Identifying Indicators of High-Conflict Divorce Among Parents:
A Systematic Review

Premela Deck
Sarah Eisensmith
Brittany Skinner
Jacqueline Cafaro

Abstract: The burgeoning field of forensic social work supports clients engaged in the legal system. Forensic social work professionals working in family court will often be called upon to assess family dynamics, provide treatment to reduce maladaptation post-divorce, and advise divorcing parents as they navigate the complexities of court. Of particular interest to the forensic social work field are the various risks and protective factors that escalate or mitigate interparental conflict throughout the divorce process. Interparental conflict is a primary moderator accounting for psychological and physiological differences between children of divorced parents and children with intact parents. This systematic review examined the factors that contribute to conflict in divorcing parents and ways to identify high-conflict cases. Peer-reviewed articles (n=11) were systematically selected using rigorous methods, including PRISMA-P protocols for systematic reviews and database searches using the search string "conflict AND divorce*." Articles were extracted to identify themes of varying levels of conflict. There is no consistent definition of high conflict in pre-divorce parents, and recent articles offer new conceptualizations of this construct. All studies that met inclusion criteria for the review identified at least one of five themes of pre-divorce conflict: conflict resolution/communication, social network, parent characteristics, satisfaction with agreements, and pervasive mistrust.

Keywords: Forensic social work, high-conflict divorce; high-conflict parents; high-conflict separation; systematic review

Poor psychological and physiological outcomes in children of divorced parents compared to children of married parents are often due to the presence of interparental conflict (Hald et al., 2019). Children from traumatic divorces often have long-lasting effects, particularly in terms of their overall well-being and ability to maintain functional social relationships (van der Wal et al., 2018; Wolfinger, 2005). Concerningly, research suggests approximately one-third to one-fourth of all divorces in the United States involve high levels of conflict (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Visser et al., 2017). This rate seems consistent with other countries with the Netherlands, for example, reporting nearly 20% of divorce cases being high-conflict (van der Wal et al., 2018). And while high-conflict cases may represent the minority for legal professionals, they require 90% of family court resources, delaying resolution and burdening the court system (Neff & Cooper, 2004; Smyth & Moloney, 2017).

_____

Premela Deck, JD, PhD, LICSW, Family Law Attorney, Clinical and Forensic Social Worker, SD Family Services, Canton, MA. Sarah Eisensmith, PhD, LCSW, MEd, Researcher, Academic Consultant, and Clinical and Forensic Social Worker, AHB Forensics and Consulting, Durham, NC. Brittany Skinner, LICSW, Clinical Mental Health Professional, West Wareham, MA. Jacqueline Cafaro, MSW, LCSW, Forensic and Clinical Mental Health Professional, SD Family Services, Canton, MA.

Despite the attention to interparental conflict and knowledge of the negative impact of conflict on children, the literature still lacks a clear definition and conceptual model for identifying high-conflict divorce cases (Polak & Saini, 2018). Instead, "high conflict" seems to be an ambiguous umbrella term used to describe divorce cases that evolve in a manner inconsistent with the majority of divorce cases. For the typical divorce case, interparental conflict is expected during the divorce process (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010). This expected conflict usually subsides within one to two years from separation as the family successfully adjusts to a post-divorce structure (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Johnston, 1994; Smyth & Moloney, 2019). However, for the atypical divorce case, this conflict may remain high due to prolonged litigation, physical or psychological abuse, significant disruption in familial relationships (e.g., parental alienation), or post-divorce maladjustment (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010). In these atypical (i.e., high-conflict) cases, forensic social work professionals are called upon by the family court to assess the family system and advise on appropriate scaffolding measures in order to effectively support the minor children affected by the conflict.

Given the many reasons a case may be considered high-conflict, it is difficult to create specific criteria that equates a case to being high-conflict. As a result, many cases may be labeled high-conflict retrospectively as children exhibit poor outcomes often associated with high-conflict divorces, such as behavioral issues, poor academic performance, or mental health concerns (Polak & Saini, 2018). This retrospective labeling may also explain the literature's focus on post-divorce rather than pre-divorce interparental conflict. A clear definition of high-conflict divorce and identification of predictors of high conflict during the divorce process will facilitate increased research opportunities that may ultimately lead to early recognition of these cases. Such early recognition will allow forensic social work professionals to identify proactive interventions to safeguard against escalating family conflict and support children's well-being.

However, failing to address pre-divorce conflict and differentiate it from post-divorce conflict may contribute to negative outcomes for minor children in high-conflict cases. As discussed, defining high conflict for divorce cases requires an acknowledgment of the stage of divorce for the family, as certain levels of conflict are tolerated and expected during the divorce process, specifically during the pre-divorce stage. Ongoing conflict in cases where divorce judgment was entered years previously, for example, but the family remains in Court, may be considered pathological and deserving of the term high-conflict (Johnston, 1994; Ponzetti & Cate, 2008). Recognizing divorce is not a single event in time (namely, the receipt of a divorce judgment), but instead is a process of social, emotional, and legal separation that leads to varying levels of interparental conflict throughout each stage in the process may better equip forensic social work practitioners to interact and intervene with these families (Ponzetti & Cate, 2008). Additionally, acknowledging that pre-divorce conflict may be high as a result of circumstances (i.e., the initial separation) rather than an entrenched, ongoing conflict with the propensity for increased risk of child maladjustment is critical in furthering the forensic field's conceptualization of high-conflict cases.

As noted, divorce is not a singular event, but rather a long-term series of stressors to which minor children are continually exposed. Divorce fundamentally changes one's family structure and can therefore have emotional and psychological implications for all

impacted family members (Ferraro et al., 2016). Mazur et al. (1999) note that in addition to the toll divorce takes on one's mental and emotional state, other stressors such as, "parental depression, interparental arguments, reduced contact with and inconsistent visitation by the nonresidential parent, and a decline in the standard of living" deeply impact a minor child's familial, social, educational and community systems (p. 231). As such, social workers—and those in the forensic space in particular—are uniquely positioned to examine the multiple systems at play and can recommend both clinical/mental health and macro/resource-based interventions to support the affected family and their minor children accordingly.

Stages of Divorce

Research on divorce relies heavily on theories including family stress and coping theory, general stress theory, and risk and resiliency perspectives (Booth & Amato, 2001; Ponzetti & Cate, 2008; Salts, 1985). With the stress perspective, marital dissolution is seen as a process that begins with parents intact and ends after a legal divorce decree or judgment (Booth & Amato, 2001). Researchers have conceptualized stages during this process of divorce in various ways (Ponzetti & Cate, 2008; Salts, 1985). Divorce stage theory holds that there are three stages to divorce including pre-divorce decision-making, divorce restructuring stage, and post-divorce recovery stage (Salts, 1985). The first two stages occur pre-divorce, meaning before the legal divorce decree. Specific to the pre-divorce stage, Ponzetti and Cate (2008) describe four sequential time points in the process of marital dissolution, including recognition of marital dissatisfaction, serious discussion of the dissatisfaction, action to secure a legal dissolution of the marriage, and acceptance that the marriage will end.

For pre-divorce parents, there are unique stressors that may affect the degree of conflict. Immediately following the decision to separate, parents are faced with a number of stressful changes, including reorganization in income, housing and time spent with their children, their role within the family, loss of a spouse and extended family members, and the ultimate loss of a partnership (Amato, 2005; Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2012; Johnston, 1994). Despite these unique stressors, there is little research pertaining to the predictors of conflict for parents in the initial stages of divorce (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2012; Saini & Birnbaum, 2007). Although there remains a scarcity of research that focuses on pre-divorce conflict, post-divorce conflict has received considerable attention by researchers and predominantly focuses on its relation to child adjustment (Ponzetti & Cate, 2008). Further, there is considerable research on factors that contribute to prolonged post-divorce conflict, identifying sociodemographic features (Amato, 2001; Benjamin & Irving, 2001), satisfaction with agreements pertaining to finances and custody (Arditti & Kelly, 1994; Bonach, 2005), and social network supports (Arditti & Kelly, 1994).

These two stages, pre- and post-divorce, have different social, emotional, and legal implications, and may have different factors that contribute to interparental conflict. Accepting that divorce is not a single event, but instead a process, it makes sense to distinguish between 1) the pre-divorce transitional and restructuring phase of divorce, and 2) the post-divorce acceptance and recovery stage. Ultimately, a distinction between

interparental conflict pre- and post-divorce may be necessary to determine whether the conflict is normal or pathological for that specific stage of the divorce process, and finally, whether intervention by a forensic social work professional is needed to facilitate successful familial adjustment and child well-being (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2012; Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2014; Johnston, 1994).
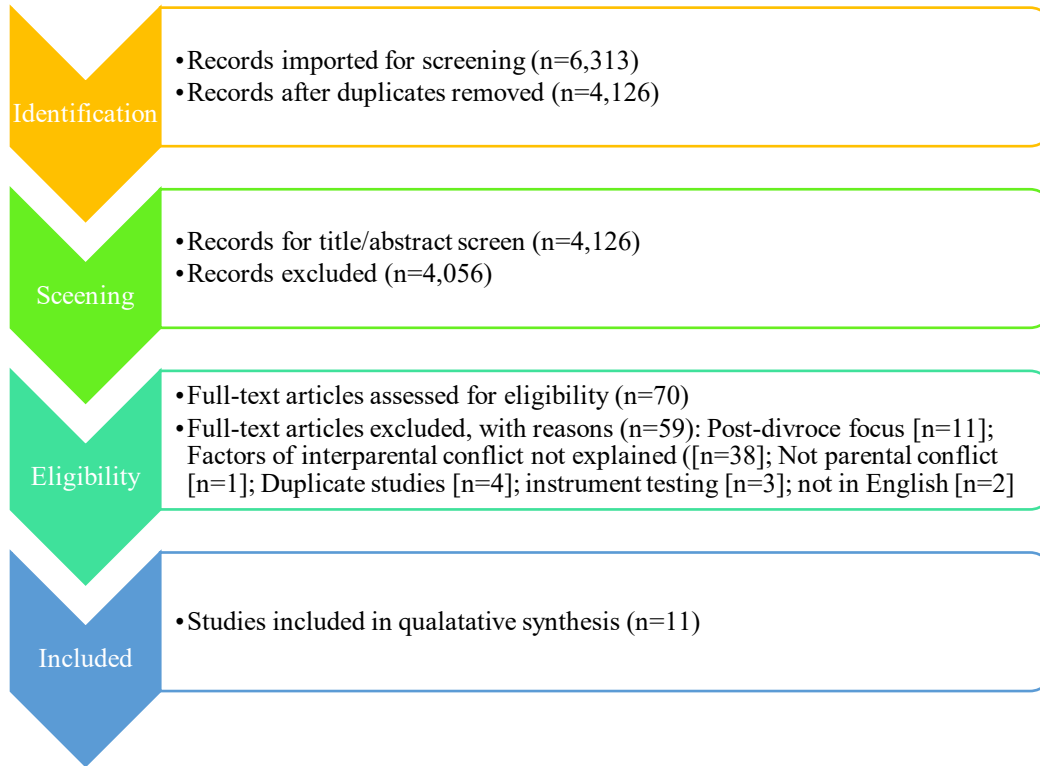
Current Study

The gap in our understanding of defining and recognizing high-conflict pre-divorce parents served as the primary rationale for this study. The literature indicates that prolonged interparental conflict correlates to child maladjustment post-divorce. Undetermined is what, if any, contributing factors prior to the legal termination of the marriage result in prolonged high conflict. The purpose of this study was to provide a systematic literature review of the social science literature to determine the factors that contribute to high conflict in divorcing parents. The review was guided by the following questions: (a) What factors distinguish high levels of interparental conflict from typical conflict for divorcing parents? and (b) What factors predict or contribute to pre-divorce conflict? This review was specifically looking to identify social or mental health factors that influence high conflict and pre-divorce conflict and in turn may support forensic social work professionals in recognizing when early interventions are needed. The importance of early intervention identification cannot be understated. Research has shown that interventions such as prevention programs and educational courses that provide support to divorcing couples early in the divorce process help to mitigate conflict, promote strong co-parent and parent-child relationships, and ultimately protect children from the negative impact of exposure to high-conflict divorce (Grych, 2005).

Methods

This review was developed using Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-analysis protocols (PRISMA-P) for systematic reviews (Moher et al., 2015). Figure 1 contains a PRISMA flow diagram depicting the various steps in this study's review process. The main goal of the review was to identify factors of interparental conflict for divorcing parents. Following the practices outlined by Litell and colleagues (2008), the following three methods were used to identify relevant conflict measurement tools: (a) database searches of peer-reviewed literature, (b) hand searches of relevant journals, and (c) reference harvesting. The electronic databases systematically searched were Social Work Abstracts, PsychInfo, and Academic Search Premier. These searches used the following search string: "conflict AND divorce."

After removing duplicates, this search yielded 4,126 articles for a title and abstract screen, of which 70 were advanced to a full-text screen, after agreement by two reviewers. Conflicts were resolved by a third reviewer. Articles were included in the review based on predetermined criteria: (a) specific to pre-divorce conflict, (b) printed in English, (c) focused on defining or describing conflict, and (d) could be either theoretical or empirical. Articles were excluded for (a) testing instruments to measure conflict ($n=3$), (b) interparental conflict was a dependent variable in an article otherwise focused on a related

topic (e.g., child outcomes, categories of interventions, program evaluations; *n=38*), (c) the type of conflict discussed is not in relation to romantic relationships or divorce (*n=1*), (d) not in English (*n=2*), duplicate studies (*n=4*), and post-divorce focus (*n=11*). Articles were not excluded based on publication date. Ultimately, there were 11 articles included in this review.

Identification
- Records imported for screening (n=6,313)
- Records after duplicates removed (n=4,126)

Sceening
- Records for title/abstract screen (n=4,126)
- Records excluded (n=4,056)

Eligibility
- Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n=70)
- Full-text articles excluded, with reasons (n=59): Post-divroce focus [n=11]; Factors of interparental conflict not explained ([n=38]; Not parental conflict [n=1]; Duplicate studies [n=4]; instrument testing [n=3]; not in English [n=2]

Included
- Studies included in qualatative synthesis (n=11)

Next, data were systematically extracted from the 11 articles included in the review using an extraction spreadsheet developed and piloted for this study. The spreadsheet captured areas relevant to the research questions guiding this review, including study design, theories and models, definitions of conflict, predictors of pre-divorce conflict, study objectives and research questions, relevant measures, as well as implications, strengths, and limitations.

From the extraction spreadsheets, predictors of pre-divorce conflict were identified through thematic analysis (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Textual summaries pertaining to predictors of pre-divorce conflict were created for each article. From the preliminary coding in the extraction spreadsheets, two reviewers organized the emerging themes into meaningful clusters, using hierarchical relationships to nest themes and relate them to one another. Any discrepancies were resolved by the third reviewer (Brooks et al., 2015). Each article was then coded for the presence of these themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Table 1. *Summary of Included Articles (n=11)*

Author (Year)	Journal	Type of Article	Theoretical Framework	Factors of Conflict Discussed	Classification System Offered
Anderson et al. (2010)	*American Journal of Family Therapy*	Conceptual	N/A	Pervasiveness, defensiveness, aggression, escalation, negative attributes, dualistic thinking, strong negative affect, emotional reactivity, lack of safety, mutual distrust, triangulation	1) pervasive negative exchanges 2) hostile, insecure emotional environment
Bergman & Rejmer (2017)	Journal of Child Custody	Empirical	Conflict of Values; Conflict of Interest; Life Trajectory	Time with the child, communication, finances, child's residence, childcare, cooperation, violence, addiction, child's wishes, mental or physical illness, access sabotage, threat/risk of taking child abroad, sexual assault of child	1) conflict of values 2) conflict of interest
Cohen & Finzi-Dottan (2012)	Journal of Social & Personal Relationships	Empirical	Adaptation Processes (Cramer, 2000)	Defense mechanisms, communication, negotiation	N/A
Finzi-Dottan & Cohen (2014)	Journal of Child & Family Studies	Empirical	N/A	Communication, cooperation	N/A
Johnston (1994)	Children & Divorce	Conceptual	N/A	Individual, interactional, external factors; nature of separation, vulnerability, legal conflict, hostility, distrust, & IPV, child factors	1) domain dimension 2) tactics dimension 3) attitudinal dimension
Malcore et al. (2009)	Journal of Divorce & Remarriage	Empirical	N/A	Perceived relationship quality; level of conflict; communication; issues with children; continued court involvement	N/A
Polak & Saini (2018)	Journal of Divorce & Remarriage	Systematic Review	Ecological Transactional Approach	Ontogenetic, microsystem, exosystem, & macrosystem factors	1) ontogenetic (individual) 2) microsystem (family) 3) exosystem (community) 4) macrosystem (culture)
Ponzetti & Cate (2008)	Journal of Divorce	Empirical	N/A	Conflict, love, maintenance, ambivalence, trust	N/A
Seirup (2014)	UMI Dissertation Publishing	Dissertation	N/A	Contentiousness, conflict, personality	N/A
Smyth & Moloney (2019)	Australian & New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy	Conceptual	N/A	Family law issues; ideological beliefs, attitudes, & values; family violence & abuse; Mental Health; Substance, & alcohol abuse; other addictive behaviors	1) Circumstantial conflict 2) Entrenched or enduring conflict
Smyth & Moloney (2017)	Family Court Review	Conceptual	N/A	Reactive &entrenched hatred	N/A

Table 2. *Characteristics of Empirical Articles (n=6)*

	Sample				Research Design		
Author (Year)	**n**	**Characteristics**	**Design**	**Method**	**Instruments Used**	**Predictors Assessed**	**Findings**
Bergman & Rejmer (2017)	33	None provided	Qualitative Cross-sectional	Summons applications, statements of defense from parents, rapid information inquiries & custody investigations	N/A	Parental disputes	More mothers than fathers requested sole custody. Majority of cases involved children under 9 years old. Majority of cases were a conflict of values.
Cohen & Finzi-Dottan (2012)	71	Mean age 41.5 for men & 37.5 for women; married average of 11.2 years; average 2.4 children; 38% men & women college degree; 46.45% of men & women "average" economic situation.	Quantitative Cross-sectional	Hierarchical linear modeling analyses on questionnaires to Israeli divorcing couples	Relationship between Former Spouses Scale; Conflict Tactics Scale; Defense Style Questionnaire; Life Orientation Test-Revised; Perceived Social Support & Perceived Social Undermining scale; Temperament Survey for Children & Parental Ratings	Coparenting via negotiation & defense mechanisms	Conscious use of negotiation & unconscious use of mature defense mechanisms were associated with better co-parenting.
Finzi-Dottan & Cohen (2014)	207	123 women & 94 men; Mean age 39.8; Mean length of marriage 10.8; mean # of children 2.4; 33% college degree; 49% average economic situation.	Quantitative Cross-Sectional	Two stepwise hierarchical regressions on questionnaires to divorcing Israeli parents	N/A	Coparenting	Negotiation as a successful co-parenting technique. Negotiation & gender contributed to communication & cooperation.
Malcore et al., (2009)	280	147 women & 133 men; mean length of marriage 9.5 years; average # of children 1.7	Quantitative Cross-Sectional Archival Data	Multiple regression analyses using survey results administered to high-conflict parent class	N/A	Perceived relationship quality; level of conflict; communication; issues with children; continued court involvement	Parents' ability to agree, the inclusion of children in the parental conflict, & parental communication were significant predictors of high conflict
Ponzetti & Cate (2008)	107	57 men & 50 women; mean age of 36.7; average length of marriage 10.2 years	Mixed Methods Cross-sectional	2 hour-Interviews using retrospective interview technique & questionnaires; Regression analysis	Dyadic Trust Scale (Larzelere & Huston (1980); Braiker & Kelley (1979)	Conflict, love, maintenance, ambivalence, trust	As individuals move toward legal termination of their marriage, the level of conflict changes. Levels of conflict peaked during discussion phase. Dyadic trust, ambivalence, & maintenance were significant predictors of conflict.
Seirup (2014)	125	72 Women & 53 men; Average age 42.1; Average length of marriage 10.9; 103 with children & 22 reported not having children.	Dissertation Quantitative Cross-sectional	Hierarchical multiple regression	NEO personality Test; Revised Conflict Tactics Scales	Contentiousness, Conflict, Personality	Best predictor of level of conflict was the participant's report that their partner's personality was extremely different from their own. Personality prototypes were not significantly correlated with the level of conflict.

Results

Examination on interparental conflict for divorcing parents can be gleaned from social science literature and clinical literature, which is reflective in the range of journals publishing this research. These studies were found in nine journals: *American Journal of Family Therapy; Journal of Child Custody; Journal of Social and Personal Relationships; Journal of Child and Family Studies; Children and Divorce; Journal of Divorce & Marriage; Journal of Divorce; UMI Dissertation Publishing; Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy;* and *Family Court Review*. All 11 articles were published between 1994 and 2019. Of the articles, six were empirical and five were conceptual. Table 1 provides key information for each of the reviewed articles.

The empirical articles included in this review are a mixed-methods study, a qualitative study, and four quantitative studies. One of the four quantitative studies was a dissertation. The range of predictors identified and tested in these studies is indicative of the multifaceted nature of high-conflict pre-divorce and the ongoing research on conceptualizing high-conflict pre-divorce. Table 2 provides study characteristics of the empirical articles identified in this review.

Key Findings

Distinguishing "High Conflict" in Pre-Divorce Cases

Among the articles included in this study, there was wide variability in the definition of "high conflict." This finding is consistent with comprehensive reviews of the divorce literature conducted by Anderson et al. (2010), Polak and Saini (2018), and Stewart (2001) who noted that the lack of definitional clarity contributes to the difficulty professionals may face when creating successful interventions. Many (*n*=5) of the articles included in this study offered a new categorization system to conceptualize and define high conflict. Notably, of these five articles, three were published relatively recently (between 2017-2019), indicating ongoing dissatisfaction with the existing conceptualizations of "high conflict."

The seminal article by Johnston (1994) elucidates three dimensions in categorizing conflict: the domain dimension, the tactics dimension, and the attitudinal dimension. The domain dimension includes disagreements over specific divorce-related issues, such as custody, financial support, and property division. The tactics dimension refers to how a couple resolves disputes, for example, through reasoning, avoidance, or aggression. The third dimension, attitudinal, refers to the negative emotions felt or expressed between the parties.

Next, Anderson et al. (2010) state that couples with high conflict have distinct attributes that fall into one of two categories: "Pervasive Negative Exchanges" and "Hostile, Insecure Emotional Environment" (p. 16). First, "Pervasive Negative Exchanges" focuses on interactions between the couple. The authors state that these exchanges are dominated by conflict and offer "pervasive" to describe behavior between the couples that exhibit defensiveness, aggression, escalation, and/or negative attributions and dualistic

thinking consistently throughout their exchanges. Next, "Hostile, Insecure Emotional Environment" addresses the strong negative affect, emotional reactivity, lack of safety, mutual distrust, and triangulation of others (often children) resulting from the consistent pervasive negative exchanges.

In creating their categorization system, Bergman and Rejmer (2017) note that not all conflicts lead to court disputes and sought to understand why some conflicts were more difficult to settle than others. They offer two categories, conflict of interest and conflict of values, and further state that some conflicts may have elements of both categories. Conflicts of values represent a difference of opinion, such as how to raise a child. Conflicts of interest involve a scarce resource, for example, time with a child. In their study, the authors found that most conflicts *(n=*31/33*)* were conflicts of values.

Polak and Saini (2018) conceptualize high-conflict disputes based on an ecological transactional framework. From their systematic review, the authors concluded that various systems are necessary to identify and understand conflict within families. The authors suggest considering risk factors and indicators for high conflict within ontogenetic (individual), microsystem (family), exosystem (community), and macrosystem (culture) categorizations. Their review concluded that conflict is a complex construct that occurs in several systems, accounting for the observed definitional difficulties.

Finally, Smyth and Moloney (2019) recently conceptualized a two-category definition for high conflict involving "circumstantial conflict" and "entrenched or enduring conflict" (p. 8). The authors state that pathological hatred may account for why some couples continue their fighting for years after their divorce. Circumstantial conflict, or reactive hatred, is time-limited, for example, initial reactions to the decision to separate. However, entrenched conflict is an enduring negative attachment that may be fueled by extreme differences in personality and dysfunctional interpersonal dynamics.

Although these five conceptualizations of conflict in divorce suggest a lack of agreement on how best to define and recognize high-conflict pre-divorce cases, these conceptualizations have some significant overlapping themes. For example, all of the conceptualizations consider conflictual communications between the parents as at least one component of high conflict. In fact, Anderson et al. (2010) solely focus on verbal and non-verbal communication, underscoring the import of negative communication patterns to predict high conflict in divorce. Secondly, four of the five studies acknowledge the divorce process as a contributor to heightened conflict, indicating some type of situational conflict (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Johnston, 1994; Polak & Saini, 2018; Smyth & Moloney, 2019). Essentially, these four articles indicate that the adversarial nature of divorce and the court system in which the conflict sits, particularly around the division of resources, can influence parents' conflict and necessitate the involvement of a forensic social work professional. The consensus from these articles pertaining to negative communications and the divorce process's influence supports further study of interparental conflict specific to the pre-divorce stage.

Predictors of Pre-Divorce Conflict

As summarized in Table 2, the articles included in this review focus on a number of predictors for high-conflict pre-divorce. The relevant predictor data from these articles were extracted through thematic analysis, and the predictors have been arranged in the following five themes: Conflict Resolution/Communication, Social Network, Dissatisfaction with Agreements, Parent Characteristics, and Pervasive Mistrust.

Conflict Resolution/Communication. Conflict resolution and communication are grouped in one theme to capture the idea that a couple's communication practices impact their ability to resolve conflict. For example, a couple who communicates well may engage in calm reasoning to resolve their dispute (Johnston, 1994). Cohen and Finzi-Dottan (2012) further found that negotiation as a conflict resolution tactic contributed to successful co-parenting during the divorce process. Anderson et al. (2010) found that high-conflict couples engage in pervasive negative exchanges that escalate over time and hinder effective conflict resolution. Additionally, high-conflict couples may use aggressive communication practices that focus on person-focused attacks rather than issue-focused conflict resolution (Anderson et al., 2010). Poor communication was also found to result in cooperation difficulties where one parent may be unable to contact the other to make decisions on behalf of their child, which may result in a parent filing for sole custody of a child (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017). This finding is consistent with the literature noting that cooperative communication is linked to greater paternal involvement after the divorce (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2012).

Social Network. In their ecological transactional framework, Polak and Saini (2018) discuss the exosystem, or the community, as a critical subsystem in understanding conflict. They note that a parent's perceived disapproval of a former spouse from their network is significantly related to more co-parenting conflicts. This network is further discussed as including family, friends, new significant others, and even professionals, including mental health and legal professionals, who may "cheerlead" and support a parent's position. Finzi-Dottan and Cohen (2012) also note that family may also become aligned with their relatives in a way that might interfere with the interparental relationship by bolstering one parent's perspective rather than encouraging a second perspective. Anderson et al. (2010) describe this phenomenon as triangulation, when a third person is brought into the relationship, perhaps through venting or gossip. Unfortunately, Anderson et al. (2010) note that children are often the target of the triangulation, which exposes them to a parent's emotional distress or anger. Nonetheless, a strong social support network may be crucial to improving parental well-being, leading to reduced interparental conflict (Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2012). Parents may find the emotional support of their friends and family, and even the additional childcare options may result in reduced stress and better adjustment post-divorce.

Dissatisfaction With Agreements. Johnston's (1994) first dimension in their categorization of conflict is the domain dimension which includes disagreements over financial support, property division, custody, and access to the children. These disagreements can be further grouped into differences related to finances and to the children (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017). Unsurprisingly, difficulties with access to finances

and access to the children lead to conflict between co-parents (Malcore et al., 2009; Polak & Saini, 2018).

Indirect Parent Characteristics. The fourth theme noted in this review was the effects of indirect parent characteristics on interparental conflict. The term indirect parent characteristics is used to describe attributes of a parent that may influence their overt reactions to a conflict. Examples of these attributes include a parent's defense mechanisms, degree of hatred for the other parent, negative attributions, dualistic thinking, or personality characteristics.

Defense mechanisms result in a distortion of reality and are prevalent when an individual is motivated by self-protection rather than conflict resolution (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2012). Cohen and Finzi-Dottan (2012) note that people with immature defense mechanisms, such as splitting and projection, tend to foster hostility, mistrust, anxiety, and poor communication that may increase interparental conflict. Further, Cohen and Finzi-Dottan (2012) found that mature defense mechanisms (e.g., humor or altruism) were associated with better co-parenting. These defense mechanisms may result in dualistic thinking. Dualistic thinking occurs when a partner is rigid in their thinking and considers a situation as binary: right or wrong; black or white. Anderson et al. (2010) state that dualistic thinking ultimately "vilifies the other and portrays the self as victim or under attack" (p. 18).

Hatred (Smyth & Moloney, 2017) and ambivalence (Ponzetti & Cate, 2008) were described as ways in which a former partner may project personal uncertainties toward a new dynamic. Hatred reflects a strong, negative assessment of the former partner and may manifest as reactive to a situation or deeply entrenched hatred (Smyth & Moloney, 2017). Ambivalence, however, reflects a feeling of uncertainty towards a former spouse. Ponzetti and Cate (2008) are unclear if the conflict leads to ambivalence towards one's partner or if ambivalences escalate the conflict.

Finally, the literature suggests that personality characteristics should be considered in determining an individual's impact on interparental conflict. Polak and Saini (2018) note that personality disorders and psychopathology have been found to be prevalent in high-conflict parents. Particular attention in the literature has been made to self-differentiation, narcissism, and attachment (Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2012; Malcore et al., 2009; Polak & Saini, 2018; Seirup, 2014).

Pervasive Mistrust. Pervasive mistrust is the final theme identified in this review and is used to describe a parent's distrust, for various reasons, of the other parent, and particularly in their ability to care for the couple's child(ren); Anderson et al., 2010; Johnston, 1994). Ponzetti and Cate (2008) found that distrust was significantly negatively related to conflict noting that as conflict increased over the marriage dissolution process, dyadic trust decreased. This review revealed a number of reasons, though unlikely an exhaustive list, of why a parent may distrust the other parent, such as violence and general unfitness to parent.

Several articles refer to violence as an indicator of parental conflict in divorcing parents (Anderson et al., 2010; Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Johnston, 1994; Polak & Saini, 2018;

Smyth & Moloney, 2019). These articles suggest that considering violence in a conceptualization of high-conflict parents requires understanding the difference between reactive violence and ongoing violent relationships. Reactive violence may occur during the heightened emotional environment of the separation and divorce process as opposed to ongoing, severely violent relationships categorized by tactics of control, domination, fear, manipulation, and degradation of one spouse by the other (Anderson et al., 2010). A further distinction is made between violence against a former spouse and violence against a child. Violence against a child may come from one of the parents, or it may come from a parent's new partner (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017).

Unfitness to parent is the final "catch-all" term to describe why a parent may mistrust the other. Mental illness falls within this category due to its complex nature and potential influence on a parent's distrust. Other factors that fall within this term include aggression, lack of appropriate housing, and insufficient childcare (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Polak & Saini, 2018; Smyth & Moloney, 2019). Additionally, misuse of alcohol and/or drugs was specifically identified by several articles in this review as a reason for a parent to distrust the other (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Polak & Saini, 2018; Smyth & Moloney, 2019).

Finally, it is worth noting that several articles (e.g., Anderson et al., 2010; Bergman & Rejmer, 2017) describe children resisting or refusing to see a parent (the non-favored parent) as the source of conflict in divorcing parents. The literature on these resist-and-refuse dynamics is extensive, but it is worth noting that these behaviors may fall under the pervasive mistrust category both for favored and non-favored parents. For favored parents, it is possible that there is an underlying reason for a child refusing to see the other parent that has little to do with the favored parent, known as realistic estrangement, and this may increase the favored parent's mistrust of the non-favored parent. In cases of parental alienation, the non-favored parent may rightfully distrust the favored parent as there is a pattern of the favored parent poisoning the child's interactions, or sabotaging access to the non-favored parent (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017). These dynamics are of particular interest to the forensic field as professionals are often called by the court to assess resist-and-refuse dynamics, and determine how to mitigate further harm to the parent-child relationship.

Discussion

The goal of this review was to analyze the state of the literature and identify the factors contributing to interparental conflict for divorcing parents. Specifically, this study sought to determine: (a) What factors distinguish high levels of interparental conflict from typical conflict for divorcing parents? and (b) What factors predict or contribute to pre-divorce conflict? Eleven articles were identified that met the inclusion criteria and critical findings of these articles are summarized in Table 1.

In the first key finding, this review notes that researchers are continuing to conceptualize conflict and distinguish typical conflict from high conflict. This is evidenced by the new categorization systems offered by several of these articles. Of note, none of these articles categorize conflict by level (i.e., low to high). Instead, high conflict is described as a unique and salient subtype of divorce-related conflict. This suggests that

identifying high-conflict cases may not be accomplished with one threshold, but may instead require consideration of a variety of factors, as well as what, if any, implications exist if multiple factors are present. For example, any case that has a history of intense domestic violence may be considered high conflict, regardless of how the parents score on a measurement tool or even how the parents perceive the conflict. In this instance, physically violent cases represent a subtype of the cases with conflict in divorce. However, the mere presence of physical violence may implicate several of the themes identified here, including conflict resolution, parent characteristics, and pervasive mistrust, suggesting that it may be possible to define high conflict based on the number of themes or indicators that are implicated in a case.

Similarly, the literature does not offer factors that apply to low-conflict couples versus high-conflict couples, but instead describes numerous factors that may indicate high-conflict couples. As Polak and Saini (2018) write, conflict is displayed on many levels, from individual personality characteristics to involvement of macrosystems like child protection services. To thoroughly define high conflict would involve consideration of predictors across many systems. Conclusively, determining a threshold or an identification system for high and low conflict cases would require additional research, including determining if some indicators are more predictive of high conflict than others or if the number of indicators present in any case is important in classification (i.e., if more indicators equate to more conflict).

This review was also uniquely positioned as it sought to look at indicators of pre-divorce conflict, which is an under-researched area of study. This review ultimately synthesized the extant literature to identify five indicators to consider when evaluating pre-divorce conflict: conflict resolution/communication, social network, dissatisfaction with agreements, parent characteristics, and pervasive mistrust.

Implications

High-conflict divorce cases—however defined—continue to receive significant attention from practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. Social work education uniquely prepares social workers to engage in high-conflict family cases as social workers are educated to think systemically. Social workers of clinical and macro inclinations are needed to support this population of families in crisis following a decision to divorce. Correctly assessing the level of conflict prior to the divorce judgment may be instrumental in intervention research for forensic clinicians, legal professionals, and policymakers. Correctly assessing and identifying interparental conflict can facilitate appropriate care and treatment needed to reduce the psychological and physiological effects of divorce on parents and children (Amato, 1993). For researchers, this review suggests that a differential approach based on levels of conflict and stage of divorce are merited.

Further research is needed to conceptualize and implement these interventions and to design instruments that measure conflict and direct couples to appropriate supports. Finally, for policymakers, high-conflict divorces present a significant burden on social resources. Families in conflict may overuse social welfare services as allegations of child abuse or neglect are deployed as a litigation tactic (Saini & Birnbaum, 2007; Scafadi,

2008). Polak and Saini (2018) note that allegations of child maltreatment in high-conflict cases are common and that police and child protection services are frequently involved in high-conflict families.

Future research is needed to explore the significance of the five aforementioned themes in identifying pre-divorce conflict. As this study included both empirical and conceptual articles, it will be important to determine if these five themes are empirically supported predictors of pre-divorce conflict. Further, additional research should focus on identifying threshold markers for high and low-conflict couples.

Strengths and Limitations of This Review

All studies included in this review were published in English in peer-reviewed journals. It is likely that additional studies exist that were conducted and perhaps published in other languages, or perhaps never published at all, that could have provided further insight into the factors associated with high-conflict divorcing parents. Future research should include non-English and gray literature. The decision to exclude these potential articles from this review was made due to the potential unreliability of these findings and the potential bias in the intended audience. As this systematic review was an initial step in the development of a measurement tool, the literature needed to be peer-reviewed papers.

It is also likely that there is much to learn from the broader conflict literature, not specific to divorce. However, an investigation of the larger construct of conflict was not the of this study because it specifically sought to develop the foundational and theoretical knowledge to create a new instrument to measure conflict in divorcing parents. Future reviews could take a more general approach and synthesize the results from studies for all types of conflict literature. Finally, this study reviewed articles published in the social science literature. It is possible that other disciplines, particularly the legal literature, may have other relevant articles. Legal literature was excluded from this search as ongoing legal conflict is a known indicator of high conflict that is also discussed in the social science literature. This review sought to identify social and mental health indicators of high-conflict divorce, in addition to continuous litigation and legal strategies which are currently recognized as high-conflict markers by legal scholars and within social science literature.

Despite these limitations, this review also has several strengths. First, this review closely adhered to PRISMA guidelines and used rigorous methods to identify relevant studies. In addition, two reviewers participated in the title, abstract, and full-text review to determine the studies' eligibility. A third reviewer settled any conflicts between the reviewers. Further, this study used multiple sources to identify relevant articles, including reference harvesting of relevant articles. In addition to the use of rigorous methods, this review offers a unique contribution to the divorce literature. To our knowledge, no review to date has systematically examined conflict factors specific to divorcing parents, which is a critical period in setting the tone for interparental conflict post-divorce. This review provides a valuable contribution to the field of divorce research and forensic social work by synthesizing the current state of the literature on divorce conflict for parents in the process of separation. This information can be used in the forensic space to identify mitigation factors and intervention strategies to de-escalate conflict and reduce a child's

likelihood of maladaptation post-divorce. Additionally, increasing a forensic social work professional's access to research and tools that enable them to identify a family's needs at the beginning of the divorce arc will lead to the implementation of preventative and intentional strategies that will mitigate conflict, benefit the entire family system, and ultimately relieve the overburdened and under-resourced family court system.

References

References marked by an asterisk reflect articles reviewed and included in this study.

Amato, P. R. (1993). Children's adjustment to divorce: Theories, hypotheses, and empirical support. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 55*(1), 23-38.

Amato, P. R. (2005). The impact of family formation change on the cognitive, social, and emotional well-being of the next generation. *Future of Children*, *15*(2), 75-96.

*Anderson, S. R., Anderson, S. A., Palmer, K. L., Mutchler, M. S., & Baker, L. K. (2010). Defining high-conflict. *American Journal of Family Therapy 39*(1), 11-27,

Arditti, J. A., & Kelly, M. (1994). Father's perspectives of their co-parental relationships postdivorce: implications for family practice and legal reform. *Family relations: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies, 43*(1), 61-67.

Benjamin, M., & Irving, H. (2001). Money and mediation: Patterns of conflict in family mediation of financial matters. *Mediation Quarterly, 18*, 349-361.

*Bergman, A., & Rejmer, A. (2017). Parents in child custody disputes: Why are they disputing? *Journal of Child Custody, 14*, 134-150.

Birnbaum, R. & Bala, N. (2010). Towards a differentiation of "high conflict" families: An analysis of social science and Canadian case law. *Family Court Review, 48*(3), 403-416.

Bonach, K. (2005). Factors contributing to quality coparenting: Implications for family policy. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 43*(3-4), 79-103.

Booth, A., & Amato, P. R. (2001). Parental predivorce relations and offspring postdivorce well-being. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 63*(1), 197-212.

Brooks, J., McCluskey, S., Turley, E., & King, N. (2015). The Utility of template analysis in qualitive psychology research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 12*(2), 202-222.

Buchanan, C., & Heiges, K. (2001). When conflict continues after the marriage ends: Effects of post-divorce conflict on children. In J. Grych & F. Fincham (Eds.), *Interparental conflict and child development* (pp. 337-362). Cambridge University Press.

Cramer, P. (2000). Defense mechanisms in psychology today: Further processes for adaptation. *American Psychologist, 55*(6), 637-646.

*Cohen, O., & Finzi-Dottan, R. (2012). Defense mechanisms and negotiation as predictors of co-parenting among divorcing couples: A dyadic perspective. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships 30*(4), 430-456.

Emery, R. E. (1994). *Renegotiating family relationships: Divorce, child custody, and mediation.* Guilford Press.

Ferraro, A., Malespin, T., Oehme, K., Bruker, M., Opel, A. (2016). Advancing co-parenting education: toward a foundation for supporting positive post-divorce adjustment. *Child Adolescent* Social *Work Journal*, *33,* 407-415.

*Finzi-Dottan, R., & Cohen, O. (2014). Predictors of parental communication and cooperation among divorcing spouses. *Journal of Child and Family Studies 23*, 39-51.

Gyrch, J. (2005). Interparental conflict as a risk factor for child maladjustment: Implications for the development of prevention programs. *Family Court Review, 43*(1) 97-108.

Hald, G. M., Strizzi, J. M., Cipric, A., & Sander, S. (2019). The Divorce Conflict Scale. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 61*(2), 83-104.

Johnston, J. R. (1994). High-conflict divorce. *Children and Divorce 4*(1), 165-182.

Littell, J. H., Corcoran, J., & Pillai, V. (2008). Systematic reviews and meta-analysis. Oxford University Press.

Maccoby, E. E., & Mnookin, R. H. (1992). *Dividing the child: Social and legal dilemmas of custody*. Harvard University Press.

Malcore, S. A., Windell, J., Seyuin, M., & Hill, E. (2009). Predictors of continued conflict after divorce or separation: Evidence from a high-conflict group treatment program. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 51*(1), 50-64.

Mazur, E., Wolchik, S. A., Virdin, L., Sandler, I. N., West, S. (1999). Cognitive moderators of children's adjustment to stressful divorce events: the role of negative cognitive errors and positive illusions. *Child Development, 70*(1), 231-245.

Moher, D., Shamseer, L., Clarke, M., Ghersi, D., Liberati, A., Petticrew, M., PRISMA-P Group. (2015). Preferred reporting items for systematic review and meta-analysis protocols (PRISMA-P) 2015 statement. *Systematic Reviews,* 4, 1-9.

Neff, R., & Cooper, K. (2004). Parental conflict resolution: Six-, twelve-, and fifteen-month follow-ups of a high-conflict program. *Family Court Review, 42*(1), 99-114.

*Polak, S., & Saini, M. (2018). The complexity of families involved in high-conflict disputes: A postseparation ecological transactional framework. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*.

*Ponzetti, J. J., & Cate, R. M. (2008). The developmental course of conflict in the marital dissolution process. *Journal of Divorce, 10*, 1-15.

Saini, M., & Birnbaum, R. (2007). Unraveling the label of "high-conflict": What factors really count in divorce and separated families. *Journal of the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 51*(1), 14-20.

Salts, C. J. (1985). Divorce stage theory and therapy: Therapeutic implications throughout the divorcing process. *Journal of Psychotherapy & The Family 1*(3), 13-23.

Scafidi, B. (2008). *The taxpayer costs of divorce and unwed childbearing: First-ever estimates for the nation and all fifty states.* Institute for American Values.

*Seirup, A. (2014). *Conflict tactics in high-conflict divorce as informed by individual personality traits* [Doctoral dissertation, Massachusetts School of Clinical Psychology]. ProQuest Dissertations.

*Smyth, B. M., & Moloney, L. J. (2017). Entrenched postseparation parenting disputes: The role of interparental hatred? *Family Court Review, 55*(3), 404-416.

*Smyth, B. M., & Moloney, L. J. (2019). Post-separation parenting disputes and the many faces of high-conflict: Theory and research. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy 40*, 74-84.

Stewart, R. (2001). The early identification and streaming of cases of high-conflict separation and divorce: A review. *Her majesty the Queen in Right of Canada*, represented by Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada.

Thomas, J., & Harden, A. (2008). Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews. *BMC Medical Research Methodology, 8,* 1-10.

Van der Wal, R., Finkenauer, C., & Visser, M. M. (2018). Reconciling mixed findings oof children's adjustment following high-conflict divorce. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 28*, 468-478.

Visser, M., Finkenauer, C., Shoemaker, K., Kluwer, E., van der Rijken, R., van Lawick, J, Bom, H., Clsien de Schipper, J., & Lamers-Winkelman, F. (2017). I'll never forgive you: High-conflict divorce, social network, and co-parenting conflicts. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 26*, 3055-3066.

Wolfinger, N. H. (2005). *Understanding the divorce cycle: The children of divorce in their own marriages.* Cambridge University Press.

Author note: Address correspondence to Premela Deck, SD Family Services, 793 Washington Street, Canton, MA 02021. Email: pdeck@sdfsmass.com