995) defined it as follows: ''...conflict is an expressed difference between at least two independent

parties who recognize that they have incompatible motivations, limited compensations, and who are aware of the other partner's interface in the pursuit of their aims" (p. 20). This can also be referred to as the tactics dimension, as it is the manner in which couples attempt to resolve conflict (Johnston, 1994). For example, the individuals in the relationship may both have the appropriate individual skills to function properly: secure attachment, clear differentiation of self, no untreated mental health issues, but may not have the ability or skills to effectively communicate with their partner (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Lampis et al, 2017). They may exhibit contempt or stonewalling in their interaction with their partner; they may criticize more than they compliment, and they may express more negative than positive feelings to their partner (Gottman, 1999). When this occurs, they may be displaying interpersonal conflict.

Intrapersonal conflict, on the other hand, is the conflict within oneself that any individual brings to an interaction with others. Brock and Lawrence (2014) defined it as the abiding vulnerabilities that each individual brings to the couple. Intrapersonal conflict can also be referred to as the attitudinal dimension, as it is the amount of negative emotion or hostility that is present within each individual (Johnston, 1994). For example, each individual in the couple may have the ability or skills to effectively communicate with their partner. They may abstain from behaviors such as criticism or defensiveness, and they may display an appropriate ratio of positive to negative interactions with their significant other (Gottman, 1999). Where they may be lacking, however, are in the individual intrapersonal attributes that help them to be stable, well-adjusted individuals, such as secure attachment, a high differentiation of self, and appropriately treated mental health difficulties (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Lampis et al, 2017). A high level of either

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interpersonal or intrapersonal conflict can cause a domestic partnership to rise to the level of high conflict.

High Conflict Relationships

When the conflict in a domestic partnership escalates to a certain degree, it can be considered a high conflict domestic dispute. The following criteria may be considered when determining if a domestic dispute can be considered high conflict: (1) the couple exhibits high levels of anger, hostility, and distrust; (2) they have difficulty communicating or may not be able to communicate at all; (3) there is a complete lack of cooperation between the couple; (4) if married, the couple has been enmeshed in the divorce process for a minimum of two years; and (5) if there are children involved, there is a high rate of custody litigation (Levite & Cohen, 2012).

Two prevailing characteristics that are present in high conflict domestic disputes are an insecure, hostile emotional environment, and pervasive, negative exchanges (Mutchler, 2017). These two aspects consist of multiple features. Within an insecure, hostile emotional environment, the following elements are often present: emotional reactivity, mutual distrust, a strong negative affect, a lack of safety, and triangulation (Anderson et al., 2011). Adding to these negative features, the following are present in pervasive, negative exchanges: aggression, escalation, pervasiveness, defensiveness, and a tendency towards all or nothing thinking (Anderson et al., 2011). The presence of these numerous facets understandably negatively impacts the members of the couple and causes a great disturbance to their relationship.

As one would expect, living in an environment wherein there are a number of high conflict elements present from one or both members of the couple can cause an

increased level of stress and other negative results. In extreme cases, it has been conceptualized as a traumatic experience (Bonach, 2009). Particularly in high conflict relationships, each partner experiences a traumatic impact stemming from the separation, which may include attachment issues, both partners blaming one another, and the inner conflict of each partner (Kluwer et al., 2021). Each partner may blame each other, believing the other to be at fault. This can lead to hostile attributions, with each partner blaming the other for escalating the conflict (Kluwer et al., 2021).

The conflict within the household is further complicated when there are children involved. Not only are children present to witness the hostile emotional environment, and pervasive, negative exchanges, but they have their own responses to their experiences (Mutchler, 2017). Children can undergo adjustment issues, emotional difficulties, behavioral problems, and social issues (Johnston, 1994). Their experience of their parents' high conflict dispute includes unhappiness, insecurity, and stress (Amato & Keith, 1991).

The other complication that occurs with children of high conflict domestic disputes is the intergenerational continuity of the behaviors that caused the dispute to be high conflict from the outset. As the children of high conflict disputes become older, they become involved in their own relationships, which may potentially lead to difficulties forming satisfying, intimate, stable, and trusting relationships with a romantic partner (Shulman et al., 2001). After experiencing the conflict of their parents, these adult children may be afraid of being betrayed, disappointed, or abandoned by their partner (Shulman et al., 2001).

Adult children of divorce experience the consequences of their parents' high conflict interactions across a variety of constructs, including interpersonal competence, emotional dysregulation, psychological well-being, materialistic orientations, and susceptibility to irrational beliefs (Radetzki et al., 2021). The fact that children carry this baggage through to adulthood further emphasizes the necessity to provide appropriately targeted early interventions with the parents. This would greatly reduce the ramifications of the conflict that have a great impact on the family, potentially for future generations.

High Conflict Relationships and Their Impact on Counselors

When counselors are called to intervene with families embroiled in high conflict situations, the individuals can be uncommunicative, antagonistic, and filled with rage (Scharff, 2004). Counselors working with couples or individuals in this situation often do not know where to begin to help the family heal. Depending on the antecedent that is causing the conflict to escalate to high conflict, either a couples therapy intervention or an individual therapy intervention might be the best option, or perhaps some combination of both. This is the case with clinical counselors, but also with family counselors employed in the court system, particularly with the Friend of the Court. These counselors may be in the position to have the greatest impact on these families, as they are working directly with the individuals and children involved in the conflict, and have the most access to the whole family. Since they are attempting to help the family come to a resolution, they are not formally conducting therapy, but are working in a more informal capacity. This can allow the family counselors to learn more about the contributing factors that may be causing the conflict to escalate.

There have been a variety of interventions that have been utilized with high conflict couples thus far. Once a couple chooses to enter the court system, interventions such as mediation or arbitration with a third party are options, and while they may resolve the current issues, neither gets to the source of the conflict and resolves the core issues (Lebow & Rekart, 2007). Either may resolve a financial dispute, or a custody disagreement, but neither mediation or arbitration can address the issue or issues that caused the conflict of the couple to escalate to such a high degree.

Integrative family therapy has been a popular therapeutic option for clinical counselors working with couples in conflict (Lebow, 2003). This intervention utilizes an integrative family systems framework wherein the counselor works with the family over time to resolve custody and parenting time disputes. Although this intervention has a biopsychosocial base, it integrates a number of aspects, including parenting skills, remarriage issues, and interface with the legal system (Lebow, 2003). While these are all important aspects to address with the couple and family in order to resolve the current conflicts that are present, there is a lack of focus on the problems or pathologies brought to the relationship by each partner. When the core concerns are not resolved, it is more likely that issues such as custody and parenting time will continue to arise and be in dispute.

Many other existing therapeutic interventions are based in reunification therapy and are focused on the triangulation that can align the child with one parent, which often results in alienating them from the other parent (Garber, 2015). Two common reunification interventions are behaviorally based. The first is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which focuses on modifying the maladaptive thoughts and beliefs about

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the rejected parent, and the other is based in CBT, but focuses on flooding and desensitization procedures (Garber, 2015). The other common reunification intervention is Family Based Reunification Therapy and is based in a family systems therapeutic model (Smith, 2016). Although all three models have demonstrated varying levels of success in reunification, like integrative family therapy, it does not address the core issues that are present within each partner in the couple that may have caused the triangulation from the start (Garber, 2015; Smith, 2016). The added knowledge of the antecedents that escalated the conflict would allow for the addition of interventions that could complement the current treatment options and could get to the core issues of the individuals involved.

To date there has been little to no research that explores what antecedents may be present that cause some couples to escalate to this high degree of conflict. If the antecedent(s) could be determined, there could be more frequent and targeted early interventions, which address the specific aspects that are causing the escalation in conflict. This could prevent couples from getting to the point of hatred and the inability to communicate, and could give counselors the necessary information to intervene in a successful and productive manner.

Statement of the Problem

The number of negative repercussions that accompany high conflict domestic disputes, both for the couple and for the children involved, are numerous and include the possibility of future generations being impacted (Radetzki et al., 2021). While there are interventions available for those entangled in high conflict situations, they do not focus on the heart of the issues at hand. Currently, the antecedents, or root of the conflict,

present in high conflict couples have not been determined. Therefore, counselors are not able to direct their interventions to any particular realm. There are a variety of potential areas from which the antecedents may stem, including interpersonal issues or inability to communicate (Kluwer et al., 2021). There may be issues rooted in each individual's childhood, such as attachment issues, or difficulties with differentiation of self (Fish et al., 2012). It is also possible that there are mental health diagnoses that may be present that are impacting the couple.

Without knowledge of the antecedent(s) that cause the domestic dispute to devolve into a high conflict discord, a counselor does not have sufficient information to direct specific interventions that may address the root of the issue. The difference between an interpersonal antecedent and an intrapersonal antecedent would modify the approach that a counselor may take with the couple. If the conflict between high conflict couples stem predominately from childhood attachment issues, for example, the intervention would vary greatly from a determination that the conflict stems from an interpersonal inability to communicate.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the antecedents that cause the conflict between couples to devolve into a high conflict domestic dispute. Counselors can benefit greatly from determining the antecedents of high conflict domestic disputes in their clinical work with couples and families. By ascertaining whether the antecedent is interpersonal or intrapersonal and where specifically the conflict lies can help counselors by identifying the area in which the therapeutic interventions must be directed. It would help determine whether individual therapy, couples therapy, or some combination of both

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would be the best way to approach the conflict. An interpersonal antecedent and an intrapersonal antecedent have vastly differing origins, and would require counselors to approach the couple in vastly different ways.

For example, if it is discovered that high conflict domestic disputes are caused by interpersonal issues such as difficulty communicating, an early intervention with the couple such as cognitive behavioral therapy, involving work on modifying reactions and responses to certain behaviors, may be most appropriate (Gehart, 2016). Whereas if the dispute is rooted in intrapersonal issues, such as attachment issues, a psychodynamic early intervention approach with one partner or the other, wherein past attachments can be connected to current behaviors may be most productive (Gehart, 2016). There would be notably differing goals between interpersonal and intrapersonal antecedents, making this determination necessary for early intervention and prevention.

Research Question

The research question for this study is as follows: What are the antecedents that lead to high conflict domestic disputes in couples?

Overview of Methodology

This study will use a qualitative, grounded theory design to attempt to determine the antecedents that lead to high conflict domestic disputes in couples. I will use purposeful sampling in order to obtain participants. Each participant will be contacted via email, initially to confirm their interest and verify that they meet the selection criteria. Following confirmation, each participant will be provided with an informed consent, as well as demographic sheet, and an interview will be scheduled to be conducted via Zoom. In-depth interviews will be conducted with each participant, using a semi-structured

interview protocol. Once each participant completes their interview, they will be asked to recommend another participant that meets the selection criteria. After each interview has been transcribed and verified, member checking will be utilized to verify the accuracy of the interview. The member checked transcripts will be coded using constant comparison analysis. The categories and themes that emerge will continue to inform future interviews, and the process of theoretical sampling will continue until theoretical saturation has been reached. At the point of theoretical saturation, a focus group will be conducted in order to obtain feedback on the developing theory. This will provide an additional means of member checking, using theoretical sampling in order to determine the members of the focus group

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this dissertation, the following terms will be defined as follows:

Antecedents – an aspect in an individual or in the interaction between two individuals in a domestic partnership that is present which subsequently causes a conflict to escalate to a high conflict dispute.

Custody and Parenting Time Specialist (CAPTS) – mental health professionals employed by the Friend of the Court who work with individuals in cases involving custody and parenting time in an attempt to resolve disputes and reach settlements.

Domestic Dispute – a disagreement pertaining to the issues of the relationship, between two people who are or have been married, have been in a romantic relationship, or share a child or children in common.

Domestic Partnership – a couple who is or has been married, is or has been in a romantic relationship, or shares a child or children in common.

Friend of the Court – an entity that works with the Family Division of the Circuit Court and offers mediation services, makes recommendations to the Judge, enforces orders regarding custody, parenting time, and child support, as well as collects, records, and distributes child support payments as ordered by the Court.

High Conflict – disputes that meet the following criteria: (1) the couple exhibits high levels of anger, hostility, and distrust; (2) they have difficulty communicating or may not be able to communicate at all; (3) there is a complete lack of cooperation between the couple; (4) if married, the couple has been enmeshed in the divorce process for a minimum of two years; and (5) if there are children involved, there is a high rate of custody litigation.

Interpersonal Conflict – conflict that occurs between the individuals in a couple that is caused by difficulty with communication or the interaction style of the couple.

Intrapersonal Conflict – conflict that occurs between the individuals in a couple that is caused by issues that exist within each individual, such as attachment issues or narcissism.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the background of high conflict domestic partnerships was explored, including both conflict and high conflict in relationships. The ways in which high conflict disputes affect counselors was discussed and an overview of therapeutic interventions was provided. The statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, and methodology were described and the limitations of the study were illustrated. All of these

aspects will play a part in the study that will attempt to determine the antecedents that lead to high conflict domestic disputes in couples.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In a recent study of marital satisfaction, 67.6% of couples responded that they were satisfied in their marriage, 13.8% reported being dissatisfied in their relationship, and 18.6% reported somewhere in between (Chen & Geng, 2011). While a certain level of conflict is normal in any marriage or partnership, dissatisfaction may stem from the amount or type of conflict present in the relationship. The manner in which conflict is handled is imperative to understanding how the conflict impacts the couple and the family (Goeke-Morey et al., 2003).

One of the largest determining factors of the healthiness or unhealthiness of the relationships is if the conflict is constructive or destructive (McCoy et al., 2013). Constructive conflict tactics include affection, problem solving, and support (McCoy et al., 2013). In other words, the conflict is a means to an end. There was a purpose to the conflict and there will be a resolution. Destructive conflict, on the other hand, includes hostility, anger, aggression, and emotional reactions (Goeke-Morey et al., 2003). This type of conflict can eat away at a relationship and cause it to degrade. The hostility, anger, aggression, and emotional reactions are all factors that are common to and cause a relationship to be considered a high conflict dispute (Levite & Cohen, 2012). This type of conflict can also negatively affect children of the relationship. Pursuant to family systems theory, the destructive interactions that cause the conflict of the parents to escalate to a high conflict dispute can spill over into their relationships with the child (Sturge-Apple et al., 2006). Given the great effect on the children, it would not be unreasonable to

conclude that the interparental conflict, especially a high conflict dispute, has an effect on the entire family system.

While high conflict disputes can be damaging to the family system, it is not clear why some relationships escalate to a high conflict dispute. The antecedents of high conflict disputes are also unknown. As stated in Anderson et al. (2011), "The extant professional literature does not offer a consensus as to precisely *what* occurs within these high conflict relationships nor what differentiates couples who engage in regular conflict from those who engage in high conflict" (p. 12).

In this chapter, high conflict as a concept will be defined and discussed, in addition to the research base. Outcomes and interventions will be examined, including both existing interventions and the necessity for a different kind of intervention. Both interpersonal and intrapersonal theories will be discussed, in addition to the potential antecedents that stem from each.

Defining High Conflict

High conflict has been defined in a variety of ways with regard to the nature of domestic partnerships wherein conflict escalates to an unmanageable degree. It often focuses on the outcomes of the dispute, including negative repercussions for the partners, children, and other family members included in the system (Anderson et al., 2011). A particularly antagonistic relationship between the partners is often present in high conflict situations, in addition to poor communication and the inability to negotiate solutions to their differences (Rauh et al., 2016). The parents often have difficulty seeing their children's needs as separate from their own, causing their children to experience the

anger and emotional distress of the parents. This can lead to the parents and children both experiencing high levels of aggression, anger, and distress (Rauh et al., 2016).

Lengthy litigation is often a defining feature of high conflict disputes as well, most often due to disagreements and disputes related to the children (Polak & Saini, 2018). The litigation can potentially last for many years after the initial separation, creating ongoing turmoil for all involved (Laletas & Khasin, 2021). A term that encompasses these types of cases is conflicted coparenting (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Partners with conflicting coparenting styles tend to experience intense and substantial legal conflict, high levels of hostility, and frequent arguments. Individuals in high conflict can also undermine or sabotage their partner's role as a parent (Johnson, 1994).

Literature Base on High Conflict

The research on high conflict domestic partnerships began in earnest in 1994, with the research of Janet Johnston, who attempted to identify the factors that are believed to contribute to high conflict divorce. She proposed a theoretical model that explained how each of the factors relate to one another (Johnston, 1994). The theoretical model explained that high conflict disputes can fall into one of three dimensions: the domain dimension, the tactics dimension, and the attitudinal dimension. The domain dimension looks at contextual conflict and consists of the issues in dispute, such as finances, custody, or property division. The attitudinal dimension, which focuses on intrapersonal conflict, refers to the amount of hostility or unresolved issues within the individual. The tactics dimension, consisting of interpersonal conflict, is the manner in which divorcing couples endeavor to resolve disagreements (Johnston, 1994).

Since then, research in this area has grown a substantial degree, expanding to solidify the factors that cause a relationship to be considered high conflict, and examining outcomes and interventions. The factors that cause a relationship to be considered high conflict were discussed in depth by Anderson et al. (2011), who used an extensive review of the research in order to provide more extensive detail to Johnson's (1994) dimensions. Anderson et al., (2011) also relied on their own professional experience, in addition to the professional experience of court professionals who have experience with high conflict couples. The outcome research primarily focuses on the children of high conflict relationships and discusses the short-term and long-term impacts of such conflict. The literature on interventions discusses the wide variety of treatments that have developed in response to high conflict disputes. They focus on rectifying the problems that have arisen as a result of the conflict. The following section will discuss the literature on high conflict disputes pertaining to outcomes and interventions.

Outcomes of High Conflict Disputes

There is sparse research on the outcomes of high conflict disputes for couples. The research that is available focuses on physical outcomes to the parents, such as risk of heart disease, increased drinking, and risk of death by suicide (Floud et al., 2014; Harford et al., 1994; Kposowa, 2003). The overwhelming majority of research regarding the outcomes of high conflict disputes focuses on the children involved. Based on a family systems perspective, parental conflict significantly impacts everyone within the family system (Bowen, 1978).

In a family system, the primary triangle is typically formed by the child, the caretaker who is most involved in the raising of the child, and the primary attachment of

the primary caretaker (Klever, 2009). In many families, this is the child, the mother, and the father. The third person in the triangle helps to reduce the anxiety between the two-person relationships within the triangle (Bowen, 1978). For example, if the anxiety between the mother and father relationship is tense and stress provoking, one of the parents may move towards the child in order to reduce the anxiety. In a high conflict relationship, the mother will often move toward the child, so that the relationship between the mother and child becomes the inside position, and the father is moved to the outside position (Klever, 2009). In terms of stability in a high conflict relationship, this creates a more stable relationship between the mother and child, and reduces the stability in both the relationship between mother and father, and child and father (Dallos & Vetere, 2012).

When a member of the partnership initiates a separation or divorce, the family transitions from a nuclear family to a bi-nuclear family, meaning there will be two households instead of one (Cohen & Levite, 2012). There is a shift from the family system including both parental and spousal systems, to consisting of only two parental systems. The systemic themes and patterns that are present early in the marriage or relationship, such as triangulation, are typically present to a much greater degree during the dissolution of the relationship (Cohen & Levite, 2012).

The impact of a high conflict separation, in addition to the already difficulty shift in the family system, can create a great deal of distress for the child. Not only are they attempting to cope with the great deal of stress that their parents are creating, but they are adapting to two parental systems and two households (Cohen & Levite, 2012). Children

in high conflict situations are more vulnerable to both long- and short-term issues as they move forward in childhood and adulthood (Amato, 2001; Radetzki et al., 2021).

Short-term issues for children including being at a higher risk for psychological, social, academic, and self-concept concerns (Amato, 2001). Children enmeshed in high conflict disputes present with lower self-esteem and more behavioral problems than their low conflict counterparts (Amato & Keith, 1991). They are at a higher risk of difficulty interacting with others, internalizing and externalizing disorders, and psychological adjustment problems (Shumaker & Kelsey, 2020). The most common internalizing behaviors are depression and anxiety, and the most common externalizing behaviors are defiance towards authority, aggression, and delinquency (Bing et al., 2009). Also found in children of high conflict disputes are difficulty relating to peers, conduct disorders, difficulty with authority figures, and antisocial behaviors (Bing et al., 2009).

Long-term issues of children in high conflict situations most commonly are related to their own relationships and psychological difficulties. There has been a positive correlation found between the psychological distress of adult children and their parents' marital discord up to 12 years after the divorce (Radetzki et al., 2021). Although adult children of high conflict disputes may not experience many of the externalizing behaviors that are often displayed in childhood as they are older and are better able to control themselves, the internal behaviors may continue. Their own relationships can be affected due to the tendency to use distraction based or avoidant problem-solving routines. Consequently, they are more likely to have recurrent short-term relationships, more likely to be divorced if they do marry, and less able to negotiate or compromise to solve problems (Radetzki et al., 2021).

There is a generational component to high conflict disputes. Research has found that a couples' conflictual divorce can have implications on the well-being of their grandchildren (Amato & Cheadle, 2005). This is true even if the grandchildren were born after the grandparents' divorce. This intergenerational impact may be attributable to altered family system and the relationships within that may never be attended to.

Even viewing the situation from a neurobiological perspective, high conflict disputes can have lasting effects, due to the influence of environmental factors on the child's psychological well-being. When the child does not have a sufficient bond with both parents, it can stall the necessary changes to the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus. This can lead to the child being less capable of learning from mistakes, less resilient in high stress situations, and less able to form bonds with others (Huppert, 2009).

Interventions for High Conflict Disputes

Given the negative impacts that high conflict disputes have on families, children in particular, it is not surprising that a substantial portion of the research has focused on interventions. Current high conflict therapeutic interventions typically fall into one of three categories: "1) parent-focused collaborative mediation and education; 2) child-focused interventions; and 3) integrative family therapies" (Shumaker & Kelsey, 2020, p. 26). It appears as though these categories cover a wide range of beneficial therapies that can serve high conflict families. The type of therapies that fall into each category, in addition to the shortcomings of these therapies will be discussed.

Current Interventions

The first category of high conflict therapeutic interventions are parent-focused collaborative mediation and education interventions (Shumaker & Kelsey, 2020). These

types of interventions are focused on the parents and aim to help parents get along and/or resolve their disputes. The first type of intervention often used with parents, particularly once they enter the court system, is education, typically in the form of a program that they are required to attend (Deutsch, 2008). These education programs aim to decrease conflict and therefore reduce litigation. The goals of education programs often include: a) improving co-parenting, b) providing parents with information regarding the effects of the divorce and conflict on the children, and c) working to keep the children out of their conflict and disagreements (Deutsch, 2008). There have been outcomes reported that parents who have participated in education programs have greater knowledge, improved skills, and greater parental satisfaction (Deutsch, 2008).

Mediation and parenting coordination are two other interventions that are often utilized within the realm of the court system. Mediation is when a third party sits down with the parents in an attempt to facilitation a resolution (Kjos & Oddli, 2018). It is typically conducted at a time when the family is in a transitionary period and is working to renegotiate and restructure their relationships. Although similar in structure, it can be distinguished from couples' therapy by focusing more on decision making and problem solving (Kjos & Oddli, 2018). Mediation has been shown effective to reduce the conflict of high conflict couples when the mediator focused on the following aspects: focusing on short-term instead of long-term goals, shifting the focus from relational issues to factual issues, and validating the perspectives of both individuals (Kjos & Oddli, 2018).

Like mediation, parenting coordination also includes the use of a third party, and occurs when the court appoints an individual to facilitate communication between the high conflict couple (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). This allows the court to designate

someone to resolve conflicts of the couple without the necessity to repeatedly come to court. The role of the parenting coordinator includes, but is not limited to, resolving disputes between the parents, helping to implement parenting plans, providing education to the parents, and in some cases, making decisions regarding legal issues that may arise between the parties (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). Parenting coordination has been shown to reduce the number of conflicts and allow more conflicts to be resolved outside of court (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007).

The second category of high conflict interventions are child focused interventions (Shumaker & Kelsey, 2020). This typically takes the form of individual child therapy. It addresses the outcomes that often result from the high conflict disputes of their parents, such as behavioral, emotional, social, or academic problems (Jordan, 2016). This intervention closely mirrors a traditional therapeutic intervention, focusing on the issues that brought the child into treatment. Taking this approach a step further is family focused child therapy (O'Gorman, 2011). In this intervention, the child's needs are given greater preference than the other family members. This can take a few different forms. It can include therapy with the child individually, therapy with the child and a smaller subsystem such as the siblings, therapy with the child and parents, or any combination of these options (O'Gorman, 2011).

The third category of high conflict interventions are integrative family therapies (Shumaker & Kelsey, 2020). These types of therapies traditionally fall within one of two broad categories: a traditional integrative family therapy (IFT) intervention, or some type of reunification therapy. IFT is a solution focused intervention that promotes that every member of the family should be included in the therapeutic process (Smith, 2016). It

includes all family members within the immediate family system, including mother, father, and all children living at home (Lebow & Rekart, 2007). The focus of this intervention is to set goals and refocus from problems to potential solutions.

Reunification therapy occurs when a distance has been created between the child and one of the parents, usually created by the child's rejection of the parent. The focus of reunification therapy is to assist the family in reestablishing the parent-child relationship that has been damaged (Baker et al., 2020). Under the guidance and supervision of a therapist, this intervention allows the child's stated preference to be honored, and the rejected parent's claim for reparation to be recognized. The family works slowly towards a relationship, and eventually the resumption of parenting time (Baker et al., 2020).

Section Summary: The Need for Proactive Interventions

The literature base on high conflict clearly demonstrates that high conflict disputes between couples can have a devasting impact on the entire family. Specifically, individuals in a high conflict relationship are at increased risk for a number of physical and mental health problems (Floud et al., 2014; Harford et al., 1994; Kposowa, 2003). From a family systems perspective, children of couples experiencing high conflict disputes are also at increased risk for a wide array of short-term and long-term problems. Short-term problems include difficulty interacting with peers and authority figures, increased antisocial behaviors, lower self-esteem, and academic concerns (Amato, 2001; Bing et al., 2009; Shumaker & Kelsey, 2020). Given the negative impact that high conflict disputes have on the entire family, much attention has been placed on providing therapeutic interventions for these families. It is important to note that evidence exists supporting the efficacy of these interventions. For example, parenting coordination has

been shown to reduce the number of conflicts and allow more conflicts to be resolved outside of court (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). Reunification therapy works to repair relationships that have been damaged due to the high conflict relationship between the parents (Baker et al., 2020). While evidence suggests that these interventions may be successful, it is important to note that they are all reactionary to a pre-existing conflict. The conflict has escalated to such a degree that a specific intervention becomes necessary, such as psychological damage to the child that requires individual therapy, or the inability of the parents to communicate that requires mediation. These interventions all respond reactively to the conflict that is present.

If the antecedents that cause conflict to escalate to high conflict disputes could be identified, then proactive interventions could be crafted that would reduce the conflict before it escalates, instead of reacting to it after it has already escalated. Proactive interventions could be specific to interpersonal or intrapersonal antecedents, and could work to eliminate the necessity for such a wide variety of reactive interventions by focusing on the core of what created the conflict. These targeted proactive interventions would reduce the amount of high conflict domestic partnerships, reducing the negative effects on the child and the taxing effects on both mental health professionals and the courts.

High Conflict Theoretical Base

While we do not know how high conflict develops in relationships, there are many helpful theories and supportive research that provide important information on possible antecedents to high conflict. The theories are important as they can provide insight to identify potential antecedents that may be the cause of high conflict disputes,

providing integral information that can later lead to the development of proactive interventions.

Interpersonal Conflict

This section will address the area of interpersonal conflict, including both behavioral conflict theories and emotion-based conflict theories. The theories of Gottman (1999), Birditt et al., (2010), and Levite and Cohen (2012), among others, address the way in which couples interact and provide a great deal of insight into the potential antecedents that may lead to high conflict domestic partnerships.

Behavioral Conflict Theories

At its core, interpersonal conflict stems from the inability to communicate. On a general scale, this can be most easily studied by examining the behaviors of couples. One of the foremost experts in examining the behaviors of married couples and how their communication style impacts their marriage is John Gottman (1999). Gottman has pioneered multiple theories with regard to couples and the ability to predict the longitudinal success of a marriage. His most frequently cited theory is The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Gottman, 1999). This theory specifies four negative behaviors that are the most detrimental to a domestic partnership. The Four Horsemen are: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Gottman (1999) states that based on the Four Horsemen, he is able to predict with 85% accuracy if a couple will not be successful.

The Four Horsemen. In developing the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Gottman (1999) examined the negative aspects of a marriage, and determined that all negatives were not equal. Some are much more detrimental than others. The Four

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Horsemen consist of the four most destructive behaviors that can predict the end of a

domestic partnership. The Horsemen tend to occur in sequence, starting with criticism

and escalating to stonewalling. Particularly in high conflict disputes, there is a great deal

of all Four Horsemen present, usually to a high degree. Although all Four Horsemen are

damaging, criticism is considered the most harmful (Gottman, 1999).

  Impact of the Horsemen on Marriage. The first Horseman is criticism, which is

believed to be the single best predictor that a couple will divorce (Gottman, 1999). A

criticism consists of both the content and the form of the statement, and occurs when one

partner implies to the other that there is something universally wrong with them

(Gottman, 2012). They often take the form of "never" or "always" statements and

generally state what the other partner does or does not do. Statements cross the line into

criticism when one's character or personality is attacked, instead of focusing on a specific

behavior (Gottman, 2012). When one half of the couple's character is attacked, it can

lead to feelings of contempt, which is the second Horseman.

  Contempt occurs when any nonverbal behavior transpires or a statement is made

that puts oneself on a superior pedestal. It can take many forms, but it most commonly

takes the form of mockery and contemptuous facial expressions, designed to make the

other partner feel small (Gottman, 1999). Other common ways in which couples show

contempt are hostile humor, insults, and name calling (Gottman, 2012). Contempt can

cause the partner on the receiving end to become defensive, which is the third Horseman.

  Defensiveness occurs in response to the contemptuous behavior of one's partner,

and is an attempt to defend oneself against the perceived attack of the other (Gottman,

2012). When one is being defensive, they may attempt to paint themselves as the victim

and deny responsibility for any problems that may arise. Common forms of defensiveness are counterattacking, making excuses, and denying responsibility. Defensiveness tends to escalate quickly, causing the disagreement to intensify (Gottman, 1999). Once the disagreement has spiraled out of control, couples often turn to stonewalling, which is the fourth Horseman.

Stonewalling occurs when the person being attacked withdraws from the conversation (Gottman, 1999). This can occur in many ways, including looking away, not speaking, and even leaving the environment. While men are more likely to stonewall, it can also occur in females, although much less often. Stonewalling most often occurs when the individual is feeling flooded by feelings as a result of the criticism, contempt, and defensiveness that they are experiencing (Gottman, 1999). Instead of participating in toxic and unproductive interactions, they shut down and disengage. Although the Four Horsemen consist of destructive behaviors, Birditt et al., (2010) expanded upon Gottman's theory to include other types of behaviors.

Despite the widespread acceptance of Gottman's theories, there have been critiques of his research studies. Most noteworthy is the lack of control variables and nonrandom samples (Birditt et al., 2010). Other notable questions raised are: (1) Gottman's desire to ensure that the selection of subjects covered an even distribution on a bell-shaped curve; (2) not accounting for or addressing any diversity that may exist within the sample; (3) gender-linked conclusions that assume that wives begin conflict discussions; (4) validity issues related to the determination of baseline physiological activity; (5) the reliability of the measures used, and (6) the use of a stringent covariance approach (Stanley et al., 2000).

Particularly with the Four Horsemen theory, Gottman (1999) only looked at destructive conflict behaviors and failed to acknowledge other types of conflict behaviors, such as constructive or withdrawal, which may also have an impact on the end of a marriage (Birditt et al., 2010). Since the way in which the conflict is handled has been shown to be more important than the content of the conflict, incorporating cooperative conflict behaviors would be a necessary aspect to examine (Bertoni & Bodenmann, 2010). While destructive behaviors play a part in predicting the end of a marriage, there is additional knowledge to be gained from examining other types of conflict behaviors.

Beyond the Four Horsemen. Destructive behaviors, as studied by Birditt et al. (2010), incorporated many aspects that were studied by Gottman, such as criticisms, contempt, and insults. As opposed to predicting the end of a marriage, they examined the implications of the couple's behaviors on their marriage. In response to perceived gaps in Gottman's studies, this study included the additional aspects of constructive and withdrawal conflict behaviors. Withdrawal behaviors included aspects of Gottman's Four Horsemen, such as disengaging and leaving the situation. Constructive behaviors, however, explored more productive conflict behaviors such as discussing problems that arise and practicing active listening (Birditt et al., 2010). By accounting for both positive and negative conflict behaviors, it provides researchers with the ability to investigate both unproductive behaviors that end marriages and productive behaviors that support long and healthy marriages.

Behavioral Balance Theory. Couple Conflict Types were developed by John Gottman (1993) to expand upon a previous typology by applying a behavioral balance

theory of marriage. Behavioral balance theory works under the assumption that marriages are most successful when there is a balance of positivity and negativity (Gottman, 1993). Gottman (1993) believed that 5-to-1 was the ideal ratio of positive to negative interactions. Gottman (1993) also developed a typology called Couple Conflict Types. Couple Conflict Types separates marriages into stable and unstable marriages, using the behaviors exhibited in discussions or disagreements between couples.

Within the stable marriage category, couples can be classified as volatile, validating, and conflict-avoidant. In the unstable marriage category, couples are divided into hostile and hostile/detached categories (Gottman, 1993). These categories allow Gottman to provide rich descriptions of the dynamics in both stable and unstable couples.

A behavioral balance theory was also used by Bertoni and Bodenmann (2010), who classified couples as satisfied and dissatisfied by determining the ratio of positive to negative interactions. This study differs from the Couple Conflict Types by shifting the measurement from the types of behaviors that the couples exhibit, to whether the behavior exhibited was positive or negative. By limiting the categories to satisfied and dissatisfied, it allowed researchers to examine the ratio more closely. They found that, while satisfied couples had a higher ratio of positive-to-negative behaviors than dissatisfied couples, a ratio of 5-to-1 was not necessary for a couple to be satisfied (Bertoni & Bodenmann, 2010).

Stable Marriages. In stable marriages, Gottman (1999) likened the ratio of positive-to-negative behaviors to an "emotional bank account" that gets filled up with positivity. As long as the couple maintains the 5-to-1 ratio of positive to negative, the marriage will remain stable. The way in which they fill their emotional bank account,

however, depends on whether they fall into the volatile couple category, the validating category, or the conflict-avoidant category (Gottman, 1999). Although the types of couples are different from each other, one style is not better than another.

Volatile couples are the most emotionally expressive and the most passionate of the three styles (Gottman, 1999). These couples freely express both positive and negative emotions, and maintain their attempts at persuasion during all parts of an interaction. They express high levels of disagreement, but they also express high levels of affection. Volatile couples value honesty and openness above all and are supportive of mutual independence (Gottman, 1993). The style from the Bertoni and Bodenmann (2010) study that most closely resembles this style is the cooperative style, which is depicted by using compromise, solving problems constructively, and negotiating collectively and openly.

Validating couples are more moderate in their communication style and ability to be open and honest with one another. They use the most persuasion during the arguing phase, or middle third, of an interaction, and negotiate or compromise during the last third of the discussion (Gottman, 1993). The emphasis in validating couples is on the companionship or we-ness in the marriage (Gottman, 1999).

Couples who fall in the conflict-avoidant relationship style minimize the importance of problems that arise and instead focus on strengths that exist (Gottman, 1999). They reevaluate and reiterate instead of expressing any persuasive opinion. Their goal is to agree to disagree, not to compromise or persuade. The study by Bertoni and Bodenmann (2010) also addressed this style, with their description being very similar to that of Gottman (1999).

Unstable Marriages. Just as in stable marriages, in unstable marriages the ratio of positive to negative interactions has a great impact on the relationship. In stable marriages, the ratio of positive to negative interaction is 5-to-1, but in unstable marriages, that ratio falls to just .8-to-1, with more negative interactions than positive (Gottman & Levenson, 1999). Unstable marriages fall into two categories: hostile and hostile/detached (Gottman, 1999).

The first category of unstable marriages is the hostile style. Hostile marriages involve many Four Horsemen behaviors, including defensiveness, contempt, and criticism. Each partner is focused only on their own perspective, with little desire or ability to see the perspective of the other (Gottman, 1999). They show one another little support and make little attempt at understanding. This style is very similar to Bertoni and Bodenmann's (2010) competitive style. When couples interact in a competitive style, there can be offensive behaviors, coercion, and violence between the couple (Bertoni & Bodenmann, 2010).

Hostile/detached couples are similar in many ways to hostile couples, but they do much less listening and much more avoiding (Gottman, 1993). They engage in many of the attacking behaviors that hostile couples do, but there is little emotional engagement and they are quite detached (Gottman, 1999). They vacillate between attack and defensiveness, all the while not getting too emotionally involved.

Emotion-Based Conflict Theories

Behaviors are the means through which conflict grows and escalates, but emotions are the basis of the behaviors. The deep scars of one's childhood can have long lasting repercussions and affect the way in which one reacts to their partner (Levite &

Cohen, 2012). The way in which an individual perceives the emotions of their partner also has a significant effect on how they believe their partner feels about their relationship (Sanford, 2012). If not dealt with appropriately, these emotions can cause one to act out behaviorally and negatively impact the relationship.

Object Relations Theory. When viewed within the context of couples and relationships, object relations theory states that early object relations become triggered when an intimate relationship begins (Levite & Cohen, 2012). The past informs the present, and these early object relations tell one what to expect in the new relationship, leading to unconscious expectations that may not be representative of what is actually occurring in the relationship. The expectations of both parties become idealized over time, leading to the necessity of both to be able to forgive their partner for not being what they originally envisioned (Levite & Cohen, 2012). The ability to come to terms with reality versus expectations and rectify that discrepancy within oneself is a good measure of maturity (Cohen & Levite, 2012).

Depending on how one is able to come to terms with the disparity between their expectations and reality, they will arrive at a point on a continuum, which stretches from mature object relations on one end, to primitive object relations on the other (Levite & Cohen, 2012). Mature object relations are also considered the depressive position. Couples who have mature object relations have greater individual autonomy and are better able to create a more equitable emotional system with their partner (Levite & Cohen, 2012). Couples who possess primitive object relations, which reflects the paranoid-schizoid position, have less personal autonomy and are unable to see the grey areas that exist in a relationship. They are only able to see their partner as all good or all

bad (Cohen & Levite, 2012). Couples in the depressive position are able to reorganize and renegotiate their relationship when issues arise, while couples in the paranoid-schizoid position end up embroiled in conflict because they are not able to accept that the person they love can also be the person who hurts them or makes them angry (Cohen & Levite, 2012). This inability to reconcile their conflicting emotions can cause couples with primitive object relations to feel flooded with emotions that they may not be able to resolve.

As the conflicting emotions of couples continued to be studied, it became clear that there were some limitations in the research samples. It became obvious that there was a lack of diversity with regard to the sexual orientation of the couples involved (MacIntosh, 2018). Upon closer inspection, a very small percentage of studies included gay or lesbian couples. Cultural and racial diversity were also lacking in object relations research. In many early studies, demographic information related to race and cultural identity was not listed or addressed in any way (MacIntosh, 2018). By failing to address sexual orientation and racial and cultural diversity, it severely limits the external validity of the research that has been conducted. More current research has corrected this limitation, but it still calls into question the ability to apply results of past research to the general population overall.

The Communication of Emotion. There are two types of emotions that couples tend to see in one another: hard emotions and soft emotions (Sanford, 2012). Hard emotions are typically viewed more negatively and include annoyance, irritation, and anger. Soft emotions are those which are deemed much more socially acceptable, such as concern, sadness, hurt, and disappointment (Sanford, 2012). These emotions can be

distinguished by how self-centered they might appear. Hard emotions are often perceived as selfish, while soft emotions are often perceived as selfless and vulnerable (Sanford, 2007).

The perception of hard and soft emotions within a couple are important when examining the conclusions that are drawn in response to each type of emotion. When one perceives a hard emotion from their partner, they tend to sense a threat and can respond with communication that is adversarial (Sanford, 2012). The lack of a soft emotion can also cause one to become concerned about their partner's lack of investment in the relationship. When soft emotions are perceived, however, one tends to view the issue as important and one that is able to be resolved (Sanford, 2012).

Sanford (2012) found that the more satisfied and invested one is in the relationship, the more able they are to accurately perceive the emotions of their partner. Interestingly, while couples were able to accurately identify soft emotions, they did not recognize soft emotions when hard emotions were also present (Sanford, 2012). This finding leads one to believe that when a hard emotion such as anger is present, a soft emotion such as hurt is not able to be recognized. This is an important distinction to understand when examining high conflict relationships and how easily misunderstood emotions can lead to conflictual behaviors.

Research by Kouros and Papp (2019) expanded upon this study and discussed the concept of empathic accuracy. Empathic accuracy is the ability to accurately perceive the feelings of one's partner. It is determined by measuring the difference between how one measures one's own feelings, and how one's partner measures their feelings (Kouros & Papp, 2019). The lower the score, the better the perception of feelings. This research

further developed the research of Sanford (2012) by operationalizing empathic accuracy and providing a measurable way to determine the accuracy of one's perceptions (Kouros & Papp, 2019).

Section Summary: Interpersonal Antecedents in High Conflict Relationships

High conflict partnerships consist of a wide variety of issues and create a unique storm when the negative aspects of the relationship converge and intensify. Although behaviors are most readily observed and are what must be identified, it is the emotions involved that must be understood. The ability to recognize Gottman's (1999) Four Horsemen and Bertoni and Bodenmann's (2010) relationship types are vital in being able to identify the conflict before things escalate. However, understanding couples object relations theory and Sanford's (2012) perception of emotions are just as important when attempting to resolve the conflict that is identified. Having a well-rounded understanding of the interpersonal aspects of conflict is a critical step in attempting to identify the antecedents that cause a divorce or separation to become high conflict.

After review of the theories that contribute to interpersonal conflict, potential interpersonal antecedents become clearer. Most revolve around the inability to effectively communicate. Looking to the theories of Gottman (1999), the couple may be engaging in behavior consistent with the Four Horsemen, creating conflict due to their contempt or stonewalling of one another. They may criticize more than they compliment, based on the theories of both Gottman (1999) and Bertoni and Bodenmann (2010), creating an unstable marriage. Or the couple may use more hard emotions than soft emotions, creating hurt feelings and conflict, as stated by Sanford (2012). All of the interpersonal

theories speak to many potential antecedents that can cause a conflict to escalate to a high conflict dispute.

While the interactions between the individuals are important to understand, it can also be the intrapersonal issues that each individual brings to the relationship that may contribute to the issues of the couple. These intrapersonal issues also have the potential to be antecedents that cause the conflict to escalate to a high conflict dispute.

Intrapersonal Conflict

Intrapersonal conflict can be defined as the internal conflict within oneself, or the internal root that leads to outward conflict with others (O'Connor et al., 2002). That root is typically created in childhood, when initial attachments are formed and differentiation of self begins to develop. Particularly in attachment, as will be discussed, early attachments impact an individual over their entire lifespan (Bowlby, 1982/1969). As one forms attachments throughout childhood and into young adulthood, family patterns begin to affect their development. It can have an influence on their ability to establish strong relationships with significant individuals in their life, take responsibility for oneself, and act with an age appropriate degree of autonomy (Skowron et al., 2003). Just as a parent plays the role of a safe haven for a child in a childhood attachment relationship, a romantic partner can provide that same emotional security in adulthood (Saini, 2012).

All of these intrapersonal aspects are important in domestic relationships, particularly when those relationships come to an end. Although the romantic relationship may have ended, if there are children involved, the parties are still required to interact regarding matters related to the children (Radetzki et al., 2021). If either or both of the parties have a low differentiation of self, do not have strong childhood or adult

attachments, or have a high degree of narcissism, these interactions will be difficult for everyone involved (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowen, 1978; Butterworth & Rogers, 2008; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The conflict in the family will increase and matters will remain unresolved, potentially for long periods of time. The ability to identify the source of these conflicts becomes important in attempting to resolve matters so that the family may move forward.

In examining intrapersonal conflict, as it relates to high conflict domestic partnerships, it is important to dissect the inner workings of each participant in the relationship. The early relationships of each individual should be examined, in addition to the development of those in the relationship. Both of these aspects play an important role in who they become as adults and how they interact within a relationship. Attachment, differentiation of self, and narcissism all impact each individual differently and affect how they interact within a marital or romantic relationship. This section explores these theories in order to gain more insight into the potential intrapersonal antecedents that contribute to high conflict domestic partnerships.

Attachment Theory

Attachment begins in childhood with the parent-child relationship. The relationship is important to establish how secure the attachment of the child will be moving forward in their life. As described by Ainsworth et al. (1978), internal working models describe one's attachment experience, which can be secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure ambivalent/resistant. This attachment type is carried with a person throughout their life and impacts the way in which they interact with and attach to others, including romantic relationships. A separate adult attachment theory was proposed by

Hazan and Shaver (1987) that examines the attachment between the two participants in the romantic relationship, outside of the parent-child relationship. Like childhood attachment, adult attachment functions as an emotionally secure base for the other person. This can become quite complicated, however, when parties fall out of love but the attachment remains. While adult attachment is most relevant to the high conflict domestic partnerships that are being discussed, childhood attachment creates the foundation in which all individuals learn to create secure relationships with others.

  Childhood Attachment. There are three facets used as the basis to establish childhood attachment: proximity seeking, safe haven, and secure base (Sutton, 2019). When children are securely attached, they become distressed when they are separated from their attachment figure, and are comforted when they return. This demonstrates strong proximity seeking. Safe haven is provided when children can use their attachment figure for their emotional needs. A secure base is afforded by the attachment figure when the child can venture out into the outside world and explore, but know that their attachment figure will be available when they are needed (Sutton, 2019).

  When children have a secure attachment, they are easily soothed by their attachment figure, use them as a secure base, and are confident that their attachment figure will meet their needs (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Children with an insecure-avoidant attachment are very independent and do not tend to orient themselves with their attachment figure. This is often due to the fact that the attachment figure is not available when the child seeks out comfort for emotional distress (Ainsworth et al., 1978). A child with an insecure ambivalent/resistant attachment is in many ways the opposite of an insecure-avoidant attachment in that although the child will reject the attachment figure,

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they show clingy or dependent behaviors. These children are not comforted by their attachment figure and are difficult to soothe (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

If one's childhood attachment did not allow them to feel secure in relationships with others, learn to regulate emotions, and view themselves positively, it is likely to be reflected in romantic relationships, manifesting as negative emotions associated with intimacy and romantic interaction (Lampis & Cataudella, 2019). Perhaps most important is the concept of a secure base (Saini, 2012). Both in childhood and adulthood, attachment figures act as a base for emotional security and provide comfort in times of distress and when needs arise.

Adult Attachment. The concept of adult attachment was first proposed by Hazan and Shaver (1987), who believed that many of the concepts in Ainsworth et al.'s (1978) attachment model could be applied to adult romantic relationships. The phases of attachment remain the same as in childhood attachment: pre-attachment, attachment in the making, and clear-cut attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Adult attachment is most interesting to researchers in that it can provide insights to both individual difference patterns and normative processes in adult romantic relationships (Fagundes & Schindler, 2012). There were three grounds proposed that distinguished adult attachment from other adult relationships (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). First, that some distress is experienced when the person is separated from the attachment figure and the figure is used as a target of proximity maintenance. Second, the attachment figure is a safe haven for the person, particularly when the individual is sick, in danger, or otherwise in distress. Third, the person has feelings of confidence and security in the attachment figure and acts as a secure base for the person to explore (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Most interestingly, these

attachment features can be transferred from one attachment figure to another, and take an average of two years to develop (Fagundes & Schindler, 2012).

 Internal Working Models. Like in Ainsworth et al.'s (1978) childhood attachment model, Hazan and Shaver (1987) developed an internal working model of adult attachment. Although the adult attachment styles' names differ slightly from the childhood attachment model, in essence they incorporate the same aspects. Adult attachment styles include secure, insecure anxious, and insecure avoidant (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

 As in childhood attachment, the first category of adult attachment is secure. Individuals with a secure adult attachment are able to easily trust their partner, have a high level of comfort with intimacy, and a higher level of commitment to the marriage (Sutton, 2019). They are comfortable depending on their romantic partners (Shaver et al., 2000). The higher level of trust, commitment, and comfort with intimacy leads to less infidelity in the marriage as compared with insecure attachments (Fish et al., 2012).

 The second category of adult attachment varies slightly from childhood attachment and is an insecure anxious attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Those with an insecure anxious attachment are hypervigilant and have an intense fear of abandonment. They can be demanding of their partner and tend to increase their proximity to their attachment figure in response to stress (Lampis & Cataudella, 2019). Individuals with an insecure anxious attachment lack conflict management skill and therefore have difficulty coping when conflict presents itself (Sutton, 2019). Due to the anxious nature of their attachment, they spend a great deal of time seeking out the support of their partner and express more anger when the support is not received (Nisenbaum & Lopez, 2015).

The third category of adult attachment also varies slightly from the childhood attachment categories and is an insecure avoidant attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Unlike an insecure anxious attachment, who fears abandonment, an individual with an insecure avoidant attachment fears intimacy and a close relationship. Their interaction with others can include aggression, hostility, and anger, which in turn can lead to conflict in their relationships (Sutton, 2019). Due to the fact that individuals with an insecure avoidant attachment style fear intimacy and closeness, they tend to not be accommodating to others and suppress any potential displays of emotion (Nisenbaum & Lopez, 2015). They are overall uncomfortable with closeness and attempt to minimize emotions or dependence when faced with stress (Lampis & Cataudella, 2019).

Attachment Theory's Impact on Domestic Partnerships. One of the most difficult aspects of a couple separating or divorcing is that while the parties may no longer love one another, their attachment remains. The attachment, along with the anger and hurt that accompany the end of a relationship, can lead to a complicated set of issues for the parties involved. Regardless of what existed in the relationship objectively, both individuals may still experience a profound sense of confusion and sadness (Weiss, 1991). Individuals traditionally only have a few attachments of significance throughout their life, and there is understandably a great deal of distress when those attachments are lost (Saini, 2012).

Particularly with proximity seeking and relying on their partner for emotional support, either member of the couple may begin to demonstrate maladaptive behaviors when their attachment figure is removed (Saini, 2012). This may lead to a high degree of conflict in the couple, especially if either of the individuals are unable to recognize their

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attachment needs. When this occurs, the negative emotional patterns and behaviors will persist (Saini, 2012). The lack of self-awareness of their attachment experience and loss of strong emotional bonds can lead to high-conflict interactions and a great deal of fear and anger in the couple.

Differentiation of Self

Just as attachment provides a foundation upon which relationships can be built, differentiation of self adds to that foundation, as both are universal developmental targets. Differentiation of self can be defined as one's ability to integrate and distinguish between the intellectual and emotional aspects of one's personality, or in other words, the ability to balance emotion and logic (Lampis et al., 2017). In a romantic relationship, differentiation of self is important because due to the effect that differentiation of self has on conflict management styles, it can have a great impact on co-parental relations and parental functioning (Baum & Shnit, 2005).

High Self-Differentiation. When an individual has a high level of self-differentiation, their thoughts and emotions work in tandem. Couples who have a high level of self-differentiation report that they have less relational conflict and are more satisfied with their relationships than those with low self-differentiation (Lampis, 2016). They are able to appropriately express their emotions and not act on every impulse. They are also flexible in responding to stress and have high levels of self-control and responsibility (Baum & Shnit, 2005). Individuals with a high level of self-differentiation can develop intimate, emotional relationships, but still remain independent within them (Lampis et al., 2017).

In having a higher degree of autonomy, individuals with high self-differentiation are more easily able to separate themselves from others and therefore become less fused with their partner or spouse. Due to this, when marital conflict arises in couples with high self-differentiation, they find it easier to psychologically separate themselves from their partner or spouse. They can redefine their parental role as an individual parent and not one half of a team, and are able to view their parental role as separate from their partner or spousal role (Baum & Shnit, 2005).

Low Self-Differentiation. When an individual has a low level of self-differentiation, there can be two potential outcomes. Either their emotions overpower their thoughts, or their thoughts displace their emotions (Bowen, 1978). The inability of thoughts and feelings to work in tandem in those with low self-differentiation can lead to one of two automatic responses. They may either have a highly emotional impulsive response, or they may have a very unemotional intellectual response (Baum & Shnit, 2005).

Individuals with low self-differentiation tend to fuse with others and have a high degree of dependency on their partner or spouse. When fused, individuals attempt to adopt the attitudes and values of their partner or spouse by prioritizing the other's needs, often at the expense of themselves (Lampis et al., 2017). This can lead to marital conflict when partners either act out emotionally or aggressively. Alternatively, they may act out extremely intellectually and absent of any emotion. Due to this, and the tendency of those with low self-differentiation to experience people as hostile, it can promote conflict as opposed to cooperation (Baum & Shnit, 2005).

Emotional Reactivity and the I-Position. Differentiation of self is based in Bowen's Family Systems Theory (1978). Bowen's theory led to research indicating that higher differentiation of self is correlated with lower psychological distress (Rodriguez-Gonzalez et al., 2019). Differentiation is characterized by both interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions. Interpersonal dimensions of self-differentiation include fusion with others and emotional cutoff (Lampis & Cataudella, 2019). These two aspects focus on the ability of an individual to maintain a balance between autonomy and dependency on others. This includes the ability to experience intimacy in relationships while maintaining enough of a sense of self to not become fused with a partner, or feel as though complete emotional cutoff is necessary (Skowron et al., 2003).

For the purpose of this section, focus will be on the intrapersonal dimension of Bowen's theory, which consists of emotional reactivity and taking an I-position (Lampis et al., 2017). In the intrapersonal dimension, individuals with a high level of self-differentiation are less emotionally reactive, and are more comfortable with experiencing, modulating, and reflecting on their emotions (Skowron et al., 2003).

Emotional Reactivity. In individuals with high self-differentiation, there is often a low level of emotional reactivity. When high emotional reactivity is present, there is a tendency to respond to stimuli in the environment in an overly emotional manner, which can cause an individual to become emotionally flooded (Rodriguez-Gonzalez et al., 2019). It is believed that those with lower emotional reactivity are better able to remain calm when life stressors and uncertainty present themselves (Skowron et al., 2003). They are able to take stressors in stride and cope with them appropriately. Individuals with high levels of emotional reactivity, however, tend to allow their emotions to easily

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overwhelm them and experience a greater amount of psychological distress (Skowron et al., 2003). As it relates to attachment, it has been suggested that emotional reactivity may be a learned activity resulting from anxious-ambivalent parenting (Lampis & Cataudella, 2019).

The emotional overreaction to both external and internal stressors can negatively impact interactions with others and lead to dysfunction within romantic relationships (Rodriguez-Gonzalez et al., 2019). When a partner is exhibiting high emotions, it is difficult for someone with high emotional reactivity to remain calm and maintain a rational reaction. Additionally, due to the mutual aspect of relationships, there is the potential for both parties to have high emotional reactivity.

I-Position. The other aspect of the intrapersonal dimension of Bowen's (1978) theory is the I-position. The I-position is the ability to remain calm in the face of conflict and negotiate compromises (Lampis et al., 2017). Those with a strong I-position are able to maintain a firm sense of self and adhere to their own beliefs and opinions (Skowron et al., 2003). Individuals with a strong I-position have the willingness to express their own positions and values within their intimate relationships, but also to allow their partner room to claim their own positions and values (Stapley & Murdock, 2020). They are able to keep a firm boundary between "I" and "we," preventing any fusion from occurring with their relationship partner and maintaining a high level of differentiation.

The flexibility afforded to those with a strong I-position allows them to feel firm in their knowledge and judgment, which in turn helps to keep them autonomous and independent. When an individual does not have a strong I-position, they have a strong likelihood of becoming fused with their partner, as they are so dependent on someone

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other than themselves they have less ability to function in stressful situations, thus creating a great potential for conflict (Lampis et al., 2017).

Differentiation of Self's Impact on Domestic Partnerships. Higher levels of self-differentiation are associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction, in addition to lower levels of relational issues and psychological distress (Stapley & Murdock, 2020). It has also been associated with better romantic quality of the relationship, improved marital adjustment, and increased sexual communication (Dell'Isola et al., 2019). A great deal of conflict within a romantic relationship can stem from the tensions that originate from negotiating separateness and togetherness (Stapley & Murdock, 2020). Accordingly, couples who both have similar levels of high self-differentiation will have less conflict and an easier time negotiating both joint and separate ventures.

When self-differentiation is low in a couple, particularly when it is low in both parts of the couple, fusion is much more likely, which can lead to a high level of dependence. When dependency is high, hostility and aggression can become a common form of communication, leading to marital conflict (Baum & Shnit, 2005). Particularly in stressful situations, such as divorce, those with low self-differentiation can begin to experience their former partner and others in their environment as hostile, leading to attacking behavior instead of compromising behavior (Baum & Shnit, 2005).

Narcissism

It has been found that mental illness is often a predecessor for dissolution of marriages. In couples in which both partners experienced mental disorders, the divorce rate is eight times greater than the general population (Butterworth & Rodgers, 2008). In

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terms of mental disorders or illness, there is perhaps none that affects a marriage or relationship more so than narcissism. Narcissism typically falls along a continuum and may not always rise to the level of a clinical diagnosis, but it has been shown in a variety of studies to have a great effect on relationships, especially romantic relationships (Butterworth & Rogers, 2008).

According to Keller et al. (2014), narcissism is characterized by entitlement, exaggerations of abilities and qualities, feelings of superiority, expectations for special treatment, lack of empathy, and demands for admiration and attention. Those who display narcissistic qualities have a poor ability to endure distressing emotions and have delicate self-esteem. Due to the fact that those with high levels of narcissism have difficulty with emotions and self-esteem, they often find it difficult to accept even the slightest rejection or critical word (Baum & Shnit, 2005). Narcissism is typically associated with hostility and aggression, and narcissistic individuals often have difficulty with self-regulation (Keller et al., 2014).

When interacting with others, those high in narcissism feel as though they are being attacked, so they may be viewed as mean, cruel, or exasperating. In one study, the spouses of narcissistic individuals described them as egotistical, self-centered, demanding, arrogant, outspoken, intolerant, and argumentative (Keller et al., 2014). As narcissists often attempt to maintain a positive view of themselves, they may intentionally or unintentionally sabotage their relationships in order to enhance their feelings of self-worth (Peterson & DeHart, 2014).

The Effect of Narcissism on Domestic Partnerships. When interacting in romantic relationships, narcissists often find a way to navigate their relationship that

preserves their positive self-view. They tend to be more concerned with maintaining their own power and autonomy in the relationship and are less concerned with their partner's well-being. When the partner of a narcissist becomes a threat to the self-esteem of the narcissist, the narcissist will pursue self-enhancement, at times to the point of jeopardizing the relationship (Peterson & DeHart, 2014). Due to the fact that narcissists perceive divorce as a failure, they view it as a rejection by their partner, and struggle with feelings of emptiness, humiliation, and worthlessness. This can make divorce especially traumatic for those with high levels of narcissism, as their self-worth is rooted in their status and acceptance by their spouse. Since their self-worth is rooted so firmly in their spouse, narcissistic individuals may find full emotional divorce difficult (Baum & Shnit, 2005).

Interestingly, individuals with high levels of narcissism tend to choose partners who bear many similarities with them in terms of mental health conditions. This high level of homogamy with narcissists is believed to be caused by a variety of factors, including personal preferences for similar people, the opportunities of daily life that cause individuals with similar characteristics and interests to meet one another, and the involvement of friends and family who have many similarities to the individual, who may introduce them to a romantic prospect, who also is similar (Keller et al., 2014). It is believed that in couples with high levels of narcissism, every conflict or disagreement has the potential to raise destructive sentiments, leading to destructive behaviors and expressions of rage (Baum & Shnit, 2005). These destructive behaviors and expressions of rage logically have the potential to continually be exacerbated and lead to more and more conflict once the case makes its way through the court system.

Section Summary: Intrapersonal Antecedents in High Conflict Relationships

Intrapersonal theories add to the list of potential antecedents that contribute to high conflict domestic partnerships. In addition to the antecedents identified within interpersonal theories, intrapersonal theories add potential antecedents such as insecure attachment, as stated in Ainsworth et al.'s (1978) theory, or difficulty with adult attachment, as discussed in Hazan & Shaver's (1987) theory. Low self-differentiation, consistent with Bowen's theory (1978), may lead to difficulty relating to one's partner, which can increase the amount of conflict present in the relationship. The entitlement and feelings of superiority present in narcissism, as stated by Keller et al. (2014) can take a toll on a relationship and lead to a great deal of conflict. The ability to be able to narrow down and identify the antecedents as stemming from interpersonal or intrapersonal theory will assist in creating targeted proactive interventions would reduce the amount of high conflict domestic partnerships.

Conclusion

High conflict within the realm of domestic partnerships has been defined by many researchers, but the definitions all have a number of things in common. High conflict disputes often include lengthy litigation, and they have a high degree of aggression, anger, and emotional distress. The conflict has escalated to a degree that it becomes unmanageable by the couple alone, and an outside source must often become involved. The literature base that has defined this phenomenon began with three dimensions to describe high conflict and has grown to include an extensive research base on the short- and long-term effects of high conflict relationships on children.

Given the negative impact high conflict has on families, children in particular, there are a wide variety of treatments that have been developed in response to high conflict disputes.

Currently, the interventions in place only treat the results of high conflicts in a reactive way that does not address the root cause of the issue. While there are many potential antecedents that may lead to the development of high conflict in couples, the current body of literature has yet to specifically identify these factors. If the antecedents that cause high conflict domestic partnerships could be identified, it would allow the focus to shift to the root issue, and proactively target the cause of the conflict instead of the result of the conflict.

The question remains as to why some dissatisfied relationships escalate to a high conflict dispute and why others simply separate peacefully and constructively. This dissertation will attempt to identify the antecedents that cause the conflict between domestic partnerships to escalate to high conflict disputes and determine if the antecedents stem from the couple's difficulty with interpersonal interaction, or the negative impact of each individual's intrapersonal attributes, or some combination of the two.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology that was used in this grounded theory qualitative study, which examined the antecedents that are present in couples with children involved in high conflict domestic partnerships. A grounded theory approach was utilized in order to provide a deeper understanding of the antecedents present and helped to develop a theory to better understand why certain antecedents lead to high conflict domestic partnerships. The qualitative grounded theory approach will be discussed later in this chapter, as well as major aspects of the study methodology, such as participants, data collection, data analysis, and ethical concerns.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

There has been much research in the area of high conflict disputes, but no studies to date were found that specifically addressed the antecedents that cause conflict to devolve into high conflict disputes. Much of the research focuses on how to proceed after the high conflict has already presented itself. The current literature base primarily focuses on outcomes for children involved in the conflicts (Amato, 2001; Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Amato & Keith, 1991; Bing et al., 2009; Cohen & Levite, 2012; Floud et al., 2014; Harford et al., 1994; Huppert, 2009; Klever, 2009; Kposowa, 2003; Radetzki et al., 2021; Shumaker & Kelsey, 2020), and potential interventions that are only beneficial after the high conflict dispute has already developed (Baker et al., 2020; Deutsch, 2008; Jordan, 2016; Kjos & Oddli, 2018; Lebow & Rekart, 2007; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007; O'Gorman, 2011; Shumaker & Kelsey, 2020), acting as a reactive measure instead of a

proactive one. The purpose of this study was to identify the antecedents to high conflict disputes and develop a theory that explains how these antecedents lead to high conflict within a domestic partnership. Developing a theory that identifies the antecedents of high conflict domestic partnerships allows for proactive measures to be put in place that could reduce or eliminate high conflict disputes and allow the root cause of the conflict to be addressed before it escalates to high conflict. The research question this study addresses is:

What are the antecedents that lead to high conflict domestic disputes in couples with children?

Methodology Rationale

Qualitative Research

Determining the type of methodology to use in a research study often includes a determination between qualitative or quantitative approaches (Yilmaz, 2013). Qualitative research examines social phenomena and other types of non-numerical data. As defined by Yilmaz (2013), qualitative research is "an emergent, inductive, interpretive and naturalistic approach to the study of people, cases, phenomena, social situations and processes in their natural settings in order to reveal in descriptive terms and means that people attach to their experiences in the world" (p. 312). Given that little to no research exists to address the antecedents that cause some cases to devolve into high conflict disputes, the application of an emergent, inductive approach for this study was necessary.

Qualitative research also assumes that reality is socially constructed through a flexible, value-laden, holistic, and descriptive framework, taking context into consideration (Charmaz, 2006). Data is generated through focusing on people's stories

and insight related to the phenomenon under study (Grossoehme, 2014). A qualitative approach aligned with the current study's need to gather data in a naturalistic setting from participants who interacted with couples and families in high conflict disputes regularly. The natural setting of their job put them in a position to witness the phenomena that this study was examining, as they were able to speak to their perception of high conflict antecedents based on their experiences. Participant input inductively contributed to the development of a theory that will allow for expansion of the research in this area. This allowed me to gain understanding, elicit meaning, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Within qualitative research, there were a variety of qualitative research designs from which to choose. The five predominant qualitative research designs are: phenomenology, narrative inquiry, ethnography, case study, and grounded theory (Cresswell, 2009). Grounded theory attempts to develop a new theory in response to a question, using systemic analysis and coding (Cresswell, 2012). This design also uses an inductive, interpretative, exploratory approach that focuses on the process, instead of just the end result (Merriam, 2002). Due to the fact that the current study focused on the process by which high conflict develops and generated a new theory in response to the research question, I used a grounded theory approach.

Grounded Theory

As opposed to the focus on particular theoretical content in other qualitative research designs, grounded theory places the spotlight on the process of how theory is generated (Patton, 2002). It is an inductive approach that allowed me to analyze the data as it was collected. The theory that emerged during this process was then used to inform

data collection moving forward (Grossoehme, 2014). The process continued until no new information was gained, and saturation had been reached. With a subject as complex and subjective as conflict, a grounded theory approach allowed for data to be collected and analyzed in a way that was open and built towards a new theory.

Grounded theory was originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in an attempt to close the gap between research and theory. They viewed research as more than just testing or verifying a theory, but believed that the generation of theory could be furthered through research. The theory, commonly referred to Classic Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), focused on the systematic analysis of data as it was collected, allowing for an inductive approach in which the data guided the development of the theory. A constant comparison analysis was used, wherein the data was constantly compared with all other parts of the data in order to uncover core categories (Hays & Singh, 2012). Strauss and Glaser (1967) agreed that there were three levels of constant comparison: (1) codes were compared with other codes; (2) codes were compared with the categories that emerge; and (3) categories were compared with other categories. They believed that the constant comparison involved in the collection, coding, and analysis of data should "blur and intertwine continually, from the beginning of the investigation until its end" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 43). Along with constant comparison, the other hallmark of the original approach to grounded theory was theoretical sampling, which is what allowed the data to be analyzed as it was collected (Hays & Singh, 2012). Theoretical sampling is important in this study as the data collected can be used to guide the focus of future data (Conlon et al., 2020).

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Although Strauss was one of the authors of the original, or classic, grounded theory, he later split off from Glaser and developed a more systematic approach which is referred to as Straussian Grounded Theory (Kenny & Fourie, 2015). Similar to its predecessor, Straussian grounded theory utilizes coding, constant comparison analysis and theoretical sampling. Memo writing, which is the practice of the researcher recording their reflections, presumptions, and suppositions, also remains a cornerstone of the approach. However, Strauss and his colleague, Juliet Corbin, further developed the theory in a way that diverted in the areas of coding procedures, paradigms, and use of literature. Specifically, Strauss expanded upon the two stages of coding in classic grounded theory and developed a three-step structure, which includes open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Kenny & Fourie, 2015). This structure provided a more specific and effective coding strategy which provided step-by-step directives to clarify and enhance the coding procedure. Straussian grounded theory is sometimes referred to an interpretive grounded theory due to the more systemic structure of the coding process (Sebastian, 2019). Although this coding procedure is more complex than that in classic grounded theory, Corbin and Strauss argued that it is more flexible and able to be adapted to different types of circumstances (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

It has been argued that Straussian grounded theory tends to view reality as objective, but Corbin and Strauss (2008) both assert that the Straussian viewpoint is that of a critical realist. With this perspective, they believe that theory is not discovered from a pre-existing reality, but is interpreted from given perspectives (Kenny & Fourie, 2015). Therefore, the theory of Straussian grounded theory can be viewed as post-positivist, and while not quite constructivist, is pragmatic. In the world of high conflict disputes,

pragmatism and critical realism are important, while walking the line between objectivity and constructivism. The ability to interpret the perspectives of participants who regularly interact with individuals in high conflict situations will be imperative in developing the grounded theory that will emerge.

Straussian grounded theory believes the use of literature to be imperative to the research process. This use of literature extends from a review of the literature prior to the collection of data, and encourages the use of data throughout all phases of the study (Kenny & Fourie, 2015). By allowing the literature to inform the research, without allowing it to constrain the research, it can help to guide the theoretical sampling that is occurring throughout.

Straussian grounded theory was chosen for this study primarily due to the systemic coding process, which with the addition of selective coding, allowed me to further enhance the categories that emerged and compared them to other categories. This ability to constantly compare in the analysis process was beneficial in the current study as the lack of data in this area allowed the inquiries to be modified as necessary depending on the results of the coding and analysis.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher is an integral part of the study and viewed as the research instrument (Golafshani, 2003). The researcher is responsible for all phases of the study, including designing the study, conducting interviews, transcription, coding and analyzing, verifying outcomes, and reporting findings (Sanjari et al., 2014). Due to the natural environment that qualitative research is conducted within, there is a lack of control with which the researcher must contend. For this reason, researchers must be

aware of any influences or prejudices that are present with regard to the study (Sanjari et al., 2014). Due to the difficulty dissociating themselves from the research process, qualitative researchers embrace their position in the process and engage themselves within the research (Golafshani, 2003).

In my role as the researcher, I was fully engaged in the process of collecting and analyzing data. As a result, it was critical to be transparent regarding my positionality, biases, and assumptions related to the phenomena under study (Heppner & Heppner, 2004). I acted as the instrument as I was responsible for the research topic and design. I conducted the interviews, transcribed the data, completed coding, and identified categories and themes as they arose. I also kept a research journal in order to process thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the interviews as they progressed.

My familiarity with this topic occurred as a result of being employed by a Judge in Family Court for 12 years prior to becoming a Licensed Professional Counselor. As a Judicial Court Clerk, my job required me to be in the courtroom with the Judge on a daily basis, so I personally witnessed innumerable couples in high conflict, who were unwilling or unable to come to a resolution with regard to issues such as custody, parenting time, and financial disagreements. As a white, cisgender, heterosexual female, I am demographically similar to many of the individuals who appeared in the courtroom in high conflict disputes. On the other hand, I am also married without children, so I have never been in the same situation as those individuals. Witnessing this type of conflict for so long peaked my interest in this topic, as it was unclear to me why some couples were able to resolve issues in a reasonable and agreeable manner, and others had a high level of conflict from the time that the case was initiated.

Given the extensive amount of time spent witnessing the conflict of couples in high conflict disputes, there is the potential that my past experiences will impact my objectivity on this topic. Specifically, I heard directly from the members of the couple in court during the course of my employment. I observed mental health issues arise, couples refusing to speak to one another, and countless other struggles with communication or personal accountability. For this reason, keeping my own thoughts, reactions, and opinions separate from the research was of the utmost importance. Two levels of member checking, peer debriefing, and research journaling were all be used to reduce any potential bias.

Study Context

In Circuit Courts in the State of Michigan, cases that involve divorce, custody, parenting time, and paternity, among other things, are assigned to Judges in the Family Division of the Court (Revised Judicature Act of 1961). The Family Division acts in an autonomous capacity within the Circuit Court. Prior to the creation of the Family Court in 1997, all cases were randomly assigned to different Circuit Court Judges, who might have heard a criminal case, a divorce case, a custody case, and a civil contract case all in one day (Bassett, 2017). Once the Family Court was in place, Family Court cases were separated from Criminal and Civil cases, with one group of Judges only hearing Family cases, and another group of Judges only hearing Criminal and Civil cases (Revised Judicature Act of 1961). This allows the Family Judges to focus only on Family Law and provide a specialized service for the families that they work with. This takes an immense amount of time and resources, however, which is why Family Court cases receive the assistance of the Friend of the Court.

The Friend of the Court is a part of the Family Division of the Circuit Court. They are assigned any case in which children are involved. They offer mediation services, make recommendations to the Judge, enforce orders regarding custody, parenting time, and child support, as well as collect, record, and distribute child support payments as ordered by the Court (Friend of the Court Act, 1982). The Friend of the Court System in Michigan all have the same components, in that they were all created via the Friend of the Court Act (1982) and have the same positions responsible for the same aspects of cases. For example, one group of employees is responsible for custody and parenting time, and one group of employees is responsible for child support. Depending on the size of the county, however, they may be structured a bit differently. In a larger county such as Oakland, individuals may have specific caseloads assigned to them, whereas in a smaller or more rural county, the individuals may operate as more of a pool and take cases as they are filed.

The Friend of the Court used in this study in Oakland County is composed of teams, each of which are headed by a Referee, who is an attorney that specializes in Family Law and has been hired for that position. A Referee acts in many ways like a Judge, conducting hearings and taking testimony from witnesses, but they have less autonomy, as a Judge has to sign off on and approve the decisions of a Referee. Each Referee's team consists of a Case Assistant, a Custody and Parenting Time Specialist (CAPTS), and a Support Specialist ("Oakland County Friend of the Court," n.d.). CAPTSs are responsible for issues of custody and parenting time. The role of the CAPTS in Oakland County, Michigan is described as follows:

A Custody and Parenting Time Specialist provides mediation to assist parties in domestic relations matters to voluntarily resolve disputes involving custody, parenting time, and removal of domicile; provides dispute resolution, crisis education, and referral counseling regarding domestic relations or separation engendered issues; conducts custody, parenting time, and removal of domicile investigations; prepares reports and recommendations when ordered to do so by the court ("Oakland County Friend of the Court," n.d.).

Additionally, these individuals must all possess at least a Master's Degree in Psychology, Counseling, Social Work or closely related field and have at least two years of full-time experience in some aspect of family counseling.

Many CAPTSs come to the Friend of the Court from various family service agencies, where they worked with families in crisis and helped to resolve conflicts. This experience translates well to their work at the Friend of the Court, as their job involves working with parents and the child to determine what is best for the child. They may provide mediation to the couple in order to help them resolve their conflicts. This often includes meeting with the child to better understand the family dynamic and ensure that the parents are resolving conflicts in a way that is most beneficial to the child. The other large portion of the CAPTS' job is to meet with the parents and the child in order to make their own determination of what is best for the child. This determination is then forwarded to the Judge in the form of a written recommendation for custody or parenting time of the child to assist the Judge in their decision. Because of the specialized knowledge brought to the case by the CAPTS, the more informed the CAPTS, the better the recommendation to the Judge.

When couples are in high conflict disputes, they understandably spend more time arguing over the children, therefore causing the CAPTS to have extensive contact with those families. The frequent appearances of high conflict cases and the inability of CAPTS's to resolve the conflict of these cases means that an inordinate amount of time is spent on high conflict couples. The inordinate amount of time with these families causes the CAPTSs to have an intimate knowledge of high conflict families and an expertise that is unmatched by any other professional.

Participants

In the present study, purposeful sampling was utilized and an original set of data was collected from Custody and Parenting Time Specialists (CAPTS) employed by the Friend of the Court in Oakland County, Michigan. Purposeful sampling is commonly used in qualitative research and involves the selection of individuals who are especially knowledgeable about the phenomenon being studied. It occurs most often when there are limited resources related to the research topic (Palinkas et al., 2015). In this study, I used purposeful sampling in order to capture the experience and knowledge of those who met the selection criteria on the topic of high conflict domestic partnerships, and who recommended other potential participants (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017). The specific selection criteria for this study included: 1) being employed by the Friend of the Court as a CAPTS for at least six months, thus having surpassed the probationary period of employment; 2) possession of a Master's Degree in Counseling, Psychology, Social Work, or closely related field; and 3) at least two years of experience in family counseling.

Also important in purposeful sampling, and in this study, was the willingness of the sample to participate and their ability to communicate their opinions and experiences in a productive and articulate manner (Palinkas et al., 2015). Therefore, I used a combination of snowball and theoretical sampling. Snowball sampling is a method for locating well-informed participants wherein participants who meet the selection criteria recommend other participants who meet the selection criteria (Patton, 2002). Theoretical sampling is a method of collecting data based on the themes that emerge in the data and is used to maximize opportunities to develop themes and categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In order to ensure objectivity and reduce potential researcher bias, the initial participants who met the selection criteria for the study was recommended by a supervisor at the Friend of the Court. The supervisor, in an attempt to eliminate her own bias and be as objective as possible, chose the two supervisors and the individual with the most experience as the three initial participants. The initial sample was then asked to recommend individuals who met the selection criteria, and so on. As stated by Palinkas et al. (2015), I identified "cases of interest from sampling people who know people that generally have similar characteristics who, in turn know people, also with similar characteristics" (p. 535). As I moved throughout data collection, theoretical sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached.

The total number of participants initially was not known and data continued to be collected until theoretical saturation was reached. Theoretical saturation can be described as follows: "the phase of qualitative data analysis in which the researcher has continued sampling and analyzing data until no new data appear and all concepts of the theory are

well-developed....and their linkages to other concepts are clearly described" (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2018, p. 247).

Data Sources

Demographic Sheet

Demographic information was collected from the participants and included the following: 1) gender; 2) age; 3) ethnicity; 4) marital status; 5) years of experience as a CAPTS; 6) years of experience as a mental health professional; 7) degree area (e.g. counseling, psychology, social work); 8) previous family counseling experience; 9) approximate case load; and 10) approximate percentage of high conflict cases on their caseload.

Individual Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with the participants. Interviews were the chosen method of data collection as they can provide information that cannot be observed and helped to provide insight into the research question being studied (Patton, 2002). Further, interviews were used in this study as they allowed the meaningful and knowledgeable perspective of the participants to best be understood (Patton, 2002). Interviews lasted approximately an hour. They were conducted using a semi-structured interview process, in which the overall set of questions was outlined prior to the interviews being conducted. This interview protocol (Appendix A) was used as a checklist to ensure that all relevant topics were covered during the course of each interview (Patton, 2002). Further, this approach provided that each participant was met with the same elemental lines of questioning. It also allowed the interviewer to build the conversation and establish rapport by using a conversational style (Patton, 2002). Using

an interview protocol, the interviewer predetermined how to best utilize the limited time available to each participant. Additionally, it provided the ability to use a more methodical and inclusive process to ensure that the interviews remained uniform across all of the interviews (Patton, 2002).

An interview protocol was prepared based on the literature and the experience of the researcher (Patton, 2002). Topics included in the interview protocol included the following areas: a) participant definition of high conflict; (b) participant experiences working with high conflict couples; (c) participant beliefs about high conflict interventions; and (d) factors that contribute to high conflict. Additionally, topics related to the antecedent dimension that were perceived to cause the most conflict were included, as well as any issues beyond the two dimensions that may cause conflict between the parties.

Using a Straussian grounded theory approach, the semi-structured interview approach was conducive to the modifications that occurred during the process of theoretical sampling. As data was collected through interviews, it further informed the evolving theory due to using constant comparison analysis. The interview protocol gave way to the concepts that were generated from the analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Procedures

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), data for this study was collected via interviews, which were conducted by the researcher. Data collection began with interviews of three participants, with the initial participants chosen by a supervisor at the Friend of the Court in order to ensure objectivity and eliminate any researcher bias. I contacted each participant via email, confirmed their interest and ensured that they met

the selection criteria. Upon confirmation, an informed consent (Appendix B) and demographic sheet (Appendix C) was emailed to the participant, and I scheduled a date and time for the interview to be conducted. Participants were asked to send the completed informed consent and demographic sheet back prior to the scheduled interview. The interview was conducted and recorded via Zoom both for the convenience of the participants, and as an added safety measure due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Using snowball sampling, at the end of each interview, each interviewee then recommended an individual(s) who met the selection criteria (Palinkas et al., 2015).

After each interview, a transcript was prepared using the Zoom software, which was checked and verified for accuracy by me. I made any necessary modifications to ensure the transcript matched the recording. A secondary recording device was used to ensure that a recording would still be produced even in the event of a technological malfunction. I took field notes of anything particularly insightful or important during the course of the interviews. These field notes, along with the transcripts, facilitated later analysis and informed future interviews as they progressed (Patton, 2002).

Once the interview was transcribed and verified for accuracy, member checking was utilized, during which the transcript was sent to the participant and they checked it for accuracy (Phillips-Pula et al., 2011). This increased credibility and reduced researcher bias. During member checking, the participant also had the opportunity to request any redactions of statements made that they felt may not have been appropriate or were stated incorrectly.

Once member checking had taken place and the transcript was verified for accuracy, the transcript was coded by me, using constant comparison analysis. The

transcript was then coded and verified by a peer auditor. The categories and themes that emerged continued to inform future interviews as they progressed. While this was being completed, the next set of three participants were contacted. Their interest was verified, they were provided with an informed consent and a demographic sheet, and interviews were scheduled. This process continued until theoretical saturation was reached.

Data Analysis

In qualitative grounded theory research, there are three types of coding that are conducted: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As the coding process is proceeding, there are guidelines that should be followed in grounded theory analysis. These five goals of data analysis in grounded theory are: "1. Build rather than test theory. 2. Provide researchers with analytic tools for handling masses of raw data. 3. Help the analysts to consider alternative meanings of phenomena. 4. Be systematic and creative simultaneously. 5. Identify, develop, and relate the concepts that are the building blocks of theory." (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 13). The three types of coding will be broken down further below.

Open Coding

The first type of coding was open coding, in which the data were initially categorized (Brown et al., 2002). There were two goals that were focused on in this phase of coding: asking questions about the data and making comparisons among the data. Once the interviews were completed and transcribed, the transcripts were closely examined line by line and concepts began to emerge. I labeled these concepts and clustered them to form categories (Brown et al., 2002). Once the categories were formed, I further fleshed them out to determine what gives each category meaning. Constant

comparison analysis was utilized throughout. Theoretical sampling was a cumulative

process that begas during the open coding phase and continued throughout all three

phases of coding. Since theoretical concepts had not yet been uncovered in the open

coding phase, it began when coding was initiated (Brown et al., 2002).

Axial Coding

Once categories were formed during open coding, the next step I took is to break

down the categories into subcategories, which is axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

This was the next step in creating the model that eventually emerged from the data.

During axial coding, there were four processes that I followed: 1) continuously

comparing the categories to the subcategories; 2) continuously comparing the categories

to the data that has been collected; 3) further detailing and expanding the categories; and

4) searching for any variations in the categories or data (Brown et al., 2002). Theoretical

sampling continued in axial coding and worked by validating and uncovering the

relationships between concepts as they emerged. Theoretical sampling helped to

determine the accuracy of the relationships (Brown et al., 2002).

Selective Coding

The final phase of coding was selective coding, which is specific to grounded

theory. At this phase, theoretical saturation was reached, which meant that there were no

new categories or relationships that emerged (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During selective

coding, I identified concepts and the relationship of the other categories emerged to form

the story of the data. The concept of the story was the first step towards developing the

theory. The theory became "grounded" when it was mapped out narratively and validated

with the data (Brown et al., 2002). At the selective coding phase, theoretical sampling

became more deliberate and direct. Once theoretical saturation was reached, theoretical

sampling was terminated (Brown et al., 2002).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research consists of validity and reliability, which

were attended to throughout the study, including designing the study, analysis of the

results, and determining the quality of the study once complete (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In qualitative research, and in this study, trustworthiness was established by focusing on

credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility is the level of truth or accuracy in a qualitative study (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). Credibility within the present study was accomplished using a variety of

methods, including constant comparison analysis, theoretical saturation, triangulation,

member checking, and use of peer debriefing. Constant comparison analysis is just as its

name suggests, and occurred as data was constantly compared to other data, emerging

categories and subcategories, and themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). There were four

distinct stages that occurred within the constant comparison method: 1) the comparison of

incidents within each category; 2) integration of categories and the included properties; 3)

outlining of the theory; and 4) the writing of the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Theoretical sampling was described above and occurred at each stage of the coding

process, until theoretical saturation was reached (Brown et al., 2002). Triangulation was

used to improve the validity and reliability of the study and was utilized in this study by

involving peers, members, and investigators and seeking out their interpretation of the

data at different times or locations (Golafshani, 2003). Member checking was exercised

in order to verify the accuracy of the data collected. The participants of the interviews were provided with the findings of the researcher and asked to communicate any feedback with regard to the accuracy of the findings (Golafshani, 2003). Peer debriefing was used in order to verify codes and categories. This individual was a professional peer, with experience in research and knowledge of qualitative coding. The peer auditor was provided with the transcripts and was asked to develop their own codes and categories and compared with those of the researcher to further verify the accuracy of the findings.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the study's findings transfers to other groups or populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Due to the unique nature of this topic, transferability was difficult to ascertain. The goal is for the study findings to be applicable to couples experiencing high conflict, but not necessarily the entire general public. Thick descriptions were used in this study to establish transferability. Comprehensive descriptions were provided with regard to the participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis. The detailed descriptions allowed the study to be replicated, establishing some level of transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

Dependability is the degree to which research study findings can be confirmed by other researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was accomplished in this study by the use of peer debriefing. The individual conducting peer debriefing was provided with the same transcripts and data analyzed by the researcher, who coded the data in order to determine the consistency of the findings of the data.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the extent to which the findings are neutral and not influenced by the researcher in any way, and to ensure that the research findings accurately represent the participants' experiences and ideas (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It was established in this study by the use of audio and video recordings that was accomplished through the use of Zoom technology. Each interview was individually recorded and transcribed through Zoom, minimizing any influence of the researcher. Additionally, the researcher recorded their personal thoughts, assumptions, and reactions in a research journal, so that they were acknowledged and noted. This increased the ease with which they were separated from the data. Member checking also increased confirmability.

Ethical Considerations

As the researcher, the ethical standards of Oakland University and the American Counseling Association were adhered to throughout this study. Informed consent was provided to each participant, which specified the researcher's responsibilities, the nature of the study, which data of the participants was collected, and how it was used (Sanjari et al., 2014). Confidentiality was maintained by eliminating any identifying information of the participants and using pseudonyms in order to further protect the identity of the participants.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the purpose of the study and the research question were reiterated. The methodology was reviewed, including the background and rationale for qualitative research and grounded theory methodology. The role of the researcher and study context was expanded upon, in addition to the participants and data sources and procedure. The

process of data analysis was described, including details regarding each step of the coding process. The ways in which trustworthiness was established were specified. The structure specified in this chapter was used to execute the research study as I determined the antecedents that cause the conflict between couples with children to devolve into a high conflict domestic disputes.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

The results include the thoughts and opinions of the participants based on their

expertise and interactions with individuals involved in high conflict domestic disputes in

couples with children. Demographic data of the participants, including age, gender, and

years of experience will be provided. The findings will be reported and organized by

concept and category, and supported with direct quotes from the participants' interviews.

Participants

Eleven participants were interviewed. All of the participants met the selection

criteria of having been employed by the Friend of the Court as a CAPTS for at least six

months, possessed a Master's degree in Counseling, Psychology, Social Work, or closely

related field, and had at least two years of family counseling experience. Due to the

specificity of the participants' specialty, and in an attempt to maintain their anonymity,

the demographic data is aggregated. Additionally, the pronoun "they" will be used in

relation to all participants in order to maintain anonymity.

Participants were both male (n=2) and female (n=9). In terms of educational

background, four participants had a Master's degree in Psychology, two in Counseling,

and five in Social Work. The range of experience was wide, with the participants having

from one to 26 years of experience as a CAPTS, and six to 45 years of experience as

mental health professionals in general. The mean and median of each category show that

the data is skewed towards a greater amount of experience, however. For years of

experience as a CAPTS, the mean is 16.05, and the median is 17. For years of experience

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as a mental health professional overall, the mean is 27.64 and the median is 27. The ages of the participants coincide with their numerous years of experience, with a range of 36-66 years old, a mean of 53.45, and a median of 52.

Findings

Following the establishment of codes within the transcribed interviews, constant comparison analysis was used to organize the codes into categories. The ten categories that emerged from the data represented a type of influence that the participants had witnessed in high conflict couples with whom they had worked. The categories included both internal and external barriers to the ability to get along with and cooperate with the individual's former partner. Categories were reviewed and organized into three concepts based on commonalities among the categories. The concepts all pertained to the influence of various issues and how they relate to the couple and the conflict. The three concepts were: systemic influence, outcomes of childhood experiences, and relationship influences. Table 1 illustrates each concept and the categories and codes attributed to each.

Systemic Influences

The first concept is the systemic influences that contribute to the escalation of conflict in the couple. These influences are all related to external factors that impact the situation, and include the courts, money and support, and cultural opposition to conflict.

Courts

Due to the necessity of the courts being involved in legal disputes related to domestic issues, the court system can have an impact on the conflict. As stated by Participant H, "…sometimes I think the Court participates in the process of families

Table 1

Concepts, Categories, and Codes

Systemic Influences	Outcomes of Childhood Experiences	Relationship Influences
Courts • Adversarial nature of court proceedings **Money/Support** • Child support • Socioeconomic status • Support network **Cultural Opposition to Conflict** • Societal avoidance of conflict • Avoiding small conflicts leads to big conflicts	**Unresolved Trauma** • Maladaptive coping skills • Attachment • Self-protective behaviors • Inability to communicate **Power and Control** • Want/need to be right • Victim Mentality • Hero/villain, victim/villain • Triangulation **Personality Traits** • Unwilling to put child first • Selfish • Immature • Reactive **Mental Health** • Personality disorders • Narcissistic behaviors • Substance Abuse	**Unresolved Relationship Issues** • Hurt/resentment • Hostility • Betrayal • Blame • Infidelity • New partner **Lack of Coparenting** • Unwilling to cooperate/communicate • Inability to acknowledge the positive • Inconsistent parenting styles **Abuse** • Domestic violence

becoming high conflict because, you know, our system jumps in and sometimes

aggravates the situation." Many seemed to imply that the adversarial nature of the court

itself can escalate the conflict. One participant stated that the fact that even at the moment

of filing, the heading saying Plaintiff versus Defendant indicates that they are in

competition. The word versus implies that it is mother against father, or vice versa.

Participant C stated:

> …a sidebar to the adversarial nature of the entire court system, right, like the image of itself, that's the system. And so, once you enter that system there's a tendency to escalate conflict because of accusations that are made, and so on and so forth, and the whole 'I need to prove one thing or the other.' That's a blaming model right from the get go.

Speaking further about the nature of the couple being part of the system is Participant H, who elaborated about how the court system can aggravate the conflict:

> I would say that another element is when arrangements have been imposed on people, you know, by the Court or they've not been able to resolve, they've not been able to get through the initial conflict period, and so an external determination's been made about that. It kind of sets them up, because then it becomes this struggle of being defensive and feeling as if they have to be protective of their own relationship and doing whatever they need to do and so, you know, sometimes I think the Court participates in the process of families becoming high conflict because our system jumps in and sometimes aggravates the situation.

The adversarial nature of the court system may include the presence of attorneys to represent each member of the couple. Participants spoke of the ways that attorneys can escalate the conflict between the parties. Participant D stated, "I mean, I can literally point to people who are perceived as high conflict as a result of their attorney's behavior and when I meet with them individually, I find out that they are nowhere near that high conflict."

Money/Support

A great majority of the participants identified money and social support as factors that have a great influence on couples becoming high conflict. Participant B put it clearly, stating:

> I always say that the two things that are most important to people in their lives is their money and their children, and we have to unfortunately deal with both of them when they are in front of us, so of course that's going to be contentious, right, so people are going to have problems when you are coming after their money and coming after their family.

One way that participants believe this occurs is through the determination of child support, particularly since parenting time has an impact on the amount of child support. As explained by the participants, the number of parenting time overnights is one of the main factors taken into consideration when computing child support. As Participant K stated:

> Money plays a large, very large role. I have found a lot of times when child support is increased or talked about, then that's when the other parent is like, that they come to this, I don't know, it's like a light bulb has gone on, if I [the payor] get more parenting time, then my child support can be lower so then they'll request all this parenting time and not exercise it.

Participant C agreed, stating:

> Another thing that we might see that can be high conflict is things that come up over money, right, so a parent hasn't been terribly involved, but then finds out that the more time they have with the child means the more or less child support that they will have, and so people do battle about what's the truth and what's not the truth and what's their involvement with the child. Not necessarily because they want to be involved with the child, but because they don't want to pay out very much money or because they want a bigger chunk of money, or want the other person out of the way so that they can get more money from them.

Participants also reported that at times, they will see couples have a period of low conflict, until they come up for a child support review, which participants explained occurs automatically every 3 years. They stated that when this happens, the modification of child support will increase conflict as the payor may attempt to, as Participant K stated, obtain more parenting time in order to reduce their child support. Additionally,

Participant K stated, conflict can also increase when the child support is not modified, creating anger and frustration in the parent requesting the modification.

Speaking about money more generally, participants shared that there are multiple ways that the couple's socioeconomic status can exacerbate the conflict. Participant D spoke about this topic at length. They called it "manipulation through fiscal power" and stated, "…maybe one parent has more money than the other parent and knows that they can literally keep coming at him to wear him down, and the threat of, you know, I'm going to keep taking you to court." They went on to discuss that this can occur even when one member of the couple may not be able to afford to pay a babysitter, or put gas in their car in order to get to court, so an individual's socioeconomic status can affect the conflict in more ways than many people realize. If the other member of the couple is aware of this status and takes advantage of it, she stated that the conflict can be never ending. Participant A expanded upon this topic, stating:

> Frequent flyerhood and high conflict doesn't have economic parameters, and you'd like to think that people with assets, with financial and intellectual assets would be less inclined to be a frequent flyer high conflict person. But that's not the case, it doesn't. I think the higher social or economic folks, they're just more sophisticated in their methods of conflict and their methods of escalating things.

In addition to money, participants spoke about the couple's support network and the influence that it can have on the conflict. Participant C elaborated about both the positive and negative impact that support networks can have on the couple, stating:

> I mean sometimes you can see smaller things like support network issues, like if you have a tribal war, where dad's family and friends are having his back, and mom's family and friends have her back. That can be a significant barrier because they've got so much support for their perspective that they can't think outside their own box very well, so that's absolutely another barrier that I would identify. I think, basically, all of us have our support network in our tribe, and in the families that figure it out, the support network is there, but maintains appropriate

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boundaries, whereas in the high conflict situation, the tribal people cross those boundaries and accelerate the problem, rather than trying to find solutions and just providing support.

Multiple participants spoke to this topic, explaining the impact that a support network can have on an individual, and how a lack of a support network can leave them on their own. As Participant G simply put it, "…they don't have anybody that they can turn to." Participant G also spoke about the ability of the support network to distract the couple or reason with them, but that it can be difficult for the support network to stay involved when the conflict gets particularly high. Participant E stated, "…they maybe don't have a great support network, or they have burned their support network out with their antics. It's too bad." Participant E also spoke to what they wish the family and support network of the couple would say to their family member, even if they do not like their ex-partner:

> They might not have been the person I picked, but as a result, I've got this great niece, nephew, grandchild. And therefore I need to focus on making sure their foundation is solid and supported.

Instead, the reality of the situation, states Participant E, is that the family and support network are more likely to say the following:

> We're busy, you know, helping to get [the ex-partner] back. We're slashing tires, we're [filing] violence reports, we're doing all the nasty ugly behavior.

Cultural Opposition to Conflict

Participants had an interesting perspective about the role that culture has on the high conflict of the couple. Multiple participants asserted that American culture, in general, has an affinity for "sweeping problems under the rug" and a tendency to think that conflict is bad and should not exist at all. In contrast, many participants discussed how avoidance of developmentally appropriate relationship conflicts might prevent

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couples from developing the ability to resolve any conflict. Participant C stated,

"…people just don't think there should be conflict - like that whole message of 'there will

be conflict in every relationship' and you will have to work through it; sometimes people

really kind of think like they don't recognize the small things they do to resolve

conflict…"

Participant C spoke at length about her belief that the lack of dealing with small

conflicts can lead to big conflicts. They stated:

> …we resolve that by somebody giving into the other person, like people don't
> realize that they just kind of gloss over all of it and kind of think that, oh nope
> there is no conflict, when there has been, and there will be, or they pretend that
> there's not or whatever…

They went on to speak about the necessity of the small, everyday conflicts, and all the

ways that those conflicts prepare individuals to be able to cope with and resolve the big

conflicts that may arise. When these conflicts rise to the level requiring court

involvement, Participant C believes that the couple has limited ability to cope and the

conflict escalates out of control.

Outcomes of Childhood Experiences

The second concept is the current behavioral patterns attributed to unresolved

childhood experiences of the parties that can lead to high conflict disputes. Unlike the

first concept of systemic influences that encompasses external factors that impact

conflict, this concept focuses on internal factors, and includes intergenerational trauma,

power and control, personality traits, mental health, and abuse.

Unresolved Trauma

As the participants spoke about the factors that influenced conflict, one that came up was the unresolved trauma of the couple. Issues stemming from childhood, participants stated, can have a wide influence on the ability of individuals to resolve conflict and can lead to maladaptive coping skills, difficulty with attachment, the existence of self-protective behaviors, and the inability to communicate.

Participant D spoke about the impact that childhood trauma can have on current relationship conflict:

> …the unresolved conflict that they may have had is the trauma they may have experienced as children. Unresolved things with their own parents and their own childhood that gets triggered as they're now becoming parents can all be very significant.

These unresolved issues, they went on to explain, can lead the individual to have maladaptive coping skills and be unable to properly cope with conflict that arises due to the triggering effect that the conflict has on them. Participant H spoke to this, stating:

> There are people who are psychologically, mostly intact, and so they will respond well to those resources, whereas we have other parents who, in that same circumstance, their capacity to understand the impact of their behavior and their conflict on their children, and even on their ineffective coparenting relationship is minimal or limited because they themselves psychologically don't have the capacity necessarily for insight.

Participant D stated that this triggering effect can potentially cause the couple to respond in a variety of ways, from completely removing themselves from the situation, to acting out in an aggressive and belligerent way.

Another way the participants shared that this trauma can reveal itself is in the attachment style of the couple. Participant F shared that this can be demonstrated in either the individual's original emotional attachment with their own parents, or the attachment

that they had with their former partner. Participant G talked about how an insecure

attachment in childhood can lead to the same type of attachments in adulthood. They

stated:

> They tend to regress in their behavior when they have to deal with this other
> parent because they have so much conflict, and I feel sometimes some of them
> have had some sort of conflict of some sort or have been raised in a place where
> you don't get along with other people. Because then it's intergenerational and it's
> just like we're just going to choose people who are not nice to me, and so,
> therefore, I'm going to have you know I can be constantly fighting with
> somebody.

Multiple participants spoke to this issue and agreed that an insecure attachment style is

often present in cases they consider to be high conflict.

The self-protective behaviors that the couple have developed as a result of their

childhood experiences is also a barrier discussed by participants. Participants described

these types of behaviors to include being defensive, guarded, or withdrawn, all of which

can have a negative impact on intimacy and emotional connection with their partner.

They stated that these behaviors have to do with ways that their clients' history and lived

experiences caused them to adapt and survive. Participant H spoke to this relationship by

stating:

> …maybe partially from their history, growing up with what they have come into
> the relationship with, and what they've lived through as kids… they are wounded
> people, and so they come in, and at every avenue where there's an opportunity for
> them to hurt the other person, that's where they go.

They went on to explain that experiences the couple has had in childhood can lead to a

dysfunctional view of relationships. Participant C also shared this viewpoint, stating,

"People who really struggle with inner social interactions and things like that, they tend

to view interactions in terms of power and control, and have those patterns of behavior that are so deeply ingrained and dysfunctional."

These self-protective behaviors can lead to the inability to communicate, which was mentioned by a number of participants. Often, they stated, individuals have lived so much of their life utilizing self-protective behaviors, so their ability to communicate has been severely compromised. As Participant D stated, "…what they think in their head and what they actually verbalize might be two different things." Participant H expanded upon this, stating:

> They just have a very difficult time articulating and behaving in a way that really expresses what it is that they're looking to accomplish, and so it gets caught up in, you know, just behavior that is negative acting out, that kind of thing, making statements and comments that are negative.

The inability to communicate, as multiple participants mentioned, can lead to a great deal of frustration, further escalating conflict that is already inflated due to negative acting out and self-protective behaviors.

Power and Control

The need for power and control was an aspect that was mentioned by every single participant and was a topic that was discussed at great length. They spoke of the couple's need to be right, and the fact that attempting to assert or maintain control can outweigh any attempts at resolving or reducing conflict. The struggle for power and control is seen through attempts to paint themselves as a hero/victim against a villain or as using the child as a pawn. As Participant C stated that the tendency of parties to view interactions in terms of power and control can impact the ability of mediation or cooperation to be successful. They stated

…the thing that's coming to a head is like the totally non-clinical term to just say game playing, you know, that there's much more investment in maintaining the conflict and being on that power and control - and we didn't even talk about that – the power and control continuum of relationship dynamics and not being able to step out of that.

The power and control aspect can manifest itself in the tendency of individuals to adopt a victim mentality, which in turn paints a picture of their ex-partner as the villain, as stated by Participant A. They shared that they have often heard the other parent be painted in such a negative light, that the individual appears desperate to be seen as the victim/hero. Participant A recollected hearing things such as the following from a parent, "'I can't possibly allow this parenting time because the other parent is bipolar, the other parent has a drinking problem. Last time my child was with them, they came back dirty. It's all on me.'" These types of conversations were shared by multiple participants, who contributed similar experiences in hearing terrible things about the other parent in an attempt to make themselves appear to be the victim. Participant E stated:

These folks call their jobs, they call people's place of employment and wreak havoc and again, with that 'I'm going to make you pay and let everybody know what a horrible person you are.' So that sort of dynamic where they've had a lot of control issues, and now that this person's gone they're going to try to exert control.

Participant G spoke of a client who was able to fool them by playing the victim. They stated:

He, first of all, said how very upset he was about the breakup, he was shocked that this was happening ,so he was like saying mom was having an affair, which she wasn't. He was saying, making all this stuff, 'I'm trying to be this huge victim' that he was victimized through this whole thing, and he ended up being just a plain old jerk. He was just a jerk and he was he was in just wanted the oldest child there was three didn't want the other two just the oldest one.

Along with making themselves look like a victim by painting the other parent as the villain, multiple participants also shared experiences of individuals attempting to

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make themselves look like the hero by painting the other parent as a villain. This "hero/villain" mentality was mentioned many times. Participant J spoke to this, stating, "…they're trying to let us know how bad the other parent is, over and over and over again. That they are the only 'good one.'" Participant H agreed with the view of the "hero/villain" mentality, speaking about the parties' "need to self-preserve, and their need to damage the other parent."

Triangulation was mentioned with regard to power and control by multiple participants. They described it as one parent manipulating the child in order to align with the child against the other parent. It was often stated that this dynamic can cause a great deal of damage, particularly to the child, as the parent's desire to gain or maintain control, they believed, outweighed their desire to protect their child. Participant F stated, "triangulation or strangulation or tug of war that kids get caught in the middle of - it's just, it can be pretty chaotic and damaging to the child." Parental alienation also came into effect as the participants were talking about triangulation, which they stated occurs when one parent attempts to alienate the child from the other parent. Participant F stated:

> They do this, the parental alienation – it's done consciously, and I think even things like subconsciously - might not even be aware that they're doing it. But a large amount of folks are aware, because they believe they are right - is a horrible and 'she did this. He did that'… The amount of coaching that goes on, as a result of the one parent, that being really aware that their intention is to alienate, destroy the relationship with the other parent, it's really it's almost like it could be its own separate DSM, parental alienation.

Personality Traits

The personality traits of the parents can have a great influence on the conflict, particularly with regard to traits such as being selfish, immature, and reactive, all of which were mentioned numerous times by the participants. Also included in these traits is

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the inability or unwillingness to put the child first, which was another aspect mentioned

by many participants. Participant E spoke about the difference between high and low

conflict parents with regard to this issue:

> So I do think the ability to literally put the child or the children, you know, at the forefront of your decisions consistently, not to say anybody's a perfect parent, but more times than not your function is, how do we get this child, the support they need in school, or to their activities, or address their health needs. That's the biggest issue and the rest of it, they kind of iron out in the background. So I think that's a major difference with some of these folks.

Participant B also spoke to their belief that the inability to put the child first is a major

contributor to high conflict disputes. They stated that "the inability of a family to work

together effectively for the sake of the children" is a factor that they see often with high

conflict families. Participant A agreed, stating:

> Even when I think one of the more frustrating things with the high conflict folks is even when their child has some clinical issues that require therapeutic intervention or, you know, even worse, they still play the blame game. They don't recognize their role in the process.

In the same vein, many participants also spoke to the selfish behavior overall of

the couple in high conflict situations. Participant J provided an example of statements

heard by parties who they described as selfish, stating, ""I want what I want, whether it's

my parenting time schedule, whether it is an emotional alliance with my children.

Whether it's more child support, whether it's more spousal support." This aspect was

touched on by others, who spoke about the "me, me, me" behavior of many parents, and

the fact that they not only put themselves before the other parent, but also before the child

and anyone else in their way. Participant A agreed with this, stating, "So, again it's all

about, it's about me and my needs and my need for entitlement versus what might be cool

and best for the child… And they're all about themselves."

In addition to selfish behaviors, immature and reactive behaviors were used instead of behaviors that can contribute to de-escalation or solutions. This dynamic was summed up by Participant C, who stated:

> Like if you don't have the ability to logically, to use a problem-solving model, identifying a specific problem, brainstorming solutions, picking one, and then rotating back around, because your [the client's] basic interaction is [taking the attitude of], 'you're an ugly loser.' You [the client] can't follow that [the problem-solving model] and you're using the 'you're an ugly loser,' because that's all you can think when you see that person's face [ex-partner] because you're so swamped.

As with the previous example, it was explained that they often see the reactive behaviors in immature couples, who's lack of maturity often gets in the way of their ability to control their behavior and take others into consideration. Participant H stated:

> The energy of that comes out in the relationship they have with each other as coparents is being very antagonizing and sometimes they are looking to act out, you know, some type of revengeful behavior or we have some young parents.

"Young" and "immature" was often used by participants interchangeably, often in reference to some type of acting out behavior or antagonizing the other parent.

Mental Health

When speaking about issues that can impact and cause high conflict disputes, every participant mentioned mental health in some way. This was most often mentioned, as Participant H stated, in relation to impacting the parenting abilities of the parent with mental health issues. Overwhelmingly, personality disorders were referenced most often. When speaking of mental health and its contribution to high conflict, Participant D stated, "…the personality disorders, the Cluster B's, I think come into play in these situations." Other participants also specifically referenced narcissism, such as Participant J, who said, "narcissistic personalities, that person that always wants to be right, histrionic."

Participant B talked about the presence of both mental health and substance abuse in couples they have worked with:

>I think one more that, it just kind of popped in, is mental health is another thing that can cause conflict, mental health and substance abuse, which unfortunately sometimes kind of go hand in hand. But when we have one parent who is either abusing substances or has severe mental health issues that can cause some conflict because the other parent, who doesn't have those issues is fighting to gain control over the whole, the whole situation, they're requesting or demanding drug tests, mental health evaluations, and they want all of this information that can be personal to somebody to be exposed and, in a way, used against them and, while it's understandable because they need to, have a duty to protect their child, most people still nowadays are either in denial, or don't want to admit, even if they know or are embarrassed, so that can cause for a huge conflict, not only with the parents, but sometimes with the actual court and that person.

In addition to being mentioned by Participant B, substance abuse was mentioned by almost every participant in relation to issues present in high conflict situations, although there was disagreement about the impact of substance abuse. While some believed that it escalated conflict, others disagreed. Participant I stated:

>I wouldn't be inclined to say substances, because I also see a lot of parents that are really caring towards that parent that has a really serious problem, where they just want the other parent to get help, and they want the parent involved in the child's life. I see that a lot actually. But they just can't change that parent, they have to protect their child.

Other participants who agreed that although substance abuse often has a negative impact on the conflict of the couple, it does not always escalate conflict. They noted that the restrictive orders that are often put in place that take a parent's substance abuse into account help counter the negative effects of substance abuse. For example, a few participants spoke of the fact that parents who have had substance use disorder often have to complete a drug test prior to exercising parenting time or seeing the child. Restrictions like this, participants stated, can often reduce or eliminate conflict in some cases.

Relationship Influences

The third concept that contributes to high conflict disputes are influences related to the relationship. Similar to childhood experiences, these are internal barriers to conflict resolution. These barriers are unresolved issues stemming from the previous relationship of the parents, and a lack of coparenting of the parents.

Unresolved Relationship Issues

Participants stated that unresolved issues of the parents' relationship can have a number of lasting repercussions, mostly relating to the ongoing emotional connection of the parents. Factors that can contribute to this aspect, as stated by various participants, can include hurt and resentment, hostility, blame, and betrayal. The word "stuck" was used by many participants to describe the state of the couples in high conflict situations. Participant F believed that the stuck feeling was a result of the hurt and resentment felt by the couple. They stated, "They don't get over the emotional damage or dysfunction that, you know, they're ending up with, and they just don't get over it." Participant I agreed, stating,

> They're really, really stuck. I mean that is the main thing, I think, with high conflict people is that they're really, really stuck and whatever happened in the past, and they can't forgive, they can't forget, they can't just move on with their own lives and be happy.

Participant I expanded upon this, speaking to the resentment that builds:

> And, well, I think, you know, there's a lot of different ways, I mean it could be that someone is just very, very angry that they were rejected or someone was very, very angry that they were betrayed. You know, someone was disloyal to them, but then I think sometimes it could maybe be like there was an initial bad thing, but then through the courts, there continues to be things like whether this parent accused this one of molesting the child, or this one accused this one of abusing them, or something like that. So there's just more layers on top of that anger through all of those actions.

The hostility that can be caused by having unresolved grievances was addressed by multiple participants, many of whom discussed the anger that is held onto and that they witness regularly in high conflict cases. Participant A stated, "…still living the circumstances that led to their split, no matter how many years it's been. They don't let go of old issues."

Participants referenced a number of issues that accompany the anger they witness, including feelings of blame and betrayal, often due to infidelity in the relationship, or the presence of a new partner. Participant F spoke of blame, stating, "…then it leads into the blame, the, 'it's his stuff, it's not her fault, he did this, you did that.' So there's just a lot of blame and not getting over the hurt feelings." Participant C spoke to the ways in which they witness blame in relationships, stating:

> And I'm going to go to that blame word again. It really seems to me that like that central ingredient where regardless of what's going on there, the first go to response to a problem is to say, it's something to do with the other person. And then it becomes the finger pointing back and forth, you know, then you get fewer and fewer options to resolve, you're not using a problem-solving model, you're using a blame model.

Betrayal also factors in, particularly when infidelity occurs, stated multiple participants.

Participant E stated:

> The betrayal piece, I think, is a huge one. That, that's for some folks irreparable. They can't seem to move on from it, they are just so devastated by their entire concept of their world, what they look like, what their community looks like, what their household was made up of, is that now it's trashed and they just aren't able to keep afloat. So that's a big one.

Participant E expanded upon this by explaining that betrayal or infidelity does not always mean another relationship, but it can also mean dishonesty during the relationship, stating:

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I think betrayal is a huge piece, and it doesn't have to be like infidelity, it could be financial betrayal like that lack of honesty… they've been gambling away and you just didn't have an idea and now all of a sudden your house is foreclosed and your cars are repossessed and you end up with this sense of just deep betrayal.

The appearance of a new partner for either parent can spark feelings of betrayal as well, stated Participant B. They stated, "When somebody moves on…I seem to always get an influx of calls with, I want to change the parenting time because dad moved in with his fiancé." Participant A explained that in their experience, while the dynamic shifts with both parents when a new partner enters the picture, it is sometimes the mothers that have a more difficult time. They stated:

Right, where mom's new husband or partner suddenly becomes controlling, or more often, dad's new girlfriend or wife, and it's kind of an interesting dynamic that moms more often seem to complain about the dad's new partner and their role and involvement and their threat to their motherhood, I guess, in some ways, then dads about mom's partners.

Lack of Coparenting

Although the ability and willingness of the parents to work together are tantamount to resolving conflict within the coparenting relationship, many participants said that the majority of high conflict cases are lacking the necessary coparenting. The unwillingness of parents to cooperate and communicate within the coparenting relationship was mentioned by multiple participants. Participant G provided an interesting visual example of what happens when parents will not cooperate or communicate. They stated:

Right, they don't you know and I've explained to parents like this, I used like the food diagram. The food pyramid. Your kids on the top of the pyramid and then they have mom and dad and then they have their extended family and then they have their school and they have their community…then I'll turn it upside down I go, you have families fighting, you two are fighting, you're doing all this sort of stuff, and your kid is on the bottom now. You're just crushing this pyramid. And I

go, you need to flip it back over. Sometimes when you do that visual, then they kind of get it.

The lack of cooperation can extend to even the parents' involvement, stated Participant F, who spoke about "a lack of willingness to involve themselves in the coparenting household." Participant K agreed, expanding upon this to speak about communication, "Just the unwillingness to communicate, like I've seen that a lot of times, like they just don't want to talk to the other party, they don't want to hear what they have to say." Participant D agreed, stating:

> Yeah they argue about what time the parent time should start, when should it end, where do they pick up for exchanges, and if everything isn't really precise and written in an order, they are not able to figure that out on their own, without conflict.

The lack of willingness was also touched on upon by Participant E, who said, "I think there also needs to be a willingness to be open to learning those things and making that change rather than I'm just going to be in this until I destroy you."

Participant C spoke at length about the lack of willingness to work together, and expanded on a different route, explaining the ways that the unwillingness of either parent to acknowledge any positive in the other parent can be an indicator of a high conflict situation. Participant C found the inability of a parent to find even one positive quality about the other parent of their child to be bothersome. They said:

> I once had a client, who was a therapist, in front of me say that the only positive thing that she could see about her ex-spouse was that he had beautiful green eyes. Well, which was kind of disturbing in terms of a lack of insight, or you know, ability to see balance or perspective, you know, about the situation.

Participant E agreed with this, explaining the ways in which this behavior can impact the child. They said:

The idea that your mom and your sister are smack talking your soon to be ex, and your kid's sitting five feet away listening to all of the derogatory things you're saying, and what does that make them feel like in terms of you, I love my other parent and you're saying mean things, and that makes me sad and now, you know, do not love me, or if I do something that displeases you is this what's going to happen.

Another aspect that multiple participants spoke of is parenting styles. This was explained by participants to mean the different ways that each parent interacts with and disciplines their child when the child is in their care. Although conflictual parenting styles may encompass aspects of power and control, the heart of the issue is the couple's unwillingness to coparent and provide consistency in the child's life and routine. Participants gave examples such as chores, bedtimes, or rules that may differ from one house to the other. The problem arises, they explained, when one parent believes that their way is best and that the other parent should conform with their style. Participant A shared, "it is a lot of it is complaining about the behaviors of the other parent or control battles between the two parents over parenting styles." This sentiment was echoed by Participant G, who said, "…people are filing motions or putting in parenting time complaints all the time about parenting styles of the other parent, their parenting styles, which nobody has any control over people's style."

Abuse

Similar to mental health, abuse, including domestic violence, is another aspect that virtually every participant mentioned as potentially contributing to high conflict. Although it may seem obvious that domestic violence would contribute to a case being high conflict, surprisingly, participants downplayed that factor. Participant C spoke about the complexities that arise when multiple allegations are made by both parents:

Probably the most difficult and painful ones to deal with is allegations of abuse, you know that go back and forth, where one parent alleges abuse, and the other parent does, and we start to lose our ability to protect children because we don't know who's telling the truth, and there's been so many investigations that it's just really hard to you know determine where the facts are.

When domestic violence is known, or has been prosecuted, Participant B stated, the complexity of the unknown is removed, but it is just as difficult to know how to proceed. They stated:

I don't think we really talked too much about domestic violence being an issue, so I think that is something that can cause conflict within families. And that's on both ends, whether it's a lot, like we tend to say always alleged domestic violence, because unless somebody has been prosecuted, then we say alleged, but in instances where we see people who are victims of domestic violence, that is a really hard avenue to navigate, right, so you're trying to encourage a relationship with this child with a parent.

However, due to the measures that are put in place when the abuse is known, the victim of the abuse is often protected by court orders that restrict or eliminate contact between the victim and perpetrator. As Participant I stated, the victim often does not want to dwell on the situation. They said, "Even with abuse, I find that when it's, you know, real abuse, they don't want to drag it out, they just want it to be over." While the impact may be obvious, Participant I does not believe that it contributes to the ongoing conflict as much as others may intuit.

Summary

This chapter provided demographic data of the participants and findings that emerged from the data analysis, including codes, categories, and concepts. The concepts that emerged from the data described the results of the study and highlighted the experiences and expertise of the participants in their interactions with couples with children who are embroiled in high conflict domestic disputes. Systemic influences,

outcomes of childhood experiences, and influences related to the relationship, as described by participants, were felt to have the greatest impact on the escalation of the conflict between these couples. The categories that were derived within each concept, including both interior and exterior barriers to conflict resolution, further specify where the conflict lies.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of family counselors about antecedents that cause the conflict between couples with children to devolve into a high conflict domestic dispute. Based on the results of interviews with eleven family counselors employed as Custody and Parenting Time Specialists (CAPTS), multiple factors were identified that could influence the development of high conflict domestic disputes. These factors were grouped into ten antecedent categories. The ten antecedent categories were then organized and condensed into three concepts that were either external or internal to the parties involved in domestic disputes: systemic influences, outcomes of childhood experiences, and relationship influences.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the responses of the participants, a conceptual framework illustrating the major components of the grounded theory explored in this study was developed, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

Each arrow represents one of the three concepts: systemic influences, outcomes of childhood experiences, and relationship influences. The concept of systemic influences contains external barriers to conflict resolution, while the concepts of childhood experiences and relationship influences contain internal barriers to conflict resolution. The two concepts containing internal barriers are further separated into intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict. Childhood experiences consist of intrapersonal conflict, while relationship influences consist of interpersonal conflict.

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Figure 1

Conceptual Framework
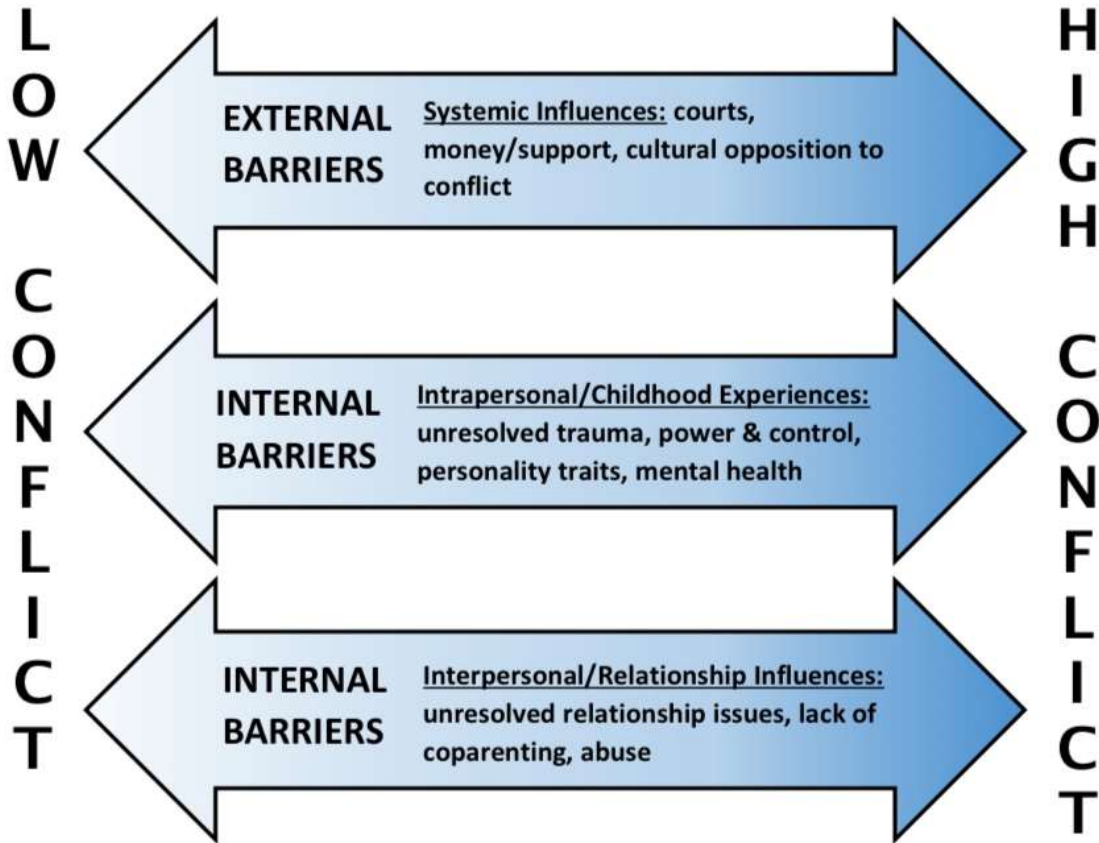
Within each arrow are the antecedent categories that are associated with each

concept. Arrows are double-sided, pointing to both high conflict and low conflict,

demonstrating that the individuals involved in the conflict can move between low and

high conflict situations within both external and internal barriers as antecedents specific

to those barriers are addressed. The arrows are shaded from light to dark to further

represent the level of conflict. The darker area to the right represents more antecedent

categories present, and therefore higher conflict, while the lighter represents fewer

antecedent categories, and therefore lower conflict. Although low conflict was not

specifically addressed in this study, it is the presumed opposite of high conflict and therefore necessary to illustrate the movement among the spectrum of conflict.

Comparison to Previous Literature

The first concept, systemic influences, contains categories that are all external barriers to conflict resolution. They are outside forces that may not be within the control of either individual. The adversarial nature of court proceedings, an aspect that was referred to by participants, is an aspect that is being addressed by the Family Court of Australia, who are attempting to shift to a more inquisitorial approach for cases affecting children (McIntosh et al., 2007). Consistent with aspects referred to by participants as causing increased conflict, the Family Court in Australia is aiming to minimize the adversarial nature of the relationship, focus on the children, reduce the time in litigation, and assist the parents in learning to coparent cooperatively moving forward (McIntosh et al., 2007).

Within the concept of systemic influences, participants spoke often about the impact that money, particularly child support, can have on the conflict on the parties, which is consistent with the findings of Hutson (2007). Similar to statements of the participants, this research discusses the animosity experienced by fathers when they are compelled to pay child support, and also the animosity experienced by mothers when father's take more responsibility and they may feel that they are no longer solely responsible for the child (Huston, 2007). In addition to child support, social support was also discussed by participants, which is consistent with research by Sorek (2020). Participants spoke of the negativity that can arise when the social support system of the parents is lacking, which is consistent with Sorek's (2020) findings, which state that

"social support mediated the relationship between parental conflict and children's wellbeing outcomes" (p. 2).

All of the categories within the second concept, childhood experiences, fall within the combination of being both internal barriers and intrapersonal conflict. Intrapersonal conflict, or the internal root that leads outward to conflict with others, includes various categories that were spoken of by the participants, including attachment, maladaptive coping skills, the creation of self-protective behaviors, and the inability to communicate, all of which are similar to the findings of O'Connor (2002). When romantic attachment is able to be achieved, maladaptive behaviors may arise when the individual's attachment figure is removed (Saini, 2012). Like Saini (2012), participants in this study felt that maladaptive coping skills, self-protective behaviors, and other communication difficulties could be indicative of high conflict relationship.

Participants discussed other aspects of intrapersonal conflict within the concept of the outcomes of childhood experiences, such as a power and control and personality traits, which is similar to Bowlby's (1982/1969) findings regarding differentiation of self. Low differentiation of self can occur when an individual's emotions overpower their thoughts, resulting in aspects described by the participants as overly emotional behavior or aggressive acting out behavior, which is similar to the findings of Lampis et al. (2017). The emotional behaviors that were described by the participants may also be explained by emotional reactivity. Similar to Skowron et al. (2003), the participants in this study felt this can occur when individuals are unable to cope with stressors and become overwhelmed and experience a great amount of psychological distress, which often impacts one's ability to remain calm and rational. Irrational and agitated behavior was

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described often by participants in response to the distress that the couple was experiencing.

The participants' viewpoint of the prominence of individuals with mental health issues is consistent with the findings by Butterworth and Rodgers (2008), which states that the divorce rate is eight times higher in couples where mental health issues are present than in couples where mental health issues are not present. The responses of the participants in this study reflected the findings of Keller et al. (2014), who found that the presence of narcissism adds an additional layer of complexity and conflict, as individuals with narcissism or narcissistic tendencies often have difficulty with emotions, low self-esteem, and often demonstrate mean or cruel behaviors.

The final concept, relationship influences, consists of internal barriers to conflict resolution, but unlike childhood experiences, this concept relates to interpersonal conflict. Although John Gottman's (1999) research tends to speak to behaviors that occur during the relationship, two aspects of his Four Horsemen theory were spoken of repeatedly by participants – criticism and contempt. These aspects encompass a great deal of input by the participants, including resentment, hostility, betrayal, and blame. The marital conflict theory of Birditt et al. (2010), which includes destructive behaviors, reflected many of the same aspects that were referred to by participants, including criticism, contempt, insults, and withdrawal.

There are two overlapping theories that encompass many of the aspects of the concept of relationship influences: unstable, hostile marriages, as defined by Gottman (1999), and unstable competitive marriages, as defined by Bertoni and Bodenmann (2010), both of which were reflected in much of the input by participants. The

detrimental influence of negative behaviors, such as little desire to see the perspective of the other, little support, little attempt at understanding, offensive behaviors, infidelity, and coercive behaviors are described in both of these theories and by participants (Bertoni & Bodenmann, 2010; Gottman, 1999).

Significance and Clinical Implications

Overview of Significance and Implications

The grounded theory derived from this study can be utilized in a number of ways, as it is one of the first studies to identify and categorize antecedents and acknowledge the effect of external systemic issues in this way. First, the recognition of the antecedents that can lead to high conflict disputes in couples with children can provide the Family Court, and the Friend of the Court, with information that could help them identify high conflict couples easier and earlier on in the process. The work done by the CAPTS is difficult and complex, but the ability to have a theory from which to work could allow some of the complexities of managing conflicts to become more concrete, and therefore the interventions to potentially be more definitive. Next, the theory, as depicted in the conceptual framework, posits that there can be movement to/from low to high conflict. Thus, the framework may aid CAPTS and the court to identify and prevent movement towards high conflict, as well as potentially identify successful interventions if the conflict moves from high to low.

Assessment Tools to Identify Antecedents and Goal Directed Interventions

With the antecedents leading to high conflict disputes identified, an instrument could be created that evaluates the presence of the antecedents to high conflict within each of the three concepts. A score above a certain threshold could be referred for early

interventions. Once the risk of high conflict is measured, early interventions could be developed that are specific to each concept and include specific goals directed towards a particular antecedent or antecedents.

A variety of already established assessments are related to each of the concepts identified in this study. Within the concept of Outcomes of Childhood Experiences, such intrapersonal measures such as the Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ) by Feeney, Noller, and Hanrahan (1994), or the Differentiation of Self Inventory – Revised (DSI-R) by Skowron and Schmitt (2003) show some overlap. The concept of Relationship Influences has some similarity to the Gottman Relationship Checkup assessment, or the Multidimensional Co-Parenting Scale for Dissolved Relationships (MCS-DR) (Ferraro et al., 2018; Gottman, 2022). However, an assessment dedicated to the purpose of identifying the three concepts might more efficiently help identify key antecedents for initial goal setting. An assessment might be utilized periodically to measure ongoing progress toward possible resolution of antecedent issues. By using the consistency of an objective assessment, progress towards goals could be tracked and interventions can be modified as necessary and targeted towards the specific antecedent identified in the assessment.

Targeted Interventions

The use of assessments to identify antecedents related to conflict in the couple can help family counselors develop specific, individualized goals to resolve domestic disputes. Early goal-directed interventions that can target the couple's specific antecedents can be developed and may lead to a higher likelihood of more efficient and effective resolutions, thus reducing the number of cases that escalate to high conflict.

Interventions may go beyond the court system and extend to referrals to outside sources for parenting classes, individual or family counseling, or education programs. The ability to identify these areas, focusing on the concepts that have been identified in this study, could allow the courts to have an idea of the conflict potential as soon as the case is filed.

For example, if the antecedents that are identified fall within the category of the outcomes of childhood experiences, individual counseling geared towards examining the background and experiences of the individual may be most appropriate. On the other hand, if the antecedent falls within the category of unresolved relationship issues, found within the concept of relationship influences, some type of family or coparenting counseling may be most appropriate in order to help the couple work through the hurt that may have occurred during the relationship and improve communication going forward.

Although systemic influences are more difficult to directly act upon, since the system may be slow or unable to change, the couple's perception of the system can potentially be modified. Providing early education, even upon filing, regarding the limitations of the court can be helpful to allow the couple to know what to expect moving forward. Shifting the focus and providing specific education on the areas identified in this concept may be helpful to reduce the conflict and move couples through the system in a more cooperative manner.

The ability to identify the concepts and accompanying antecedents may facilitate the courts and counselors to identify and respond to antecedents and therefore set more realistic goals for their clients. Goals could be based on individual assessments that lead to targeted interventions. It can provide a checklist of sorts to help both the courts and

counselors be aware of the potential for a case to escalate to high conflict and allow them to be able to intervene earlier, as soon as antecedent issues are identified. This ability to identify antecedents provides an advantage to the courts and counselors and may help prevent cases from escalating to an uncontrollable level.

Future Research

The first step in future research would be to expand the current study to additional counties with additional participants. This expansion could help to determine if the antecedents are consistent in other counties, and particularly counties with differing geographic entities, such as urban and rural. Additionally, the development of an assessment instrument to identify antecedents would allow for more specific interventions for the couple. This assessment could range from an in-depth instrument to a simple checklist of antecedents. Further research into targeted early interventions to address each antecedent would allow the success of each intervention to be measured in order to determine the effectiveness of each.

Limitations

The major limitations of this study are related to the participants involved. All of the participants came from one Friend of the Court office located within Oakland County Circuit Court. The transferability of the findings would have been higher had participants from Friend of the Court offices from other counties been included. The choice of county also may have an effect on the transferability of the findings. While Oakland County has areas of both very high socioeconomic status and areas of very low socioeconomic status, overall it is one of wealthiest counties in Michigan. Expanding this study to other

counties in Michigan, including both rural and urban areas, would further strengthen the study.

Although saturation was reached with eleven participants, additional participants in other areas would have further strengthened the study and provided richer findings. This too can be remedied moving forward as additional participants can be included in future studies expanding to other counties.

Conclusion

The identification of the three concepts, systemic influences, outcomes of childhood experiences, and relationship influences, and the recognition that these concepts can be divided into external and interior barriers can be seen as a first step in developing individualized interventions based on the specific needs of the couples involved in the dispute. The grounded theory that was developed allows for research to move forward with regard to assessment tools, goal setting specific to identified antecedents, and targeted interventions. These next steps could lead to the reduction of the number of high conflict cases in the court system and on counselor's caseloads, and can reduce the conflict, ultimately providing a better environment for the children involved.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol
A Grounded Theory of Antecedents that Lead to High Conflict Disputes in Couples

INTRODUCTION
Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this research project. I am grateful to have this conversation with you today about your experiences in working with high conflict couples.
Do you have any questions about the informed consent? By participating in this interview, can you confirm that you are providing consent? As a reminder, you can stop the interview process or any aspect of participation at any time without penalty. Can also redact portions of the interview.

As outlined in the initial email requesting your participation, this study will explore the factors that lead to couples having highly conflictual relationships. I will ask a series of questions today to help facilitate a dialogue about your experiences. Some of the areas we will explore to identify those factors can include (a) your definition of high conflict; (b) your experiences working with difficult, highly conflictual couples; (c) your beliefs about interventions; and (d) your thoughts about the factors that contribute to highly conflictual relationships.

1. Tell me a little about your experience working as a Custody and Parenting Time Specialist.
2. Describe some experiences you have had working with couples who are highly conflictual, who you may see often or may file many motions for custody or parenting time.
   a. Based on your experiences of couples who are highly conflictual, what are similarities between these couples and couples you would describe as less conflictual.
   b. What are some differences?
3. Describe how you typically intervene with a family when the couple is experiencing a great deal of conflict.
   a. What types of interventions work well? Why?
   b. What types of interventions do not work well? Why?
4. What barriers to treatment do couples with a great deal of conflict present?
5. In your own words, how would you define high conflict?
   a. What do you see as the components of high conflict?
   b. What are examples of high conflict?
6. In your experience, how do you think a high level of conflict develops between couples?
7. What factors do you believe contribute the most to the development of highly conflictual relationships?

8. Is there anything else you would like to share about working with couples that have highly conflictual relationships that we have not discussed, or that has come up for you as we have had this conversation?

Thank you for your time.

REMAINING ITEMS:
·   *Ask if they can recommend an individual that meets the selection criteria to interview next (review selection criteria with participant).*

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

Consent Form for Research
Determining the Antecedents that Cause High Conflict Domestic Disputes

Introduction
You are being asked to be in a research study that is being done by Kelli Anderson, MA, LPC, NCC, a doctoral candidate, under the direction of Stephanie Crockett, PhD, NCC, Associate Professor, Department of Counseling, the faculty advisor for this project.

Your decision to participate in this study is voluntary. You can choose to stop your participation at any time or skip any part of the study if you are not comfortable. Your decision will not affect your present or future relationship with Oakland University, the researcher, or the Counseling Department

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this research study is to explore and determine the factors that lead to high conflict relationships.

Who can participate in this study?
You are being asked to participate in the study because you are employed by the Friend of the Court as a Custody and Parenting Time Specialist and have been for at least six months, thus having surpassed the probationary period of employment, you possess of a Master's Degree in Counseling, Psychology, Social Work, or closely related field; and you have at least two years of experience of family counseling.

How long will I be in the study?
Your participation in this study will consist of one 60 minute individual interview, as well as the potential for participation in a 60-90 minute focus group. Both of these events will occur within the next 3-4 months.

Where will this study take place?
This study will take place remotely via Zoom, at a time and place that you choose. You are encouraged to choose a private setting for your interview.

What do I have to do?
You will be asked to participate in an individual interview, and potentially participate in a focus group. The interview and focus group will focus on areas such as your definition of high conflict; your experiences working with difficult, highly conflictual couples; your beliefs about interventions; and your thoughts about the factors that contribute to highly conflictual relationships.

- You will be assigned a pseudonym and will be asked to use that pseudonym on your demographic sheet. You will also be asked to change your Zoom name to your pseudonym prior to the interview commencing. Instructions on how to do so will be provided.
- The interview will be recorded via Zoom and will be used for data analysis purposes.

Are there any risks to me?
There are no known research-related risks or discomforts for this study.

With many research studies, there is a risk that someone who is not part of this research may accidentally see your personal information. Safeguards will be in place to minimize this risk by keeping your research records as confidential as possible. When the results of this research are published or presented at conferences, no information will be included that personally identifies you.

Once data analysis is completed, the recordings will be destroyed.

Only pseudonyms should be used during the interview. No group member should tell anyone outside the group anything that was said during the group session. However, we cannot guarantee that any information discussed in the group will be kept private.

Are there any benefits to me?
Although there may be no direct benefits to you, the results of this study may benefit others in the future.

Will I receive anything for participating?
You will not receive anything for participating in this study.

Who could see my information?
Your research records may be shared and reviewed by the following groups:
- Representatives of the Oakland University Institutional Review Board and/or other regulatory compliance staff, whose job is to protect people who are in research studies.
- Regulatory authorities who oversee research (Office for Human Research Protections, or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies)

De-identified data may be used or distributed to another investigator for future research use without additional informed consent from you.

When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that personally identifies you.

Who do I contact if I have questions about this study?
Kelli Anderson, MA, LPC, NCC
kbanderson@oakland.edu
586-354-5309

Faculty Advisor:
Stephanie Crockett, Ph.D., NCC
crockett@oakland.edu

For questions regarding your rights as a participant in human subject research, you may contact the Oakland University Institutional Review Board, 248-370-2762.

APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHIC SHEET

Demographic Sheet

Please respond to the following questions and return this sheet to Kelli Anderson at kbanderson@oakland.edu prior to your scheduled interview.

Thank you.

1. Gender:

2. Age:

3. Ethnicity:

4. Marital Status (Single, Married, Divorced, Widowed, Partnered):

5. Years of Experience as a Custody and Parenting Time Specialist:

6. Years of Experience as a Mental Health Professional:

7. Degree Area (e.g. Counseling, Psychology, Social Work):

8. Previous Family Counseling Related Jobs and Years Held:

9. Approximate Total Caseload:

10. Approximate Percentage of High Conflict Cases on Caseload:

APPENDIX D

IRB APPROVAL

Institutional Review Board

Date: April 22, 2022

Study #: IRB-FY2022-168

Study Tile: Determining the Antecedents Present in High Conflict Domestic Disputes

Submission Type: Initial

IRB Decision: Exempt

Research Team:
Kelli Anderson
Stephanie Crockett
Samantha Jennings

Based on applicable federal regulations, the above referenced study has been determined to be Exempt, with the following categories:
Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).
Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Letter and Consent Document:
This letter along with the IRB approved (date-stamped) consent document can be found in Cayuse in the
Submission Details page under Letters and Attachments, respectively.
The IRB date stamped consent document must be downloaded and used in consenting participants.

Permission from Research Sites:
Please note the following:

- This IRB exemption determination letter means that this research has met one or more of the federal criteria for exemption per 45 CFR 46.104- Exempt Research.
- Before the research is initiated, permission to conduct research at a given site must be obtained from all research locations listed in the IRB submission. You must keep copies of all such permission letters for your files.
- It is the responsibility of each researcher to follow all applicable policies and procedures of any outside institution where the research will be conducted.

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