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## **Apart yet Still Together: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of How Coparents Navigate Conflict Post-Divorce**

Rebecca Anderson

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Apart Yet Still Together: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of How Coparents  
Navigate Conflict Post-divorce

by

Rebecca Anderson

A Dissertation Presented to the  
College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences of Nova Southeastern University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy


Nova Southeastern University  
2020


**Nova Southeastern University**  
**College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences**

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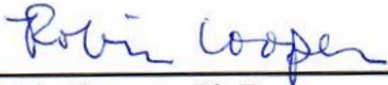
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## Dedication

To Isaac and Ella. Thank you for inspiring me to be the best I can be. May you always remember to reach for the stars.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family and friends who have supported me through this journey. I would also like to say a special thank you to my dissertation chair, Dr. Robin Cooper. Thank you for your insights and encouragement throughout the process. Thank you also to my committee for giving your time and energy to aid in the completion of my degree. And lastly, I would like to thank all my participants for their willingness to be both courageous and vulnerable in sharing their stories.

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## Abstract

This study explored the experiences of parents choosing to coparent after divorce to understand the challenges and conflicts they encountered and how they managed those conflicts. The qualitative study included the experiences of 9 mothers and 9 fathers through semi-structured interviews. Participants ranged in age from 31 to 52 years old. While all shared custody, they varied in custody arrangements. The number of years divorced ranged from one to fifteen years. Parents had anywhere from one to four children between them. At the time of divorce, children ranged in age from seven months to 18 years old. The narratives were analyzed using an interpretive phenomenological analysis approach. Using this approach, the shared experiences were summarized using emergent themes that correspond to the central research question: How is conflict managed between parents who are divorced and continuing to coparent? The analysis conducted summarized the commonalities among their narratives. By continuing a coparenting relationship after divorce, these parents encountered the challenges of redefining their roles as they transitioned from spouses to post-divorced coparents, reorganizing families, and managing conflict and communication as it applied to their coparenting goals. This study explored an important issue impacting many families in a world where divorce is prevalent, and the reorganization of families is necessary. Results from this study contribute to the field of conflict analysis and resolution by offering additional insight into how policies and conflict resolution practitioners may better support parents manage the complexities of this process. Recommendations for future research are included.

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Divorce is a reality that affects over 800,000 families in the United States (CDC/NCHS National Vital Statistics System, 2015). While the causes and impacts of divorce are diverse and not always fully known, conflict during the dissolution of marriage can have a negative impact on both parents and children (Francia & Millear, 2015; Schudlich et al., 2015; O'Donnell et al., 2010). Given so many marriages end in divorce, it is important to understand how people manage their post-divorce coparenting relationships.

Because of the complex nature of people and relationships, there are many facets of the process to consider (Masheter, 1997). Dynamics of attachment, contact frequency, conflict, and hostility have an impact on interpersonal conflict post-divorce (Masheter, 1991, 1997). The ability for couples to communicate and agree greatly impacts how quickly they settle on a custody agreement and how many times they return to court. The more times the couple appeared in court, the more conflict they had Malcore et al., (2009). Research has shown the ability for parents to get along post-divorce has positive impacts on the parents and children. This is especially important when looking at the potential long-term consequences of child health and stability, parental depression, and its influence on subsequent generations (Wallerstein, et al., 2000; Amato, 2003; Amato & Cheadle, 2005; & Hertherington, 1993).

If children in joint custody homes have better outcomes than single parent homes as Bauserman (2002) found, then understanding how parents manage their coparenting relationships is essential. Whiteside (1998) describes the process of coparenting as reciprocal in nature. When parents are better adjusted so are the children. O'Leary, Franzonni, Brach, & Zirps (1996) also found when parents can support each other in their roles as coparents, parents respond positively stating they think of themselves as the other parent as good parents. As

parents reestablish their roles post-divorce, they negotiated desired closeness and dependency as well as levels of communication (Christensen & Shnek, 1991). This process and balance allow them to choose how they will resolve conflict and make decisions (Feinberg, 2003).

While there is extensive quantitative literature documenting some of the various origins and impacts of these dynamics, there is little information on the lived experience of individuals going through the process. While the number of conflict episodes is sometimes captured in the literature and reported as somewhat infrequent (Masheter, 1991, 1997), how the conflict is managed remains largely unknown. How do coparents disagree and how do they manage those disagreements? It is important to understand how these barriers to communication and cooperation impact their ability to continue coparenting. Johnson & Roloff (2000) found serial arguing appeared to have the most negative impact on perceived resolvability, though relational confirming behaviors between arguments mitigated relational harm. Understanding this experience is important in developing programs and informing those involved with custody agreements to assist families through the transitions and hardships. By exploring how divorced parents manage conflict in their coparenting relationships, insight gained can help to alleviate some of the negative impact by understanding the phenomenon more thoroughly.

### **Problem Statement**

Nearly 50% of children grow up in a home in which their parents are no longer married (Ahrons, 1994). While this may be a frequent experience for children, it does not have to be a negative one (Amato, 2014). The divorce rate has remained fairly constant over the last decade, so one can assume this will be an ongoing factor in the lives of American couples (USCB, 2020), which makes understanding the experience particularly relevant. Overt and covert conflict can be harmful to the wellbeing of both children and adults (Wallerstein et al., 2000; Johnson & Roloff,

2000). Amato and Keith (1991) found that children are no better off in a high conflict home with both parents than if their parents divorced.

While much of the research on divorce has focused on high conflict couples, this represents only 10-15% of divorcing couples, essentially not the norm for most divorces (Wallerstein et al., 2000). Gottman (1994) suggests conflict is normative in relationships. Couples, married couples, parents, married parents, and divorced parents are going to disagree on issues. Two studies found that on average 62% of parents reported having differing opinions on child-rearing issues (Bowman & Ahrons, 1985; Goldsmith, 1980). It is important then to understand not only the unique characteristics of the high conflict group but those who coparent cooperatively and manage conflict.

### **Justification**

Increased understanding is necessary to inform judges and courts when addressing coparenting agreements. Results from this study have implications for practitioners and educators in developing intervention models. Understanding what parents experience when they are ending a marriage and beginning a coparenting relationship after divorce can help us understand how they view conflict, communicate, and reason through their daily lives. Without this understanding, we are left to draw conclusions based upon groupings of behaviors and preferences and less on the individuals who are going through the experience. While measuring the number of conflicts, personality traits, coparenting types, and communication patterns is extremely important, there is an added depth in hearing the lived experiences of those parents.

Exploring their narratives provided insights into how they were managing the everyday conflicts as well as larger issues. Increasing our knowledge may help to alleviate some of the negative impact on parents and children now and in future generations (Amato & Cheadle, 2005;

Wallerstein et al., 2002). Understanding how conflict is managed post-divorce while coparenting is essential to creating better intervention programs and increasing tools available to help parents navigate the on-going transitions and challenges. This study adds to the body of research available on various aspects of divorce and coparenting with a unique lens into how divorced parents continue to manage conflict once the dynamic of the relationship has changed.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of post-divorced coparents in an effort to provide a voice for their insights, successes, and challenges. By drawing out these themes, the researcher contributed to the field of conflict resolution. The goal of this research was to listen to and collectively give voice to their experiences and narratives. In addition to engaging readers in exploring these experiences, this study compliments research in the field by answering the following central research question: How is conflict managed between parents who are divorced and continuing to coparent?

The interpretative phenomenological approach began with conducting interviews. Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling. The interviews were analyzed in depth to draw out themes to better capture the lived experiences across participants. This approach was chosen in an effort to capture how parents make sense of their experiences navigating conflict in their post-divorced parenting relationships.

### **Researcher Context**

I developed an interest in this topic when I taught a court-ordered class for parents experiencing custody changes, mostly due to separation or divorce, called Parenting Under Two Roofs. This course focused on various aspects of parenting and how to keep the child from getting stuck in the middle of parental conflict. Throughout the course participants would share

stories about their experiences (the person going against them in court was not allowed to attend the same class). Participants in the class would comment on each other's experiences, often offering empathy or a nod of agreement. I found most people wanted to talk about their experiences.

They wanted to share their struggles. They wanted to talk about missing their children. They wanted to share about how the other parent did not want to be involved or wanted to be over-involved and controlling. Frequently a participant or two would stay after class to ask questions or to tell me more about their experiences. Some of these experiences brought me to tears. A few things were clear: parents wanted to be understood, they wanted to know they were not the only ones, they loved their children and could not stand the thought of them suffering.

You can assume if 50% of families experience divorce, then about half of my friends are divorced as well. I have some friends who coparent with few hiccups and some where it is an ongoing struggle. From these experiences, I wanted to find a way to collect these stories. I knew there must be some common themes among their experiences, some collective insights these parents had to share. If only I could give them a voice, sharing these findings would help us better understand and honor their experience. Knowing that they all do it differently, but they are not alone in their shared challenges and joys.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Divorce Prevalence**

Divorce is a common factor in the lives of children in most developed, western societies. The United States has the highest divorce rate historically, though European countries are seeing a rise as well (Amato, 2014). According to the World Marriage Data in 2008, prepared by the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, the United States had the thirteenth highest crude divorce rate in the world. Specific rates of divorce for individuals are difficult to find. Census data reports total number of divorces and total number of marriages in any given year, but it does not track by couple, so you cannot state how many of those married at any given time are now divorced. None the less, those rates are comparable over time to indicate increases or decreases. An interesting study utilizing the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth data was able to track marriages and divorces of a group of baby boomers during the 1957-1964 period. They found that by age 46, of those who married, 57.2% of men and 60.6% of women were divorced (Aughinbaugh, Robles, & Sun, 2013).

In 1969, Governor Ronald Regan of California signed the nation's first no-fault divorce bill, thus kicking off what is called the divorce revolution. Over the next decade, virtually all other states followed. From 1960-1980, the divorce rate more than doubled from 9.2 per 1,000 married women to 22.6 per 1,000 married women. Other factors such as the sexual revolution, rise in feminism, and the psychological revolution also occurred during the '60s and '70s, encouraging independence and seeking individual fulfillment (Alwin, 1989).

Compiled census data shows the crude divorce rate in the early 1900s was around .9 for every 1,000 Americans. Crude divorce rates increased to 3.2 by the 1960s and peaked at 5.3 by 1979. The crude divorce rate as of 2108 is 2.9 (CDC, 2018). The National Survey for Family

Growth reports that between the years of 2011-2015, the probability that those who were married would be divorced within 10 years was 36% and continued to increase, by 15 years 45%, and by 20 years 53% (CDC/National Center for Health Statistics, 2017). In a report derived from 2009 US Census Bureau data, Kreider & Ellis (2011) reported that 20.5% of men had experienced divorce and 22.4% of women.

Other factors that impact an increased likelihood of divorce are high unemployment, marriage under the age of 20, non-intact status of family of origin, and marriage preceded by cohabitation (CDC/NCHS National Vital Statistics, 2002). Data also shows that consistently women are more likely to initiate divorce than men particularly when they have small children and there is abuse or substance abuse issues present. (Amato & Previti, 2003; Herrington & Kelly, 2002).

With the rise of cohabitation, the divorce statistics have slightly decreased over the last 5 years, but still over 800,000 are affected by divorce (CDC/NCHS National Vital Statistics System, 2015; US Census Bureau, 2018). The median age at first marriage in the United States continues to rise, and the marriage rate has decreased. In 2018, 29% of young adults ages 18 to 34 were married, a significant decrease compared to 59% of young adults were married in 1978 (Census Bureau, 2018).

Currently, the largest moderating factor in the likelihood of a marriage ending in divorce is education (National Health Statistics Report, 2012). Those who have a bachelor's degree or higher are far less likely to get a divorce. Aughinbaugh et al. (2013) found higher levels of education to have the largest impact on deterring divorce. While divorce rates fluctuate, nearly 800,000 get divorced each year. Given this phenomenon is experienced by so many parents and



children, it is important to understand as many dynamics as possible to mitigate any negative effects.

### **Impact of Divorce**

Some of the most robust factors impacting the success of redefining the family unit and child well-being are the level of conflict between parents and how they manage it (Francia & Millea, 2015; Hetherington, 1993; Dreman, 2000). Several longitudinal studies seek to investigate the impact of divorce on children over time. Many of these studies explore the psychological problems children experience, children's ability to form and maintain happy intimate relationships throughout their life, and children's experience of parental closeness (Wallerstein, et al., 2000; Amato, 2003; Amato & Cheadle, 2005; & Hetherington, 1993).

Utilizing the data from the Marital Instability Over the Life Course Study (MIOLC), a twenty-year longitudinal study which began in 1980, Amato (2003) found the more familial transitions a child experiences, the higher the risk on their psychological wellbeing. The divorce of their parents is often the first transition followed by other changing life circumstances such as remarriage, new parental romantic relationships, puberty, parent involvement, and economic changes all have an impact. Analyzing data collected in the eleven-year Virginia Longitudinal Study, Hetherington (1993) found the many transitions following divorce such as economic hardship, remarriages, and relocations also had a negative impact on adolescent's externalizing and internalizing behaviors, further supporting that transitions over time have a cumulative impact on psychological wellbeing. In Wallerstein's (2000) study of children of divorce over twenty-five years, she found many of the major effects on children of divorce are not observed until later in life,

“Divorce is a cumulative experience. Its impact increases over time and rises to a crescendo in adulthood. At each developmental stage divorce is experienced anew in different ways. In adulthood it affects personality, the ability to trust, expectations about relationships, and ability to cope with change” (p. 298).

Again, utilizing data from the MIOLC study, Amato & Cheadle (2005) also found that divorce in the grandparent generation (G1) impacted the level of education obtained in their grandchildren (G3). It is important to note that while Wallerstein’s takes a firm approach in reporting a majority of children are negatively impacted by divorce, which runs long into their adulthood, it does not mean that children from divorced families are not well-adjusted (Hetherington, 1993). Amato (2003) found that for a majority of children of divorce, their later life experiences were only moderately impacted.

Both Wallerstein (2000) and Amato & Cheadle (2005) speculated that, “effects of divorce and other family problems in one generation becomes the causes of similar problems in the next generation” (Amato, 2005; p.193). Wallerstein and colleagues (2000), argue that divorce impacts close relationships in the lives of children because parents are supposed to be role models of positive interpersonal skills. She demonstrates these generalizations in her case studies of how children of divorce seek unsuitable partners, have many romantic relationships, or their own marriages end in divorce. Amato (2003), found that 20% of children of divorce report more marital discord in their marriages with an overall shift of marital conflict from lower to more moderate levels. Many other studies support the notion that marital discord and divorce runs in families (Wolfinger, 1999; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). Hetherington (1993) reported an increase in marital discord and a decline in marital satisfaction for those who had remarried after divorce

than for those who were married and never divorced, indicating challenges from the initial divorce may be causing challenges in subsequent relationships.

When looking at how parent-child relationships were impacted by divorce, Hetherington (1993) reports that by 2 years after the divorce, less than a quarter of the noncustodial fathers saw their children once a week or more, and slightly more than one quarter had not seen their children in the past year. This amount of involvement continued to decrease with time. By eleven years after divorce, almost one half had not seen their children in the last year, and only 20% of fathers were seeing their children once a week or more. Amato (2003) reported divorce results in poorer father-child relationships in approximately one third of children. This effect was strong showing a shift from having a positive relationship to a negative one with their fathers. While an analysis of mother-child relationships yielded similar results, the association was not nearly as strong for mothers as it was for fathers. Throughout many case studies, Wallerstein (2000) details the challenges of children to maintain strong ties with both of their parents, especially fathers, through the divorce and long after in their lives.

Another important factor to consider when looking at the impact of divorce is conflict. Amato (2003) found that marital conflict pre-divorce greatly impacted the experience of the children post-divorce. Children of parents reporting high levels of marital discord before their divorce were better off than children with continuously married parents. However, those children with a low level of parental pre-divorce marital discord fared worse than children of continuously married parents. This suggests that parental conflict is a risk factor and challenging for children to endure. In these situations, it may be beneficial for the child to be removed from the continuous exposure of overt conflict. Therefore, making divorce a potential protective factor for some children (Amato & Keith, 1991). For those children who observed little overt conflict

while their parents were married, may struggle more with the unexpected transition of the divorce (Amato, 2003).

With the exception of abuse, whether conflict occurs is less important than the way conflict is perceived and whether it is resolved (Francia & Millear, 2015). When children are directly exposed to conflict, particularly making them feel like they are stuck in the middle, it negatively impacts their behavior, achievement, and self-esteem (Hetherington, 1993). Troxel & Matthews (2004) found parental conflict may have negative health implications for children as well. Along with health implications, conflict also has a negative effect on children's general coping skills and adjustment (Bing, Nelson, & Kelly, 2009; Francia & Millear, 2015; Wang & Amato, 2000). During the divorce process, many challenges surface such as changes in standard of living, moving multiple times, burdens of solo parenting, loss of daily contact with their children, and changes in socialization patterns (Amato, 2000; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Amato, 2000; Dreman, 2000). Often the inability to resolve conflict during the divorce process, means parents return to court on an on-going basis. Malcore and colleagues (2009) found a negative correlation between court involvement and interpersonal conflict meaning the more time coparents went to court, the more severe and prolonged the interpersonal conflict was.

In their qualitative study, Francia & Millear (2015) found the child's experience of parenting, attitude toward the other parent, and the sharing of material resources were all negatively impacted if the parents had unresolved conflict. However, if they were able to resolve conflict or diminish it, children were able to feel in control and it offered children an opportunity to learn problem-solving skills. Through children's narratives, we see parent's conflict impacts the amount of depression, crying, anger, and shame in regard to how their parent's bicker,

scream, or fight (Oppawsky, 2000). Given the risk factors associated with divorce and exposure to conflict, understanding how divorced parents manage conflict is especially important.

### **Coparenting History and Prevalence**

The post-divorce coparenting relationship is a complex task of parents sharing the responsibility of raising their children in separate homes. There is no one clear definition of coparenting, but consistent with all of the various definitions, parents continue to share parenting in one form or another (Whiteside, 1998). McHale and colleagues (2002) define coparenting as “an enterprise undertaken by two or more adults who together take on the care and upbringing of children for whom they share responsibility” (McHale, Lauretti, Talbot, & Pouquette, 2002). The original definition of coparenting was applied to nuclear families only, but since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, the belief of the right of a child to maintain a strong relationship with both parents has become a more recognized right resulting in an expanded definition of coparenting extending beyond the nuclear family (Feinberg, 2003).

There are two types of shared custody regarding children. Shared legal custody refers to both parents having access to medical and school records and decision-making regarding things such as medical care and education. Shared physical custody refers to children spending time and/or living in both parent’s homes. This can be divided in multiple ways such as 50/50, 70/30, 40/60 as percent of time in each home. There are also many different schedules for example, alternating weeks, every weekend, or arrangements to share time during each week such as two days at one home, 3 days at the other, and then two days at the other home known as a 2/2/3 schedule. The sharing of physical custody is commonly referred to as joint custody, shared custody, or dual residence and are used interchangeably.

The formal concept of shared parenting is a relatively new phenomenon. Until the 1970s, courts rarely ordered the sharing of custody between divorcing parents. The greater acceptance, both on a societal and legal level, began in the 1970s when parents started sharing parenting responsibilities and the desire for a solution other than “win-lose” in child custody disputes became more prominent. In 1975, North Carolina was the only state that had a statute allowing joint custody. Only a decade later, 30 states followed suit (DiFonzo, 2014). Cancian and Meyer (1998) reported that between 1986 and 1993, 74% of cases were awarded to mother-sole custody. In a revised report they documented that number fell to 42% of cases awarded to mother-sole custody. They also reported a dramatic increase in shared custody awards from 5% to 27% in 2008 (Cancian, Meyer, Brown, & Cook, 2014).

A common term used in considering custody arrangements is what is in the “best interest of the child” defined as,

“the primary purpose of the best-interest standard, at least formally, is to underscore the priority of the welfare of the child who is an innocent bystander to the parents’ adversarial litigation, as opposed to any presumption that treats the child’s welfare as subordinate to parental rights and entitlements” (Warshak, 2011, p. 97).

Many factors are considered when determining the best interest of the child such as: the health and safety of the child, mental health of the parent, physical health of the parent, educational opportunities, parental stability, child-care arrangement, previous primary caretaker relationships between parent and child, financial stability, court’s observation of the parents, if there is a history of abuse, or the child’s preference as the children near 18 years old (Department of Health and Human Services, 2016; New York City Bar, 2015).

The National Parents Organization publishes a report each year summarizing shared parenting trends across the U.S. They grade each state from A-F. These grades are derived from several different factors, but primarily from current legislation. These factors focus on whether the state explicitly permits shared parenting, policies that encourage shared parenting, statutes that show preference for shared parenting by encouraging parent's willingness and/or requiring courts to maximize time with both parents, and whether the statutes establish a rebuttable presumption of shared parenting even if parents do not always agree. (National Parents Organization Shared Parenting Report Card, 2019). According to their review, 180 shared parenting bills were introduced between 2014 and 2019. Of those bills, 13 in nine states have been signed into law.

### **Types of Coparenting**

Baum (2004) proposed three types of coparenting styles: cooperative coparenting, parallel coparenting, and conflictual coparenting. These three types of coparenting were influenced by how they perceived their coparenting relationship. Variance in the perception of the quality of the coparenting relationship focused on communication between spouses, frequency of interaction on topics related to the children, mutual parental support, and inter-parental atmosphere related to how tense their interactions were. These factors impacted how they viewed the overall coparenting relationship. Other influencers were level of involvement in the child's life, carrying out parenting duties, and whether they used a compromising or attack mode of addressing conflict.

The typology of these coparenting styles are as follows: Cooperative coparenting is characterized by a strong coparenting relationship on account of both parties, high levels of compromise and parental functioning, and a low use of attack mode in addressing conflict.

Parallel coparenting is characterized by a moderate coparenting relationship and parental functioning on account of both parties and moderate to high use of compromise and attack modes of addressing conflict. In this type of coparenting relationship, mothers tended to compromise more, and fathers tended to use attack mode more often. Conflictual parenting is characterized by a poor coparenting relationship on account of both parties, moderate parental involvement for mothers and low parental involvement for fathers, low to moderate levels of compromise, and high levels of attack mode for addressing conflict (Baum, 2004).

As one can see, the quality of the coparenting relationship is influenced by the skills and perceptions of both parties. Other characteristics in these typologies indicate that fathers in the cooperative coparenting group were least likely to have initiated the divorce but took more responsibility for the divorce. Those in parallel and conflictual groups spent more time in court and experienced more difficulties in the legal process (Baum, 2004).

Feinberg's (2003) ecological model of coparenting relationships involves four components which emphasize the coparenting relationship as an ever-changing dynamic, impacted by personal and familial components. The first component is childrearing agreement. This is the degree to which the parents agree on child-related topics such as morals and values, discipline, behavioral expectations, education, safety, and expectations of how children behave and interact with their peers. It is important to note that disagreement on these child-related topics does not mean negative family outcomes. Parents may agree to disagree or compromise on certain issues. The second component is division of labor. This domain relates to the division of child-rearing tasks such as arranging childcare, completing household tasks, and the responsibility of the child's financial, legal, and medical issues. The central issue in this component is not whether the contributions are equal, but whether they are satisfied with the



division and carrying out of the responsibilities. It is also important to note that flexibility and structures are key factors in reducing conflict in this dynamic. The third component of his model is support-undermining. This relates to supportiveness of each other as parents. This includes affirming the competency as a parent, acknowledging the other's contributions, and respecting each other's parenting, decision-making, and authority. If parents are supportive, the children and parents may be better adjusted, whereas parents who are undermined may become overwhelmed by negative emotions. The fourth and final component is joint family management. This component focuses on responsibility of the parents to control their behavior and communication with each other; their behaviors and attitudes impact the engagement or exclusion of other family members (high conflict may result in involving the child in disputes, causing them to feel caught in the middle); and that each parent contributes in varying degrees to the balance of whole-family interactions.

Feinberg utilized these four components and seven subscales to create the Coparenting Relationship Scale to assess interactions of the components. He found this tool to be a reliable way in further research efforts in the understanding of how these factors specifically link with parent, child, and family functioning (Feinberg, Brown, & Kan, 2012).

Beckmeyer (2014), also looked at typologies of coparenting, but focused on specific aspects of coparenting relationships such as communication, cooperation, and conflict. He believed that by focusing on these behaviors, we may get a more accurate understanding on parent's perceptions of their post-divorce coparenting relationship and detect more accurate associations between coparenting and children's adjustments post-divorce.

Beckmeyer's analysis resulted in three clusters or typologies when looking at communication, cooperation, and conflict. The first typology labeled "cooperative and involved

coparenting” had high scores in communication and cooperation and low scores in conflict. This typology is similar to the cooperative coparenting type identified by Baum (2004), Amato et al. (2011), and Maccoby et al. (1990) in that it is characterized by frequent communication about children’s needs, little attempt to undermine the other parent, and few disagreements. The second typology labeled “moderately engaged and coparenting” had lower cooperation scores and higher conflict scores than the first type. This group is similar to the parallel coparenting style mentioned in Baum’s (2004) research. The third typology labeled “infrequent but conflictual coparenting” had the lowest cooperation and communication scores and the highest conflict scores. These behaviors are similar to what Maccoby et al. (1990) called a disengaged coparenting relationship. The cooperative and involved coparenting group comprised about 31% of the sample, moderately engaged coparenting 45%, and infrequent but conflictual coparenting 24%.

The unique part of Beckmeyer’s model (2014) is how they assessed correlations between the coparenting types and children’s behaviors. They looked at both the child’s behaviors and the parent’s perceptions of their child’s behaviors. Child’s externalizing and internalizing behaviors were positively correlated with coparenting conflict and negatively correlated with coparenting communication and cooperation. Child social skills were negatively correlated with coparenting conflict and positively correlated with coparenting cooperation and communication. They found, regardless of their coparenting typology, parents perceived their children as having similar social skills and amounts of externalizing and internalizing behaviors.

## **Impact of Coparenting**

Whiteside (1998) in summary of her research from a family systems lens, suggests the impact of divorce on children and parents is reciprocal in nature. Major implications are as follows:

1. The quality of the couple's relationship post-divorce impacts how individual adults adjust. Higher levels of depression in parents is positively correlated with higher levels of conflict. In contrast, higher levels of self-esteem are associated with cooperation and support.
2. More involvement, warmth, closeness, and communication between parent and child are associated with shared childcare and cooperation among parents.
3. Higher incidents of conflict and aggression between parents are associated with negative discipline styles and rejection of the parent-child relationship.
4. The parent's management of the child and emotional relationship with the child impact child misbehavior and adjustment problems.

For those in joint custody arrangements, parents who believe that harmonious shared parenting is best for children and make it a priority, are most successful (McKinnon & Wallerstein, 1987; Steinman, et al., 1985). These parents are able to build strong bonds with their children and have higher levels of self-esteem. In order to prioritize shared parenting, they were willing to coordinate schedules, communicate regularly, and synchronize routines in both households. Not only do these successful couples believe shared parenting is best for the child, but they are also more likely to believe the other parent is a good parent. They can see the parent's relationship with the child as distinct from the ex-spousal relationship. Often those who saw themselves as good parents, saw the other parent as a good parent too (O'Leary, Franzonni, Brach, & Zirps,

1996). This positive support allows for cooperative negotiations in the amount of time spent with both parents and desired level of communication (Camara & Resnik, 1989; MacKinnon, 1989). As Whiteside (1998) points out, “the task is to maximize the possibility that a child has two good parents, rather than engaging in a debate over who is the better parent” (p. 8).

We can then conclude when parents are not able to agree and form a cooperative coparenting relationship, children also suffer. If parents are not well adjusted, then children have a difficult time adjusting as well (Whiteside, 1998). Bauserman (2002) found that children of joint custody arrangements, both legal and physical, were better adjusted than those of sole custody arrangements. An important dynamic in this equation is the benefit of children having an engaged father in their lives (Amato & Dorius, 2010). Kelly (2007) reported that only 5-7% of children lived at least one third of their time with their father. Historically a majority of mothers maintained sole custody, so it is logical to assume that when parents cannot coparent well, the relationship with their fathers is at high risk (Marsiglio et al., 2008; Mandel & Sharlin, 2008; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). In their research with families in Wisconsin, Melli & Brown (2008) found that children raised in shared parenting families had fewer health problems, were less depressed, and happier with their living arrangements than those in sole parent homes. Nielsen (2011) argues that the only way children get a chance to build relationships with both of their parents, and glean the benefit from those attachments, is for fathers to have more time with their children.

When analyzing data from the Stanford Custody Project, including over one thousand families, Maccoby and colleagues (1990) found data supporting the benefits of dual residence placement for the children. In their study, parents with dual resident arrangements reported higher satisfaction even if conflict was present. If we are to assume that logistics of taking the

children from home to home, difference in parental rules, and coordinating schedules could increase the amount of discord and decrease the amount of cooperation, then dual residence may pose increased challenges. However, even when parents reported some of these things were a challenge, they scored them as not serious. Parents reported they often did not attempt to align their rules, instead participated in parallel parenting, and scored their spouses above the mid-range for feeling the other parent was supportive of their parenting. This study, therefore, supports the notion that while dual residence custody arrangements may lend to more opportunities for disagreement and conflict, with increased communication and cooperation, there are benefits for children and parents. This may be seen as a cost-benefit analysis. When parents prioritize actively coparenting with the other parent there may be more conflict, but they feel it is worth it for the benefit of the child. When focusing on this, they focus on supporting the other parent's parenting for the child's benefit and in turn had higher satisfaction with the arrangement (Whiteside, 1998; O'Leary et al, 1996; Camara & Resnik, 1989; MacKinnon, 1989). In general, sharing custody is possible between divorcing parents, and should be encouraged for both the well-being of parents and children (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Brotsky et al, 1988; McKinnon & Wallerstein, 1987).

### **Interpersonal Conflict and Communication**

A common endeavor in the long-term study of divorce is to understand whether parents can successfully cope with the personal and psychological stress of dissolving a marriage and uncoupling while also reorganizing the family and continued involvement in each other's lives as coparents. The level of conflict prior to and through the divorce process may continue to impact their experience of conflict, anger, and preoccupation while coparenting after the divorce (Sbarra & Emery, 2005; Baum & Shnit, 2003; Masheter, 1997). Essentially, the conflict they had before

the divorce then impacted the amount of conflict they experienced while coparenting thereafter, though the topics changed to focus mostly on child custody, care taking, and parenting issues (Grych & Fincham, 1993; Hetherington, 1999; Kitzman & Emery, 1994). Maccoby, Depner, and Mnookin (1990), found that couples who reported high hostility six months after the separation, when they were still negotiating the terms of their divorce, strongly predicted their coparenting pattern a year later. Those with initially high scores of hostility were more likely to have a conflicted coparenting relationship marked with undermining each other's parenting, avoiding communication, arguing frequently, and challenges with visitation schedules. Those with low hostility scores were more likely to have a cooperative coparenting style (Maccoby et al., 1990; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). In a 12-year follow-up study, Sbarra and Emery (2005) found that even after 12 years 41% of mothers reported they can never talk to the other parent about problems with the children and 19% reported on-going conflict with their former spouse and 14.5% of fathers reported still feeling hostile toward their former spouse. These data then suggest that coparenting difficulties and hostilities may become a continued long-term pattern in their post-divorce coparenting relationships (Ahrons & Rodger, 1987).

As mentioned previously, there are many dynamics influencing how parents manage interpersonal conflict through the divorce and coparenting after. The way parents talk about, view, and feel about the divorce impacts effectiveness of coparenting and their ability to resolve conflict. Often these perceptions include how they view the other parent in general, who took ownership for the divorce, and perceptions of who was to blame for the divorce (Walzer & Oles, 2003; Bonach, 2005). Walzer & Oles (2003) found participants describing both parties as responsible for the divorce reported less conflict in their coparenting relationship. Bonach (2005)

found that 62.2% of respondents blamed the other party for the divorce. If both parties are seen as responsible, it may reduce defensiveness and lend affirmation (Walzer & Oles, 2003).

In addition to sharing responsibility, creating a new narrative in which new roles are established can help the transition and reduce conflict (Walzer & Oles, 2003; Wetheim & Donnoli, 2012). The narrative changes from being the “ex-spouse” to the “other parent”. This is an important transition in how they can work together, reduce hostility, and lessen preoccupation with the other parent. Positive friendships with low conflict and hostility can then be established (Masheter 1997). Ebaugh (1988) speaks of the challenges in a psychological divorce in that it is necessary to become ex-spouses while being reminded during on-going interactions with the other parent that they were once married. They never become non-married as they cannot erase the experience of their former marriage (Ebaugh, 1988). The successful ability to transform the relationship from emotional attachment to functional attachment is essential in coping with the presence/absence of the other parent. They are present as a parent but absent as a romantic partner (Baum & Shnit, 2003).

While Baum & Shnit (2003) argue the importance of self-differentiation and ending any emotional attachment, Ahrons (1994) suggests with continued involvement, there is often still some concept of family. There are challenging and diverse ways of drawing these boundaries in coparenting relationships. This relationship becomes bidirectional and paradoxical in nature (Gurmen, et al., 2017). Gurmen and colleagues (2017) found the quality of the parental interpersonal relationship post-divorce had a direct impact on their co-parental relationship. When the parents feel personally and emotionally involved with their ex-spouse, they are more likely to perceive the post-divorce coparenting as positive. The paradoxical nature of their finding suggests that while a better parental relationship may encourage a better co-parental

relationship, meaning they remain emotionally and personally involved, they feel more involved only when the co-parental relationship is positive.

As Whiteside (1998) states, “Advice to divorcing parents inevitably includes the challenge: Separate your parental interactions from your feelings as former spouses” (p.12). Another way of demonstrating this point is recognizing the need for parents to self-differentiate and establish new role boundaries (Kline et al., 1991; Ahrons, 1994). While parents speak of the importance of mutual support, communication, and collaboration, Maccoby & Mnookin (1992) found that some parents reported communicating only as needed. They developed more parallel parenting styles with little coordination or shared rules. Parallel parenting does not mean they disagree on how to parent, but rather use less attack mode when disagreeing and compromise more (Baum, 2004). These data support that parents can be respectful and civil in their interactions and maintain child-focused communication without having to be friends (Whiteside, 1998).

It becomes apparent there is a need to continue interactions and communication to lessen the impact of divorce on children, yet allow each other to have separate parental identities (Baum & Shnit, 2003; Ahrons, 1981; Petren et al., 2017). This can become challenging as parents uncouple since there are often feelings of grief and a need to overcome feelings of rejection (Baum & Shnit, 2003). Forgiveness may be of help in this un-coupling process and redefining their roles as coparents (Wetheim & Donnoli, 2012; Bonach, 2005). These factors are largely dependent on whether the parent feels the other parent is remorseful, the severity of the offense, and the likelihood it will happen again (Wetheim & Donnoli, 2012). Interestingly, Bonach (2005) found only 24.8% indicated they had forgiven their ex-spouse and 71.1% did not believe the other part was remorseful; supporting that while remorse and forgiveness may be important



elements to reducing conflict and working together, many couples may not be utilizing these tactics.

Conflict management styles and personality also play a role in resolving interpersonal conflict (Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2012; Baum & Shnit, 2003; Wetheim & Donnoli, 2012). Those with a yielding style of conflict management provided more opportunities for cooperation. Those with forceful styles or narcissistic traits had more conflict and were more prone to revert to attack mode (Baum & Shnit, 2003). This is an important factor to understand and explore given the negative impact that on-going overt conflict such as yelling, openly arguing, and belittling each other has on child well-being (Buehler et al., 1997; Petren et al., 2017). Utilizing negotiation as a conflict tactic can greatly impact parental communication and cooperation, with the understanding that negotiation allows for parents to convey their opinions verbally and to consider the other parent's point of view. Negotiations may then only be available to parents with mature defense mechanisms (Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2014). By demonstrating negotiation and compromise, parents are modeling prosocial behavior which encourages children to model the same behavior in interactions with their peers, leading to higher self-esteem and more positive play behaviors (Camara & Resnick, 1989).

Communication patterns of coparents can greatly impact their ability to resolve conflict (Christensen & Shnek, 1991). When thinking about a relationship, often there are differences in desired closeness and interdependence or autonomy and independence (Christensen, 1998; Jacobson, 1989). As new parental roles are defined and configured, there may be differences in these dynamics. This often leads to a demand/withdraw cycle. One parent demands more closeness by pursuing conflict and criticizing that they do not do enough, while the other parent seeks more distance and avoids conflict by withdrawing, defensiveness, or avoidance. This cycle

and incompatibility between desired closeness may impact their ability to both positively communicate and resolve conflict (Christensen & Shnek, 1991). According to Gottman & Carrere (1994) this cycle results in dysfunctional communication patterns. As already mentioned, cooperation, compromise, and negotiation are helpful ways of resolving conflict and increasing communication between coparents (Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2014; Camara & Resnick, 1989). It is thus demonstrated that this type of communication pattern may be detrimental in the coparenting relationship. Coparents must find a way to balance desired closeness and autonomy to communicate effectively (Christensen & Shnek, 1991).

This overview of relevant research in understanding dynamics of coparenting and divorce is a foundation for identifying key themes in what may make families successful and thrive during these transitions. While there are many complex dynamics of communication and conflict, Whiteside's meta-analysis of nine studies revealed that over half (57%) of divorced couples rated themselves as having excellent or cooperative relationships with their former spouse, indicating coparenting after divorce does go well for many couples (Whiteside, 1998). In the next section, several theoretical frameworks are investigated as potentially helpful lenses in exploring these dynamics.

### **Theoretical Framework**

**Human Needs Theory.** John Burton is known for his contribution in developing the human needs theory (Rubenstein, 2001). This theory places the primary focus on a set of universal needs all humans have. These needs are not biological in nature, but rather are unique to humans to produce non-violent behavior (Etzioni, 1968). The focus on needs lends understanding into why people react to conflict in an attempt to meet their needs.

Burton credits Paul Sites with the labelling of, “Eight essential needs whose satisfaction was required in order to produce “normal” individual behaviour... primary needs for consistency of response, stimulation, security, and recognition, and derivative needs for justice, meaning, rationality, and control” (Rubenstein, p.1). If these needs are not met, conflict ensues.

Maslow (1908-1970) also identified five basic human needs: physiological, safety, affection, esteem, and self-actualization. These five needs are hierarchical with physiological on the bottom and moving up in the order listed above. His theory stressed that while this is not a fixed order and the needs may not have to be met fully to move onto the next level, there is some order to the needs (Katz, Lawyer & Sweedler, 2011). An example often shared is the need for children to have food in order to pay attention in class, hence all of the school programs which provide breakfast and lunch to children whose families cannot afford it.

When looking at how to reduce conflict, one must look at how these needs are or are not being met in relationships (Rubenstein, 2001; Etzioni, 1968). By looking at conflict in this frame, it allows us to analyze the most appropriate times to intervene and the need to look at the underlying cause of conflict. Conflict may arise as a result of unresolved issues that present themselves as something else. Looking at conflict through this lens allows the observation of unmet needs as the primary basis for conflict (Rubenstein, 2001).

Parents going through divorce often have needs for security, recognition, meaning and control (Walzer & Oles, 2003). Walzer and Oles (2003) found through the shared narratives of divorced parents, that the ability for one party to acknowledge their part in the demise of the relationship was essential in reducing conflict. This theory illuminates the reason divorced parents may have conflict as they want to be heard and assured that their needs and the needs of

their children can and will be met. People often become more defensive and salient in their views when they feel the need to defend themselves (Walzer & Oles, 2003).

This theory is limited by its micro focus. When looking at individuals and whether needs are met or not, it is challenging to understand complex needs and who is responsible for meeting those needs. Individuals have different needs, and there is not a one size fits all solution to meeting those needs. Individuals are invested in their needs being met, but do not always have the agency to meet their needs or present them in an understandable manner. Often people must rely on others to help them meet their needs, which can pose additional challenges.

**Conflict Transformation.** Conflict transformation can be both descriptive and prescriptive of the direction resolution can take (Lederach, 1995). Conflict transformation believes in the transforming of relationships in the context of a larger structure. Not only is the conflict resolved, but the relationship between members can also be transformed and changed for the better. Hugh Miall (2004), argues conflict transformation is a unique theory, different than the mere management of conflict. As Maill (2004) describes, “The common pattern is for conflict to broaden (suck in new issues), widen (suck in new actors) and intensify (suck in new victims). But it is also possible for conflict to be transformed, as parties shift positions and adopt new goals, new actors emerge, and new situations develop allowing for new relationships and changed structures” (p. 7).

As Lederach (1995) emphasizes in his systematic approach, conflict transformation is unique in its dialectical nature. The conflict is not quickly or definitively solved, but rather transformed. An important process in transforming conflict is reconciliation. As Lauderach (1997) describes,

“Reconciliation, in essence, represents a place, the point of encounter where concerns about both the past and the future can meet. Reconciliation-as-encounter suggests that space for the acknowledging of the past and envisioning of the future is the necessary ingredient for reframing the present. For this to happen, people must find ways to encounter themselves and their enemies, their hopes and their fears” (p.27).

This theory captures two important processes occurring in the ongoing negotiation of new roles regarding the raising of their children. Conflict transforms the way we look at ourselves and others. Change is a result of enduring the complex process which leads to transformation. The conflict is then viewed as an important agent for transforming relationships. Through the complex challenges of post-divorce shared parenting, doors may be opened for resolution. The need for transforming conflict is evident as these are on-going relationships which impact the well-being of the parents and their children.

While conflict transformation is relevant to the experience of these parents, it must be understood conflict is not always clear and concrete in nature. Conflict transformation is a process which takes time and is ever changing. When a decision needs to be made you must analyze possible solutions and select from criteria relevant at that time. Conflict transformation focuses not only on deciding in that moment, but the on-going process and how it impacts the relationships of those involved. While any direct conflict in the moment is the focus (e.g. how do we reach a settlement or construct a parenting agreement), transformation is a process focused on resolving a specific issue in a way that begins to transform how other on-going conflicts are addressed.

**Principled Negotiation.** Fisher, Ury, & Patton (1991) established the concept of principled negotiation. This concept suggests four fundamental principles in negotiating with the

other party 1) separate the people from the problem; 2) focus on interests, not positions; 3) invent options for mutual gain; and 4) insist on objective criteria. Principled negotiation is particularly relevant as parents negotiate the many changes in the relationships with each other and their children. In their book *Getting to Yes*, they discuss the need for communication in the process of understanding the other party's motives and emotions supporting their position. Without communication there is no negotiation but instead a situation where each party makes their own decision with little regard to the other party's feelings or opinions. While important and necessary, this communication can be a real challenge, "Communication is never an easy thing, even between parties who have an enormous background of shared values and experiences" (p.32).

Underlying the concept of principled negotiation is the need to "separate the people from the problem" (Fisher et al., p. 17). Often people's motives are complex. Situations and people become entangled. Expressions of anger over a difference of opinion in how a decision should be made, becomes anger directed at the person for how they made the decision. The problem then becomes the person versus the situation at hand. In this complex dance of focusing on the problem and shared interests, it is important to preserve the reputation of the other party.

Focusing on interests and not positions is the ability to not just focus on what each party wants and how these positions are in conflict, but rather it is the ability to understand why they have decided that position (Fisher et al, 1991). "The basic problem in a negotiation lies not in conflicting positions, but in the conflict between each side's needs, desires, concerns, and fears" (p.40). Their interests may align, and a resolution can be reached by better understanding the desires and needs of the party and addressing them in the decision made.

As Fisher and colleagues (1991) suggest, inventing options for mutual gain requires inventing creative options. Hinderances to the ability to think creatively are criticism, looking for a single answer, assumptions of a win-lose outcome, and a narrow lens focusing only on the issue at hand. An important part of the process in reaching an agreement is focusing on understanding the problem and brainstorming how it may be solved in such a way that each party gets some of what they want. By stressing the similarities in shared interests, parties can co-create solutions that factor in what both parties deem important. This is particularly important in preserving on-going relationships.

Insisting on objective criteria allows parties to take the focus off their differing opinions and look at what is fair in any given situation (Fisher et al., 1991). Negotiations are not just a matter of wills, but a broader perspective of what is fair. This requires both parties to reason and respond openly to the reasoning of the other party. This is an opportunity to expand the negotiation to include stated objectives. By doing so, the focus shifts from positions and desires to reasonable solutions (Fisher et al, 1991).

One of the aims of using the principled negotiation strategies, is to preserve the on-going relationship. This theory is a helpful framework in understanding the successes and challenges with how parents continually negotiate on-going decisions involving the children including finances, time sharing, rules, and various other dynamics. For the parents who are able to separate the people from the problem, focus on interests, invent options for mutual gain, and insist on using objective criteria, possibilities for resolving and negotiating agreements are plentiful.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

The Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach focuses on the lived experiences and the meaning derived from significant life events through a hermeneutical approach. This research method is effective in developing a better understanding of their experience, “the complex understanding of ‘experience’ invokes a lived process, an unfurling of perspectives and meanings, which are unique to the person’s embodied and situated relationship in the world” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p.21). Specifically, this research method allows for an in-depth study of fewer participants given its idiographic approach. Because of IPA’s commitment to idiography, it necessitates a more in-depth examination of fewer participants than some other qualitative methods such as thematic analysis or grounded theory (Smith et al., 2009).

Because IPA is concerned with an in-depth understanding of how people perceive and make sense of their experiences, it necessitates an open-ended interview approach attempting to find a balance between leading and being led through the process. By using broad, open-ended questions, the participant sets the parameters in the discussion of the topic (Smith et al., 2009). This also means asking a fewer number of questions with the ability to dive deeper and ask for expansion and clarification during the interviews. Smith et al. (2009) describes the underlying qualities of the IPA researcher to be: open-mindedness; flexibility; patience; empathy; and the willingness to enter into, and respond to, the participant’s world” (p. 55).

This approach aims to explore the lived experience of participants’ involvement with a given phenomenon in a particular context and who have the experience in common. Specifically, this study intended to represent and interpret the lived experience of parents embarking on the journey of continuing to coparent after divorce. This study explored how parents make sense of



the various changes in dynamics such as communication and conflict resolution. It also explored how they make sense of the process and the unique challenges that come about in the process.

I chose a qualitative research approach, and IPA specifically, to explore and uncover shared meaning in the participant's lived experiences in an attempt to collectively draw upon their narratives. IPA is committed to examining each case in detail desiring to know what this experience is like for each individual person and how this person is making sense of the experience (Smith et al., 2009). This honors each participant's journey while allowing for an opportunity to also look across cases to gain a more comprehensive understanding of shared experiences. In alignment with this approach, interviews were collected to provide descriptive data on their experiences of the phenomenon. The transcribed interviews were then used to further explore and analyze how parents made sense of their experience.

### **Sampling**

Because the participants were offering insight into a particular experience, purposeful sampling was used to ensure questions in the interview were relevant (Smith et al., 2008). Participants were largely recruited through word of mouth. This study includes a relatively small and homogeneous sample of 18 participants ranging in age from 31 to 52 years old. While all shared custody, they varied in custody arrangements. The number of years divorced ranged from one year to fifteen years. Parents had anywhere from one to four children between them. At the time of the divorce, children ranged in age from seven months old to 18 years old.

Since the specific focus of this study was to better understand how coparents continued to experience conflict following a divorce, there were additional criteria to participate. Given people need time to reflect on their experience to make sense of it (Smith et al., 2008), participants had to be legally divorced to participate. In the state of North Carolina, parents must

be separated and living apart for one year before they can divorce (North Carolina General Assembly statute 50-6). This one-year transition period gave parents a chance to coparent apart and reflect on their experience. Parents had to have a joint custody agreement constituting their ability to meet the requirement of coparenting, meaning children spend time in both parent's homes. Also, the participants had to be actively coparenting at the time of the divorce. Both men and women were eligible to participate in interviews since the purpose of the study was to explore the shared experience of parents having been through divorce and continuing to coparent. Paired samples were not required since the researcher was not looking to compare viewpoints of the experience within couples.

Given IPA's goal of obtaining detailed information about personal experience, the sample was relatively small. This ensured the ability to focus on the individual experience, but not get overwhelmed by the amount of data. Smith et al (2009) suggests including between four and ten interviews in the study. The researcher completed nine interviews with fathers and nine interviews with mothers.

### **Bracketing**

While Smith et al. (2009) argue there is no such thing as 'too much' or 'too little' previous knowledge about the subject, they do stress the need to acknowledge your preconceptions and the consequences they may bring. It requires self-reflection and a realization that you may not be able to identify all your preconceptions up front. Creswell (2007), calls this process bracketing, where the researcher attempts to identify and put aside their experience to look at the participant's experiences with a fresh, clear perspective. While reflection and consciously putting aside preconceptions is important to allow the focus of analysis to be on the participant's experience, one can rarely completely devoid their experience entirely. I used

reflexive bracketing throughout all stages of the research process to ensure the integrity of the data, often in the form of field notes or journaling.

- Pre-interview/preparation stage. Initially, I reflected on any lived experiences and previous knowledge I had with this topic in hopes of being able to separate them from the narratives I would hear and later analyze in my research.
- Data collection stage. I wrote field notes and sometimes jotted notes during interviews in an attempt to capture thoughts sparked by the stories told. These notes were often first impressions, resonations, and feelings about the interview process. I frequently journaled about the process. I am an external processor, so it was helpful to get it out of my head and onto paper.
- Data analysis stage. Again, I took notes and random jottings of phrases that stuck with me or particular parts of stories that evoked feelings. I recorded these observations in my thought journal as I continued the analysis process of looking at themes across interviews. I found this particularly helpful as I immersed myself fully in the data. I attempted to not let any particular stories become more dominate in my analysis than others. Occasionally I found parts of the interviews caused me to reflect more than others. As emotions arose, I took breaks and went for a walk or journaled.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions to allow the participants to freely share their experiences. Clarifying questions were asked as needed to develop thoughts or to fully answer the questions. Follow-up questions were asked to fully understand responses and meaning to statements given.

Interviews were conducted over Skype (audio only) and recorded so they could be transcribed at a later date. Each interview lasted anywhere from 15-50 minutes in length. Questions pertained to their experience of managing conflict while coparenting after divorce. A complete list of the interview questions can be found in Appendix E. The interview was semi-structured as participants are the experts of their experience, the researcher must also guide the process as to not get too off track (Smith et al., 2009). The interviews were structured with a welcome and introduction followed by a few demographic questions such as how long have you been divorced? and how old are your children? Refer to Appendix E for a full list. I proceeded with experience-related questions for example: How would you describe your relationship with your ex-spouse? In addition, I also asked sense-making questions such as: How is your communication different now than it was before your divorce? I concluded each interview with asking them if they had any other thoughts they would like to share that I did not cover with the questions I asked or had surfaced during the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

The following describes Smith et al.'s (2009) six steps of analysis:

#### **1.) Read and re-read the data.**

To immerse in the data, it is important to listen to the audio recording while looking at the transcription, "Imagining the voice of the participant during subsequent readings of the transcript assists with a more complete analysis" (p.82). In this first stage, the goal is to allow the participant to be the focus. This involves slowing down the process of reduction. This requires entering a phase of active engagement with the data. In this step, the researcher will see the interview structure develop. The structure will go

from broad to more specific, will highlight where the data may be most rich with details, and will indicate the progression of rapport throughout the interview.

While this step focuses explicitly on “reading”, I would also say the transcribing stage from audio recording to written documentation was also immersive. I heard and reheard the stories unfold as I completed this process. In specific regard to reading, in general, I read each interview transcript 3 to 5 times. This allowed me to develop a deeper sense of each participant’s experience.

## **2.) Initial noting.**

This is the initial phase of analysis, making notes of anything of interest within the transcript, “It begins to identify specific ways by which the participant talks about, understands, and thinks about an issue” (p.83). This is the first attempt to begin making sense of the participant’s explicit meaning. During this process, the researcher will make comments within the transcript. In this step, it is important to look at language, noting the context of their concerns, and looking for more abstract themes to explore the meaning throughout their stories. Smith et al. (2009) suggests writing notes in the margins of the document. These “exploratory comments” can be categorized to distinguish between context, language, and narrative flow (p. 91).

For each transcribed interview, I triple spaced the text and expanded my margins. I then assigned a highlight color to each type of comment (descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual) to highlight the relevant phrases or words with room to insert comments on the right-hand side of the document. See Appendix G for an example.

Comments were labeled in one of three ways:

***Descriptive Comments:*** These comments focused on describing the events and various contextual details in their narratives. According to Smith et al. (2009), these are concepts of things that matter to the participant such as events, experiences, and key objects. These comments are helpful as reference points during the initial noting stage, therefore descriptive notes should be written in such a way that the comment itself helps you see something about the experience. Here is a specific example from one of my transcripts, “He is upset about the holiday schedule and she suggested they go by the custody agreement.” Noting descriptive comments was the first time I was breaking down what was said to understand the key phrases that captured the overall experience.

Each paragraph in the transcript was analyzed individually. I reviewed the transcripts in their entirety for descriptive comments first. These comments were assigned a highlight color and the comments were made in the right margin designated with a D for clarity. I then followed the same procedure for linguistic comments and, lastly, for conceptual comments. These three types of comments were displayed and tracked on the same document to see the connections and themes emerge. See appendix G for an example.

***Linguistic Comments:*** These comments focused on the key words or phrases used to describe events. The focus is not only on what was said, but how it was said. This may be changes in their tone, volume, intensity, or speed of speech. Some of my participants paused or stuttered when answering certain questions. This was often noted and explored throughout the interview to see if these specific details were harder to recall or uncomfortable to talk about. I also explored laughs as expressions happiness, irony, relief, or discomfort. I looked for key phrases, noting some people used terms and

phrases such as “which hill to die on” to emphasize the severity of the struggles they experienced. Upon further review, some phrases were noted as not significant to their meaning making such as “you know” was just a filler.

***Conceptual Comments:*** These annotations focused on the integration of themes or concepts. These queries were not about finding answers, but an indicator I was entering a more interpretive stage of my analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Given its interrogative nature, many annotations began with “it seems” or were posed as questions. A specific example from one of my transcripts was: “I wonder if she has a hard time standing up to him (seems this is a great example of her doing so), or if she just doesn’t like to because he responds poorly?” While I am inevitably drawing on my own experience to make sense of theirs, Smith et al. (2009) cautions, “One is using oneself to help make sense of the participant, not the other way around. If you start becoming more fascinated by yourself than the participant, then stop, take a break – and try again!” (p.90).

At times I did have to take a break and try again. I found it challenging sometimes to not analyze how I had a similar experience, what my reaction to that experience was, and how that did or did not align with their experience. I found myself over empathizing to the point where I lost my focus on their experience alone. At times I found myself wanting to pass judgement or disagree with things that were said. In these moments, I would take a break and try to deconstruct the data by reading a paragraph backwards to focus on what they were saying and how they were saying it. This technique helped it to feel less like a conversation and more like a study of their experience.

I also found myself bolding key phrases or whole sentences that began to describe what appeared to be a theme in the data. I added a final page to each transcript and made bulleted notes of some of the key points in the narrative or overall impressions of their experience. I found this helped me to “close” one narrative and begin the next transcription with a fresh start. As Smith et al. (2009) states, this is a “fluid process of engaging with the text in detail, exploring different avenues of meaning which arise, and pushing the analyses to a more interpretive level” (p.91).

### **3.) Developing emergent themes.**

In this step, the researcher is attempting to reduce the volume of detail by grouping the data into themes. These themes emerge from the initial noting and memos. This creates a shift from working with the initial transcription to working more with the notes, though staying closely tied with the original transcript. Smith et al. (2009), suggests in order to explore emergent themes, it is necessary to break up the data and re-organize it. Once the themes emerge, they must be grouped together to create connections between them. To take a first pass at identifying emerging themes, I looked at my bulleted lists at the end of each transcript, reviewed any bolded statements throughout the text, and re-read my conceptual annotations. The outcome of this process was a collective grouping of individual experiences coming together as a whole.

### **4.) Searching for connections across emergent themes.**

This step requires the researcher to identify the pattern between the emergent themes to create more collective themes through grouping. This can be done through abstraction, subsumption, polarization, conceptualization, numeration, and function. The researcher is looking to group the emergent themes in a meaningful way through various



means of analysis. This is then displayed visually, often in the form of a graphic (Smith et al., 2009). In this stage, I went through each transcript and typed up the emergent themes in the order they appeared in each document. I also copied and pasted any key quotes from the transcripts (see Appendix F for an example).

#### **5.) Moving to the next case.**

Since this is not a case study, the researcher will move on and repeat this process with the next transcript (Smith et al, 2009). While the researcher will be influenced to some degree by previous analysis, it is important to keep an open mind to allow the individuality of each participant's story and to allow for new themes to emerge.

#### **6.) Looking for patterns across cases.**

This process requires creativity and critical thinking (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher is looking for over-arching themes that honor the collective experience and the individual experiences of the phenomenon. It is most often displayed as a figure or table.

Initially I looked over all the emergent themes and came up with about thirty themes that seemed to be emerging across the participants (see Appendix H). I then took each of these and attempted to group them into larger, overarching themes. I found this to be extremely difficult and confining (see Appendix I). I felt like I was not grouping them in the best way. I went back to my emergent theme notes and printed the documents. I then cut each of these notes into small strips of paper. I gave each participant a different code so I could return to their transcripts when providing quotes to demonstrate the themes. I read through each strip of paper and sorted them into piles. Finally, I took those piles and reorganized them into seven overarching themes.

The hermeneutic dialogue is important in that the research is making sense of the participant's experience and the reader must make sense of all this sense-making (Smith et al., 2009). This is done by providing excerpts of the data to show what the data collected were like as well as sharing the analysis of the data. The results section begins with an overview to help the reader frame the information. The super-ordinate themes are shared with details to illustrate the content and meaning of the theme. This section is a narrative account of what the researcher has learned about the lived experience from the participants. In sharing excerpts of the interviews, the researcher is being transparent about the process and allows the reader to form their own opinion of what has been shared.

### **Ethical Framework**

When working with human subjects, it is necessary to ensure the avoidance of harm for all participants (Smith et al., 2009). The purpose and procedures of the study were made clear to participants up front so they could make an informed decision whether they wanted to participate or not. A consent form was obtained before the interview was scheduled. The consent form and any documents were approved by Nova Southeastern's Internal Review Board (see Appendices A-D). In addition, verbal consent was obtained at the beginning of the interview. This allowed the participant a second chance to fully understand the process. I reminded them the interview would be recorded and made clear to them when I clicked record and when I stopped recording. Because they were sharing personal details, confidentiality was ensured. While complete anonymity was unrealistic (given their stories were collected and read when analyzing the data), anonymity can be ensured in the changing of details to protect their identity in any published documents.

Consents were obtained from all participants before the interviews. The consent included the purpose of the study, how the information will be analyzed, how data will be stored securely, and what measures will be taken to protect the integrity of the data. The consent included any risks or possible effects of participating in the study. I was flexible in my approach to scheduling the interviews, accommodating their schedules since I was using their time to collect data for my research. A list of resources was provided to participants given divorce can be a sensitive topic and talking about it may bring up unpleasant emotions.

Because this may be a sensitive topic for the participants to talk about, precautions were taken to ensure the interview questions were sensitive in nature. The interviewer had extensive experience in interviewing and knew how to keep the interview on track. She reminded herself of the importance of the voice of the participants, not the interviewer. The importance of respect for the participants was stressed. Knowing that strong emotions may arise, the interviewer was prepared to explore experiences, understanding the importance of listening but not sharing with the participants (Creswell, 2007). The participants were also given a list of resources should they want additional information or support (see Appendix J).

Throughout my career, I have worked on many research projects and currently coach supervisors in my profession. I have honed my skills in listening versus talking. While I enjoy connecting through storytelling and shared experience, I knew not to make these connections during the interview. I made a concerted effort to validate their experiences and let them know I understood what they were sharing without interjecting. I clearly expressed when I stopped the recording, and often the participants continued to talk with me. At this point, I could engage in more of a dialogue with them. They often wanted to be reassured that their information was helpful. In a way, I think they wanted to know they were not the only ones going through this

experience or that their experience was somehow normative. I was thoughtful in expressing my gratitude in their sharing, and how honored I felt in their willingness to share their stories with me.

All audio files were kept on a secure server, encrypting the data to protect against hacking or any other breach of privacy. Only the researcher had access to these files because they were dual password protected. All transcribed data was encrypted as well to ensure privacy of the data. Concerning the data: each participant was given a number to track their data. This ensured two things. First, this ensured the confidentiality of the data. Without the names attached to the data, if the data were stolen or unintentionally shared, the identity of the participants would be protected. Secondly, this ensured that data was not treated special or differently based upon who the participant was. Removing the names allowed the researcher to connect concepts without being influenced by who said what.

The following chapter presents my research findings including the emergent themes and interview excerpts that support and demonstrate the seven themes of my research study. I have provided a brief summary of each participant followed by an extensive description of each of the themes. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of all participants and their children.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The following section outlines the findings that resulted from the collected data and the phenomenological interpretive analysis therein. The participant's experiences support the collective themes discovered in the data. These emergent themes demonstrate the significance of the participant's experience with conflict as they coparent after divorce. In addition, I have provided a brief description of each participant including their age, gender, current relationship status, how long they were married, how long they have been divorced, number of children, and custody arrangement.

### **Participant Summaries**

The following participant summaries serve as a brief introduction to the individuals who agreed to share their stories. Again, pseudonyms were chosen to replace the actual name of the participants and their children in protection of their anonymity.

**Edward.** Edward is a 42-year-old male. He was currently single. He was married for 15 years and had been divorced for one year. He and his ex-wife have four children together; the children were three, four, eight, and 10 years old when they divorced. Their current custody agreement was 50/50 with one week on and one week off.

**David.** David is a 40-year-old male. He was currently engaged. He was married for 14 years and had been divorced for four years. He and his ex-wife have three children together; the children were 6, 7, and 9 years old when they got divorced. Their current custody agreement was 58/42 which equated to every other weekend, two weeks during the summer, and half of the holiday break.

**Mark.** Mark is a 45-year-old male. He was currently single. He was married for 16 years and had been divorced for one year and four months. He and his ex-wife have two children

together. Their children were 11 and 16 when they divorced. Their current custody agreement was 50/50 with two days on, two days off, and every other weekend.

**Carl.** Carl is a 52-year-old male. He was currently single. He was married for 21 years and had been divorced for four and a half years. He and his ex-wife have one child together. Their child was ten years old when they divorced. Their current custody agreement was 50/50 with two days on, two days off, and every other weekend.

**Nathan.** Nathan is a 42-year-old male. He was currently single. He was married for 15 years and had been divorced for one year. He and his ex-wife have one child together. Their child was 12 years old when they divorced. Their current custody agreement was he had the child every other weekend and an occasional week here and there.

**Daniel.** Daniel is a 45-year-old male. He was currently remarried. He was married to his ex-wife for 17 years and had been divorced from her for three years. He and his ex-wife have two children together. Their children were 14 and 16 years old when they divorced. Their current custody agreement was 50/50 with one week on and one week off.

**George.** George is a 52-year-old male. He was currently single. He was married for 23 years and had been divorced for two years. He and his ex-wife have three children together. Their children were 14, 21, and 23 when they divorced. He had primary custody and she had visitation every other weekend, though it had rarely occurred.

**Jared.** Jared is a 34-year-old male. He was currently remarried. He was married to his ex-wife for 10 years and had been divorced from her for eight years. He and his ex-wife have two children together. Their children were two and four years old when they divorced. Their current custody agreement was 50/50 with one week on and one week off.

**Kevin.** Kevin is a 48-year-old male. He was currently single. He was married for 17 years and has been divorced for four years. He and his ex-wife had two children together. Their children were 11 and 13 years old when they divorced. Their current custody agreement was 50/50 with one week on and one week off.

**Jennifer.** Jennifer is a 35-year-old female. She currently has a partner and was coparenting in a blended family. She was married for 11 years to her ex-husband and they had been divorced for three years. She and her ex-husband have two children together. Their children were nine and ten years old when they divorced. Their current custody agreement was 50/50 with one week on and one week off.

**Fiona.** Fiona is a 43-year-old female. She was currently engaged. She was married for seven years and had been divorced for 12 years. They have one child together. Their child was four years old when they divorced. Their current custody agreement was 50/50 with one week on and one week off.

**Allison.** Allison is a 34-year-old female. She was currently remarried. She was married to her ex-husband for seven years and had been divorced from him for four years. They have one child together. Their child was two years old when they divorced. She had primary custody and he had a visitation schedule, but it varied all of the time.

**Brenda.** Brenda is a 45-year-old female. She was currently single. She was married for 24 years and has been divorced for one year. They have four children together. Their children were 8, 10 (twins), and 19. She had primary custody and his visitation schedule was one day per week and one to two weeks in the summer.

**Sharon.** Sharon is a 42-year-old female. She was currently remarried. She was married to her ex-husband for 10 years and had been divorced from him for six years. They have two

children together. Their children were three and eight years old when they divorced. She had primary custody and he had visitation every other weekend.

**Anita.** Anita is a 31-year-old female. She was currently remarried. She was married to her ex-husband for eight years and had been divorced from him for three years. They have three children together. Their children were three, one, and seven months old when they divorced. She had primary custody and he had visitation every other weekend and one day during the week every other week.

**Jenna.** Jenna is a 38-year-old female. She was currently single. She was married for seven years and had been divorced for four years. They have one child together. Their child was two years old when they divorced. Their current custody agreement was 50/50 with two days on, two days, off, and every other weekend.

**Rachel.** Rachel is a 46-year-old female. She was currently single. She was married for 12 years and had been divorced for five years. They have one child together. Their child was eight years old when they divorced. She had primary custody and he had visitation every other weekend.

**Josie.** Josie is a 49-year-old female. She was currently engaged. She was married to her ex-husband for 12 years. She had been divorced from her ex-husband for 15 years. They have two children together. Their children were four and eight when they divorced. One of their children currently lived with his father, and when their children were younger, they had 50/50 custody and had one week on and one week off.

### **Themes**

The following section contains thorough descriptions of the emergent themes derived from the participant's responses in their interviews. Each participant had a unique narrative



detailing their challenges, successes, and overall experience of managing conflict in their coparenting relationship post-divorce. By carefully organizing and analyzing the data, connections between the narratives emerged. The themes presented here are a representation of some of the most common and prominent experiences.

**Theme 1: The process of un-coupling results in feelings of loss and grief before, during, and after the divorce**

The data collected indicated that all participants experienced some feelings of loss and grief as their marriages ended and coparenting apart began. All participants went through changes and transitions in various areas of their lives throughout the process. Not only were they going through these changes, but these very changes had an impact on their children.

The following excerpt from an interview describes a father's experience toward the end of their marriage as he described what their relationship was like before he got divorced. There was a loss of connection and enjoyment of each other because of hostility and frustration. He now describes their relationship as civil but explains how hostile things became before they divorced:

*Edward. "So, obviously before we divorced, we, we had quite a bit of hostility. Um, you know we were married long enough that, uh, you know things build up and, you know, you lose some of the magic and you, um, gain some of the frustration, and, um, by the end of the time that we were spending together in our marriage we spent more time fighting and avoiding each other than we did, uh, enjoying each other."*

When Brenda describes how her communication has changed since before their divorce, she discusses how she lost not only her ability to communicate with him, but the loss of respect

and feelings of invalidation. The impact of those losses lead to negative experiences that still haunt her today.

***Brenda.** “Um, so...when we were married, I think he respected my opinion more. Um, I know I did. I respected his opinion more, um...a little bit more. Mostly I would just...knew which, which hills to die on. I just, I, we rarely fought when we were married. At least the last probably 7, 7 years because I, you can’t win a fight with him. You can’t prove a point. You can’t, it’s not, it’s all for nothing, so, I just stopped. Um...so...um...yeah, it was, it was tough telling, you know, when we were married I would try to tell him, like, maybe like some things, how I would feel about some things and, um, and then it would either be, he would see it as threatening or, um, tell me that, that I didn’t feel that way, so (laughs). It was really, it was kind of a lot of mind fuckery back then. So, now I kind of, I mean, I think it’s still there in my head, but he’s not necessarily doing it to me as much. You know, so...or really at all. I mean, cause he doesn’t have the opportunity, but I’m still, I’m still reacting that way.”*

Her use of the phrase “knew which hills to die on” indicates how their relationship had become a battle. Her use of laughter is almost a scoff, perhaps highlighting how exasperated she felt in the time leading up to their divorce. Throughout her interview, she strongly describes the impact these experiences had on her thinking, and how the loss of her clear thinking caused her to second guess herself even today.

Several participants also mentioned a loss of trust and what a challenge that was in a continued coparenting relationship. The loss of trust resulted from various circumstances including but not limited to situations like affairs, resentment and hostility, or poor joint business decisions and employment decisions. Not being able to trust them as a partner also impacts their

ability to trust them as a parent. Once that trust was broken, several participants mentioned how hard it was to repair even though they felt it was important in the coparenting relationship.

*Anita. So, um, I feel like the divorce, and I think it might have been the kind of chaotic and very, um, traumatic...emotionally traumatic, um, nature of my divorce. But I feel like after the divorce, we had a completely different relationship where I couldn't talk to him anymore. I didn't trust him anymore. Um, and you know, as much as we are trying to mend things, I, I mean, I still would never trust him. Um, so, I kind of take things he says with a grain of salt now. Where before, you know as my husband and, you know, the girl's father, I, I trusted him. But after the divorce, I, I definitely lost that trust. But that's probably the biggest part of how our relationship changed...from the divorce, was huge trust issues.*

The following excerpt describes loss and grief of a different nature. This father describes the vast amount of change that occurred with his wife's actions. Having once planned for a future together, he now felt she had become someone else entirely. He grieved the loss of the future they planned together and of the solid relationship he felt they had.

*George. "We, we coparented quite well and I think, you know, with the divorce, the difficult part of the divorce was, was trying to, for us, what trying to separate everything because we had, you know, uh, uh joint bank accounts and everything we did, we did as a couple, more so than as single individuals. And, I think, I think in the marriage we, umm, we planned for the future as a couple and, you know, it's, it's was kind of a stunning change for me for sure. I know for me, for sure. I don't know about her, but her, once the divorce was done. I mean, you know, it was not the same person that I, that I, made all these plans with and uh, it, it, I didn't recognize her. When, umm, everything started*

*happening, uh, with the marriage and things were falling apart, I, I didn't recognize her. It was really strange. At least to my, to my feeling and, and how I looked at everything. It was really, um, I didn't think someone could change that much."*

As someone who did not want the divorce, Carl describes how shocked he was, how strange it sometimes still felt, and how much he grieved becoming single after so many years together.

*Carl: It's now she's just someone that I used to know kind of a thing. You know, and it's okay. It's okay like that, so. It's kind of odd after 25 years of being with someone to...it's that way now, it's, it's just very odd. It's still hard for me to wrap my head around it at times. Um, you know, just uh, I don't know, you know, cause when you're two and now all of a sudden you're just one, it's, it's kind of a shock. And, uh, so...yeah, just, just getting over, getting past that I think. The whole, um, ending of it I think was, was really tough for me. Like, uh, it took me about 2 years, I think, to get through it. So, I mean, there's a lot of people out there that go, oh yeah we got divorced and uh, uh, and it's like a big party and they can't wait, and well, it wasn't like that for me at all. So, um, which is probably why I'm still single now, you know, after almost 5 years of being divorced.*

He mentions later in his interview "how a bomb was dropped on him" and "how shell shocked he was", painting an image of a man experiencing immense grief and loss as if having gone to battle. He also reiterates how much of a process this had been for him. He went from shock to acceptance, but it took years to do so.

In some way or another all participants were confronted with grief and loss. Relationship patterns become predictable and any large or sudden change disrupts that predictability. It was common for them to feel grief about ruined future dreams and opportunities.

Throughout my analysis, I continued to come across the themes of loss and grief integrated into many facets of their experiences. Even if they wanted or chose the divorce, they were sad their children did not have one home to go to at Christmas or that their children had to travel back and forth between houses and adjust to new people in their lives. Grief and loss are an expected part of the process when couples divorce and sort out how their relationship changed and how it will be reconstructed as they move forward.

**Theme 2: After divorce, coparents experience challenges with accepting change in relationship dynamics and relinquishing control**

All participants were asked about their experience coparenting before and after their divorce as well as what the most challenging aspect to overcome in the process was. The data suggests every parent faced challenges with accepting change and learning to relinquish control in some way.

Some parents mentioned having to accept that when the children are with the other parent, they do not have much control over what they do. There may be rules or expectations that differ, even, from things they agreed upon before their divorce. One father mentioned the challenge of having to accept her parenting decisions when the children are with her.

*Mark. "Umm there have been times that we've had conflict that ummm I'm pretty firm in the fact that it's almost always about the kids essentially. That I'm making the right choice for the kids, but sometimes I don't have a say. That's the reality of divorce is when the kids are with her, she gets to decide shit. As much as you want to do it together, and we try to, sometimes she decides shit that I don't agree with. So, I have to just accept it and, but also voice and express my frustration. And I've had to do that several times. And with the kids too just be like I'm, I'm letting you know I am not okay with this. There's*

*nothing I can do about it, when she's at your home but I'm not okay with it. Umm, so, that's part of it. But I also try not to dwell on it because that's not gonna, that doesn't help us do well for the kids."*

Parents also come to accept that in order to coparent together, it may necessitate letting personal grievances with each other go so they can focus their attention on their children. There may no longer be a need to resolve personal issues.

**Jenna.** *"If it's anything regarding our child we, it's just really like black and white. You know, like, it's just we, you know, if we, if he, he's the priority, so one of us is going to have to do something or the other and we just kind of, like, nip it in the bud, you know, it just doesn't get any further than that. Um, if for whatever reason, like, some other topic comes up that we're talking about and we start to fight about it... Like, honestly, like from I think both of ours stand points, like, we just kind of feel like there's no reason to, like, continue fighting about it, because we're not together, like, it doesn't... You know what I mean? Like we don't have to like re... I don't know. I hate to have to use the word 'resolve' but like, it's kind of like we don't have to because why do we need to? You know what I mean like there's no reason to like, you know, talk it through or, you know, mend whatever it might be because we don't have to deal with each other really in any capacity outside of our child."*

Another parent mentions before the divorce she made many of the decisions and her husband went along with them. Now that they are apart, he had more of a say in the decisions. This requires more negotiation and a need to share their different perspectives and decide whose opinion will win.

**Fiona.** *“It’s not being able to make the decisions myself that I think are right. And having to accept that he’s got his own perspective. And regardless where he’s coming from, he and I don’t have that perspective, that we have to get to an agreement. And that part is just really the most challenging. We have to find a way to do it. And...it’s not easy. Um, it...when we have a difference of opinion, I would say things can still get pretty dicey and there’s no sort of way, easy way to decide who’s going to win, um, and winning seems to be the thing that we are always fighting for. Um, but you know so it’s sort of a control issue.”*

Along with these themes of allowing for different perspectives and negotiating decisions, there is also an acceptance that this is an on-going process. Children are constantly changing, and while they may agree on big things like school or medical decisions, as the children age, they continue to navigate new experiences with coparenting.

**Nathan.** *“It is, it is strange though, the things you don’t anticipate when you start the separation process is the aging of your child. It’s, it’s really been, you’re constantly having to reevaluate the coparenting style, as, as they, as your child changes. So, it’s just, your child changes, the coparenting situation has to change.”*

Not only do children grow and change, but some also come to accept that coparenting apart will continue to be a challenge. One mother’s experience supported this theme when she shared how she came to expect having some of the same challenges apart as they did together.

**Brenda.** *“Um... I think it’s learning how to be, how to find normal now. So, find a groove that we can communicate, and we never could communicate when we were married so, why, you know, why would now be different? We couldn’t, we never really coparented well when we were married, so why would now be different? Um, it’s just kind of trying*

*to lead the kids in, in a positive direction, and not still sort of live with the ghost of the past in my mind.”*

As I analyzed the data it became clear that throughout the on-going process of coparenting apart, dynamics constantly change. Children’s behavior changes, the parent’s relationships change, and there is a constant tension between accepting those changes, advocating for what you feel is best, and letting go of what you do not have control over. I found myself often wondering how much of their experiences involved control. Is the parent not present or interested, or does the other parent prefer not to share in the experience? There is a constant negotiation of what is best for the child, who is best suited to decide that, and who gets to weigh in.

**Theme 3: Coparenting apart can bring positive change in dynamics and patterns of relationships**

The data analysis suggested that while divorcing creates change, some changes are positive and enriching. For parents who reported a lot of conflict in their marriage, divorce was an opportunity to shift their focus away from the conflict in their dyad and to see coparenting in a new light. Parenting apart allowed them to use their style of parenting without clashing with the other parent’s style of parenting. It was not that either parent had a disruptive style, they were simply different in their approach. The children are now only experiencing one style at a time.

*Josie. “And it was hard for us too to say, okay, I think your styles’ better. I’m, I want to do it your way or, you know, it was just a, we, there were differences in us parenting together, and it was, it was easier doing it apart from him (laughs) than it was doing it together. That’s the easiest way I can say it.”*



Another excerpt from a parent mentioned he thought it was easier on his child to experience their parenting differences apart as well. He feels his child was only accountable to one parent's demands at a time. This also improved his relationship with his daughter because he did not feel forced into picking sides when she had disagreements with her mom.

*Carl. "And so, we have completely different parenting styles. Um...and so it can create problems when you're there together, because I think that, the child is looking to you to like, hey, save me, she's you know, going too far. I think she is more relaxed now instead of bothing, both of us coming at her as parents, you know if there's an issue, it's only one. And then she comes here, that issue's not here, it's, it's over there. And, um, vice a versa. I think it's much better now than it was, because of that, um, the, the relationship with our daughter individually, I think, is better now than it was together."*

Jared and other parents mentioned that when married they fought often and now that they are apart, they coparent well. When they are coparenting well, the children are happier.

*Jared. "Um, coparenting, it, it, it's great now. Um, you know, it's, it's we get along a little better. I think the kids are happier. Um, we communicate better back and forth. I think we both tend to listen a little bit more, instead of just, you know, she used to see things her way and that was just the way it was."*

Coparenting apart allowed parents to have some time without their children. This could be a time to rejuvenate and focus on themselves, especially for a parent who felt like an only parent. They were then able to be more present with their children when they did spend concentrated amounts of time with them.

*Edward. "It's hard, hard, hard to stay home with even one kid let alone four who are, you know, some of them young. So, you know, with the benefit, for me I suppose, is that*

*while I still get to see my kids a lot and I have this fantastic relationship with each of them individually and as a group, I also get time off (laughs). And I didn't have that before. So, you know, one, one that we sort of joke, you know, single parents sometimes they talk to you, you sort of joke that, you know, don't have enough time for yourself as a, as a married person, get divorced (laughs). So, um, so, yeah, we've, you know, full laughter, but I mean, it is true. I, you know, definitely have more time for myself, and I think that's helped me with some of my emotional recovery and development, you know, is putting myself first sometimes and having time for myself, and I think that reflects positively on my relationship with the kids as well, right?"*

As I reflected upon the data, I wondered if his laughter around the concept of having more time to himself and enjoying his alone time was out of guilt. Transitions bring about all sorts of emotions, and parents learn to adjust and adapt just as children learn to adjust and navigate that process.

As mentioned in an earlier theme, sometimes one parent makes most of the decisions when they are together. Parenting apart gives added opportunities for both parents to be more involved in making decisions for the children. When asked how his coparenting relationship was different now than before the divorce, he mentioned they inform each other now, but he did not have input before.

**David.** *"Uh...when we were married, uh, I didn't, I didn't have a lot of say. Uh, she was sort of a be all end all on all things related to parenting."*

Sometimes a change in relationship dynamics allowed parents an opportunity to take a step back and change perspectives. As I listened to these experiences, I noticed a pause in many of the stories. This pause was often a positive breath. It was a transition from the challenges they

had to a renewed focus on the children, and a realization that transitions can be difficult but good can come from those changes. For parents to feel they had a voice where they did not before or an opportunity to connect with their children in a new way was a powerful change for all individuals involved.

**Theme 4: Concern for the impact divorce has on their children, leads coparents to work together to put the child first even when it is not comfortable and often requires flexibility**

Throughout the interviews, parents were concerned for the impact their divorce and behaviors following would have on their children. Several parents mentioned the children did not choose the divorce and therefore they wanted things to be as easy for them as possible. In trying to make the experience more pleasant for the children, parents often sacrificed their own comfort and pride to put the child first. This required them to discuss issues with the other parent when they would rather not or compromise when they would otherwise prefer to do it their way.

Several parents mentioned defaulting to their written parenting agreement when they had conflict about visitation. This was a helpful tool to utilize in making decisions. When I interviewed Allison, she mentioned her experience of coming to realize there were going to be times when things felt unfair even if they were following the agreed upon terms. They agreed upon those terms because that was what they thought was best for their daughter, and it is about her experience and having time with both of them.

*Allison. "So, you know, even if one person feels like something's not fair, um, you know, we can always go back to that agreement and say well look this is what we agreed to. This is what we're going to do and that's it. Um, it's not always easy, you know (laughs). It's not always, um, especially when you feel like, oh, it's not fair you've had her every holiday or you have her, you've had her this whole week. Or, you know, things like that. I*

*guess just at the end of the day, like, always just remembering that it's not about us. It's about our daughter and how is she going to have the most fulfilling life with both of us."*

Often coparenting required flexibility. Parent's schedules changed last minute because of work or an activity their children wanted to participate in. Time was not divided as planned. Parents often found themselves in a position that required sacrifice and flexibility to make it work best for the child.

**Jennifer.** *"So, on one hand, do I let this slide, or do I address it? And, you know, I might choose to address it and be, like, you know, maybe you should really stick to that more, because if I had plans, etc., etc. And I've had to do that in the past, um, just to have more respected time, I think. But life happens and I also have to understand that, you know, the same thing could happen to me, and I would need him to just be as open as I, you know, should be for him as well. We don't, we realize, you know, everything's 50/50. You know, they're both of ours."*

At times, parents put themselves in situations that felt awkward, often being around the other party at a social or school event. Even though it was awkward for them, they did it because it was what they felt was best for their children.

**Josie.** *"And, a lot of times we would actually even sit together because we wanted that to be as normal as possible for them, because we didn't want to create any type of, um, you know, anxiousness or anxiety or, or...for the kids. You know, we, we did it for them. Even though, I mean, at first it was kind of awkward, but you know, when I say at first, I mean like within like the first maybe year and a half, two years it was kind of awkward, but then after that it was just, you know, that's just the, you know, we just did it because we knew it was, you know, for the kids."*

As much as they could, they tried to support each other and have similar expectations so it was easiest on their children.

*Jenna.* “So, um, so I do think that’s really good too, that we both, um, you know what I mean, kind of like support that and follow up on that and that it really is like a joint effort between the two of us to make sure that he, you know, is being raised, you know, like the same way in each of our households.”

The most important thing was putting the children’s interests first which meant not saying negative things about the other parent around the children.

*Kevin.* “It’s, it’s not everybody always keeps the kid’s interests first. And I think that’s, uh, that’s probably the most important thing. Um, that they get too angry about things or, and definitely there was confusion, sadness, anger and everything else in the beginning, but, but, um, it didn’t, uh, it hasn’t manifested into doing anything negative, or, or ever saying a negative word about my ex in front of my children or vice versa. So, it’s, um... For us, it’s just about keeping a level of respect and, um, putting kid’s interests first.”

Throughout their narratives, there were continuous mentions of accommodations made for the benefit of the child. Many parents went so far as to say it was selfish if the child was not put first. In placing the child’s experience of stability and a sense of normalcy or predictability first, parents often made sacrifices. It was not always comfortable to sit with the other parent or attend events together, but they did it for their children.

### **Theme 5: Lack of time together requires more intentionality to include each other**

One of the biggest challenges most parents faced was missing moments when the children were at the other parent’s house. They miss these moments because they are not always with their children. The mother below shares her biggest challenge.

**Jenna.** *“Um...I would say, like, for me it’s not always being there. You know, like, you know, just missing just little moments. You know what I mean, that like might happen when he’s with his dad or whatever it might be. Um, like even things like, um, you know, when he lost his first tooth, you know, like he happened to be at my house and, you know, like there was this part of me that was like so excited that, like, I got to be there for that moment, you know, but then I also thought that like, well, that kind of stinks that his dad didn’t get to, you know, be there to like see how excited he was when the tooth fairy was there, you know, when he woke up he saw that the tooth fairy had come . So, I think it’s those things that, um, you know, that I kind of struggle with, like, it really is just more like the moments that each of us kind of miss when he’s at the other person’s house.”*

One of the tools she mentioned later to aid in overcoming this challenge was recording those moments if possible, or to call or video the other parent so they could hear the excitement in his voice while the event was occurring.

Without seeing each other day to day, they must be more intentional in bringing up issues and following through to get responses. In the excerpt below, a father shares how he and the child’s mother had different communication styles. He felt he was more communicative, and she was more avoidant. This was evident when they were together but had become more of a challenge apart. When they had to weigh in on a decision or he needed a response, he did not have the ability to bring it up at dinner or home, but instead had to depend on her responding to emails or texts.

**Edward.** *“I could at the dinner table, at the dinner table I could bring these things up and, you know, she wouldn’t necessarily be as avoidant in that moment as she is, when all she, when she can just easily, you know, ignore an email or a text, you know, look*

*away. Oh, I'll get to that later and then she doesn't. You know, when, when you're in person that's less capable."*

Fiona echoes a similar experience in emphasizing how essential communication is, and how she had to think to inform him versus their being a default of communication when they saw each other at home.

**Fiona.** *"The more we communicate the better things are. Um, I think the more that we are proactive about communication and not reactive the better things always are. Um, and that's the only tool that we have, really, is just we make sure that we both know what is going on, you know, to the extent possible I don't think our communication is that much different. I just, again, it's just much harder now to go out of your way, to think to inform him as opposed to him, just you automatically see each other at the end of the day."*

Knowing that a lack of communication contributed to the end of their marriage, though it was difficult, they made a point to try and communicate to work through challenges.

**Mark.** *"I mean, I think we do try to talk about things. We're both social workers so we recognize like if there's an issue, umm one of the reasons we're divorced is we quit talking about stuff within our marriage. Umm for various reasons and so we do try to talk about stuff but sometimes that can be a trigger for other stuff. But we absolutely try to work through and hash through things."*

Because they were not in the same home and sharing everyday communication, it provided an opportunity for each parent to intentionally stay more informed and involved with things like their education when one parent primarily did that before. This was an opportunity for

both parents to feel more involved. When asked what was different about how they managed their coparenting after divorce, she mentioned his increased involvement.

*Allison. “Um, honestly, I, I would say that we coparent more separated than we did when we were together. When we were together, everything was just on me. Um, I was making all the decisions and, you know, um, responsible for everything. Um, whereas his just kind of went to work and wasn’t really involved. So, I think being separated has forced him to have to be more involved and committed to what’s going on with our daughter.”*

The changes in communication patterns in the parents I interviewed seemed to have a similar shift in that, while they may not have had great communication while together, they passed along factual information to each other on a regular basis just by being in the same home. Without that dynamic present, there was a greater need to include the other party when possible. Parents had to make a concerted effort to inform the other parent of events and information about the children. This was accomplished through a variety of ways (phone calls, texts, emails, face to face during exchanges, etc.). Regardless of the mode, it required intentionality.

### **Theme 6: Coparenting after divorce gives an opportunity to reconceptualize what family means**

From the participant’s interviews, I discovered each parent had a view of what constituted family. I did not hear comments like old family and new family, so I believe the change in their relationship often impacted how they conceptualized family as a whole. For example, I often heard statements indicating they were no longer a family, or they were now a divorced family. Two participants I interviewed mentioned still having relationships with the other parent’s extended family even though they were divorced and did not get along with their ex-spouse.



Several of the interviews indicated that instead of family being defined by only the children, parents, and their parents, they had an opportunity to extend that to new friends, partners, and spouses. They welcomed new partners or spouses into their concept of family. Some even continue to spend holidays, have birthday parties, and engage in social events together with their extended families. In the excerpt below, Jennifer mentions how they have a new name for their expanded family.

***Jennifer.** “So, it was, it was important for me to basically come forward and say, you know what? We need to work through our crap. We weren’t good together. Let’s be great apart. And now we have a good friendship. We have holidays together. We, he’s like, he’s still invited to my parent’s house for holidays. You know, because as much as we didn’t work out, he’s an amazing dad. Um, and we make it a part to... we call it our ‘family’ (laughs) you know, our friends and our family that we choose to, to be our family around us, and, um. Yeah, like my parents, like I said, still welcome him. Um, I’m good friends with his girlfriend, so if anything arises, you know, I know that I can address it and we can talk it out and be adults about it.”*

One father I interviewed mentioned how helpful his new wife was with his children’s stability. His new wife and ex-wife get along well which worked well for balancing the children’s busy schedules.

***Jared.** “Um, it’s really cool. They came up with like a new name for her. It’s MoMo. It’s my other mom. So, they know like she’s not leaving and we’re together and things are good. And, um, my ex-wife is settled now. She has her own house and the kids are, have kind of their own things and a house and I think just the bouncing around for the first*

*couple of years was probably just really hard for them, but now knowing that they know where home is again and, uh, what to expect is, um, has really helped a lot.”*

Many participants mentioned liking the new partners or spouses, that their input helped. Having a third party allowed for an additional sounding board or input. Some of the participants I interviewed shared stories about doing exchanges with their ex-spouse’s new spouses and finding them easier to communicate with. I heard many of them mention using group chat as a tool to include everyone. This allowed third parties to feel more involved firsthand and seemed to help with avoiding or preventing interpersonal conflict. Several utilized their new partner to talk things over with and help regulate their emotions before they responded to comments or requested from the other parent.

***Fiona.** “We don’t seem to get as much accomplished as if, as when, the three of us have a group text and I can text the two of them, and even I think she prompts him to respond sometimes when he just doesn’t want to deal with it. So, sort of bringing some other reasonable people into the conversation, I think, helps. Um, from, and it’s not an intentional mediation role, but it just sort of adds a different perspective.”*

I realized that while some parents were expanding their definition of family, others were struggling with feeling the loss of how they conceptualized family. Some parents saw their original nuclear family as their family, and felt they lost that in the divorce.

When I asked Mark how his relationship had changed with his ex-wife since the divorce, he spoke of their difference in views and perspectives and the anger that brought. He mentioned how over time they were starting to get along better. He described feeling sad they were having to work on being comfortable with each other all over again.

**Mark.** *“Umm, it’s, I think a good word to kind of say it is ‘softening’ a little bit. Not like get back together softening, but like there’s more comfortability. We’re able to be around each other. Like we weren’t able to be around each other for a while. Umm, we forced ourselves to, but it wasn’t comfortable. And it’s becoming more comfortable. Umm, so, and sometimes that’s sad because it’s like gosh, we used to be a family and now we’re not.”*

Throughout my interview with Daniel, he spoke often of traditional gender roles within the family when they were together. He spoke of his expectations for the roles each parent and the children played within the family unit. It seemed even though he was remarried, he was still conflicted about the divorce. While he was divorced, he did not really believe in divorce. I could hear the struggle in wanting to be out of the marriage, but not wanting to disrupt the family unit.

**Daniel.** *“Um, because I still, and even my current wife, she, she kind of, she was like why do you hold such a grudge? And to be quite frank about it, I still don’t like, I’m still mad at my wife because for 17 years, you know we had two kids, we were married for 17 years, and what I feel is...you pissed our marriage away. And, and while I’m glad that I’m not in that toxic relationship any more...I just, I, I’ve alw...I’ve always believed in the family unit and it’s, eh, there’s a piece of me that is I don’t like the fact that I have to coparent. That what, why did you, you know, why did, you know why did this...”*

As I listened to and analyzed their stories, it seemed some parents felt a focus on the children was essential and they did not need to be friends with their ex-partners, merely civil to get the job of coparenting done. Others continued to show care for each other and their extended families and lives. Many mentioned clear boundaries like not texting ‘good morning’ or ‘how was your day?’, but also a genuine care for their former in-laws.

Some couples were together a long time and new the other parent's families like their own. They still considered them part of theirs and their children's family. Josie mentioned having this type of relationship with her ex-husband.

*Josie. "Um, we, when I'd go by his house or he comes by mine to drop something off or pick something up we go in each other's home and we'll talk for a while, um, um, just about things that are going on either, you know, with ourselves, with our parents, our kids, um, you know cause we still, you know, care about one another's families."*

Reconceptualizing family seemed like a challenge and a process for parents. For some it seemed like an organic process to change and include new and previous members. For others it was challenging to let go of their original definition of family.

### **Theme 7: Parents make meaning of their experience through reflection, support, and personal growth**

The data suggests that while the transitions were at times difficult, they have come through the experience of divorce having gained insight about themselves or their situations. Some parents utilized the change as an opportunity to reflect and grow as individuals. This growth was achieved through time and support.

When I interviewed Carl, he spoke of the shock he experienced when his wife ended the marriage. He went from being married for 21 years to single once again. It took time and a focus on himself to regain his balance and work through his feelings. He later mentioned in his interview that he is happier now than he had been in over a decade.

*Carl. "Umm...you know, I think just time, has, has just helped me overcome it, and finding, uh, finding who I am instead of, the, the it's not we, it's me now, so...um...I think just time. Getting through time has made it a lot easier. Um...working through, I think I,*

*you know, for me, um...I guess the toughest part in working through was she was the one that made the decision. I didn't, so and it was dropped on me like a bomb. Um, so, you know, it took a year to get through just the shellshock of it, literally. And then another year to kind of be normal again, and uh, so I think just not dating, not having relationships, not jumping right back into um, you know another, another relationship I think has helped, helped me get through it better."*

When I asked Jennifer how she had overcome her biggest challenge, she mentioned going through therapy to learn how to become a better communicator. Throughout her interview, it was clear she reflected often on her role in the dysfunction of their marriage and the changes she had made. She made these changes through the support of others and determination to make things better. As she talked openly and comfortably about her challenges, she both laughed at her 'ah has' and paused during her reflection.

**Jennifer.** *"Um, when we first split up, I went to therapy. Um, cause I realized it was important to work on myself, um, as well as to learn to, to communicate. Um, I was diagnosed with anxiety and depression. Um, and that was mainly the reason for my short temper come to find out. Um, but I did like once I was able to kind of get an idea of what was causing that, I was able to kind of be introspection, introspective, and (sigh) think things through rather than just react. Um, and so I was able to, to listen to myself and what I needed, um, and then just work on realizing that. My current partner helps me a lot with that. He (laughs), he's an external processor. Um, so he likes to talk a lot of things through and I wasn't. But I learned, um, just to, just to verbalize a lot of things better. Um, and in doing so, you can make things a lot easier (laughs), cause you know, you can't always read minds."*

Regina mentioned gaining her independence through the divorce. She spoke of her financial independence and the struggle of learning to live off just her income. She achieved this through educating herself on how to budget. She also spoke about learning to be flexible but firm with her boundaries. In the excerpt below she explains how she realized she had a choice to respond and the feelings of independence that brought her.

***Rachel.** “You know, at this point, he’s, I’m in my own place. I can tune him out. I don’t have to answer the phone call. I don’t have to respond to a text. You know, if it’s nothing serious. If he just wants to rant and rave about something crazy. I don’t have to respond. Like I can tune him out. It’s so different now, because I think I’m more independent. I’m not as dependent on him. So, I can be my own person.”*

Space and time away from the marriage encouraged Nathan to reflect on dynamics in his relationship as well. He was not able to realize certain dynamics until he was no longer in the relationship. In his interview he spoke of learning to advocate for his daughter when he and her mom disagreed on expectations for her.

***Nathan.** “Um, I would say there was the same underlying, uh, tone of, she was the boss and I, I would actually joke that I got very good at saying, ‘yes, dear’. I, I was, was, really, I could not have much of an opinion on really much of anything. And, I honestly didn’t realize it until I, I was out of the marriage.”*

Throughout my analysis, I continued to hear examples within their narratives of challenges, change, and struggles. I also heard times of reflection and growth. Whether the parent chose the divorce or not, many adapted to their changing circumstances with new realizations and modifications of their behavior. Many utilized their new partners, friends, books, and therapists to aid in their reflection and transformation. Often the tone in their voices would

change when they spoke of positive changes and overcoming their challenges. They were proud of how they were evolving even while acknowledging it was an ongoing process.

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this research study was to explore the lived experience of how parents manage and experience conflict while coparenting after divorce. Understanding the perspectives of these parents was central to this purpose. The central question of this study was: How is conflict managed between parents who are divorced and continuing to coparent?

The seven themes described and demonstrated in this chapter provide a conceptual framework of the lived experiences of these 18 participants. These reductions of analysis shed light on their shared experiences. Excerpts from these interviews were presented in support of the following seven themes:

1. The process of un-coupling results in feelings of loss and grief before, during, and after the divorce.
2. After divorce coparents experience challenges with accepting change in relationship dynamics and relinquishing control.
3. Coparenting apart can bring positive change in dynamics and patterns of relationships.
4. Concern for the impact divorce has on their children leads coparents to work together to put the child first, even when it is not comfortable, and often it requires flexibility.
5. Lack of time together requires more intentionality to include each other.
6. Coparenting after divorce gives an opportunity to reconceptualize what family means.
7. Parents make meaning of their experience through reflection, support, and personal growth.

The next chapter, Chapter 5, will discuss the research findings in their relation to the central question of the research and the current body of literature mentioned in previous chapters. In addition, recommendations and future implications of ongoing research in the field of conflict resolution will be explored.



## Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the lived experiences of post-divorced parents as they navigated managing conflict while coparenting. In the previous chapters of this dissertation, the relevant literature and theoretical frameworks chosen to support this study were discussed. A description of the research methodology and themes in this qualitative study were also presented. This chapter will include a thorough discussion of the findings and their correlation to the theoretical frameworks chosen for this study and how this study contributes to the field of conflict analysis and resolution. A connection between the themes and relevant research will be established. Lastly, this chapter will present limitations and recommendations for future research.

### **Findings**

This dissertation gathered and explored the narratives of eighteen individuals in an effort to examine their experiences of managing conflict as they navigated coparenting following divorce. The narratives were analyzed using interpretive phenomenological methodology. Using this analytical approach, the shared experiences were summarized using emergent themes which correspond to the central research question: How is conflict managed between parents who are divorced and continuing to coparent?

The analysis conducted has summarized the commonalities among their narratives. These commonalities developed into themes demonstrating both the complex and unique dynamics of their experiences. By continuing a coparenting relationship after divorce, these parents encountered the challenges of redefining their roles as they transitioned from spouses to post-divorced coparents, establishing new boundaries in reorganizing families, and managing conflict and communication as it applied to their coparenting goals. This study explored an important

issue impacting many families in a world where divorce is prevalent, and the reorganization of families is necessary. This exploration was important in adding additional insight into how policies, social workers, judges, lawyers, and educators may better support parents mitigating the negative implications of the inability to manage the complexities of this process.

### **Theoretical Framework Connections to Research Findings**

The theoretical framework for this study consisted of three theories: human needs theory, conflict transformation, and principled negotiation. These theories provided a lens through which the experiences of these parents navigating conflict in their coparenting relationships could be understood and examined. Human needs theory is used as a lens to better understand the needs parents have as they reorganize their families and seek resolution in their conflicts. After divorce, parents have concerns for their children and stress making their children's needs a priority. Because the children are shared by both parents, adjustments must be made to include the other parent in the decision-making process. Not only is there a focus on present needs but who is responsible for meeting those needs.

As Lauderach (1995) states, "Context, relationships and memories are all part of the tissue connecting the contradictions, attitudes and behaviours in the conflict formations, within the wider background in space and time" (p.112). All participants were divorced and continue to bring their experiences and memories of their marriage with them as they face conflicts in their coparenting relationship. These past experiences influenced their approach to resolving conflict in present situations. Some parents found that time apart allowed them to begin the reconciliation process. Parents saw the need to work together more peacefully to accomplish the goals they had regarding protecting their children from their interpersonal conflicts and to increase their communication around the raising of their children. While focusing on reducing conflict and

working better together, parents learned to accept it was not going to be perfect or easy and that it was an on-going learning process.

In Fisher's (1991) integrated approach to resolving conflict, he addresses the need for parties to focus on the shared interests and goals, letting go of preconceived notions or positions. This theory is used to highlight parent's on-going need to negotiate changes in their parenting arrangements. The data showed no parent could foresee all of the future conflicts encountered in parenting. Parents constantly endured negotiations regarding where children would spend holidays, acceptable child behaviors, school attendance, medical procedures, and boundaries in their relationship.

The first theme to emerge from the data described their experiences of loss. For some parents, this loss started long before the marriage ended. Walzer and Oles (2003) describe the needs of divorcing parents to feel secure, recognized, and a sense of meaning and control. It was evident in their narratives that the breakdown in communication hindered their ability to get their needs for connection and validation met. These unmet needs often caused conflict, hostility, or disconnect. One mother described her experience in the seven years leading up to the divorce in which her feelings were invalidated and communication just stopped because she could not reason with him. She spoke of the long-lasting impact that experience still has on her now. Their stories described continual moments of feeling a loss of predictability and control. One mother shared how the traumatic nature of their divorce caused her to lose all sense of trust. Security comes from a sense that you are supported and recognized. One parent mentioned the difficulty of grappling with a divorce he did not want, and the feeling of "having a bomb dropped on him." Another father described prior to the divorce how much his wife had changed, even to the point he no longer recognized her. Not only were they grieving the experience of their own unmet

needs, but also the disruption of predictability for their children. Children experienced a loss when one parent left the home. They described their fears of their child's needs being met in both homes to lessen the impact their decision had on their children.

The second theme to emerge in the data described challenges with accepting change and learning to let go of control. This theme is best understood through the lens of principled negotiation. Parenting in two different households requires an ongoing negotiation of what is appropriate and best for the children. One parent spoke of trying to find a balance between negotiating decisions, standing up for what he felt was right for the children, and letting go of the fact he could not control what she did with the children when they were with her. Another parent described navigating what to negotiate. Because they are no longer a couple, he is not responsible for meeting certain needs she may have but will negotiate with her ex-husband on decisions impacting the children. Parents mentioned using their coparenting agreement as a fallback when they could not agree, finding it a helpful legal document. As much as it may feel unfair in that moment, they stuck to the agreement to end conflicts. Several parents also mentioned that while it was beneficial in meeting the child's needs to have both parents involved, learning to accept the new assertions of the other parent was challenging. Up until this point the other parent often followed along with decisions made, but now more decisions had to be negotiated.

The third theme to emerge in the data described the positive transformation some of their relationships went through. This theme can be best understood through a conflict transformation lens. While the divorce may have been challenging, some parents shared how they were better able to coparent apart. One parent described how he did not have a lot of say in parenting when they were together, so the divorce allowed him an opportunity to become more involved in

decision-making. Another parent mentioned how being apart positively impacted their ability to communicate and see things from the other parent's point of view. This space was a tool which allowed them to reconcile some of their differences by approaching disagreements differently. Parents also felt coparenting apart was easier for the children to accept and appreciate their differences in parenting styles. Children were exposed to less conflict as parents reconciled their different perspectives on raising their children, an example of how conflict transforms to not only impact the primary players, but others involved.

The fourth theme in the data described how parents worked together to lessen the impact of the divorce on their children. In order for conflict to transform, Lederach (1997) emphasizes the need to envision a common shared future or goal even in the midst of conflict. While they wanted things their way, they realized getting along for the sake of the children was more important to them. They chose to put the needs of the child first. This often meant they had to let go of what did not seem fair to them and instead focused on what was fair for the child. In negotiating the terms of their parenting agreement, one mother mentioned how often things do not feel fair. The parenting agreement is something they can use as a tool when making difficult decisions. It became a matter of following the agreement, which Fisher et al. (1991) refers to as objective criteria, versus a conflict of what each parent felt or wanted in that moment. One mother mentioned the need for flexibility within their coparenting relationship. There were times when the other party could not uphold their agreement on which weekend they were scheduled to spend with the children because something came up. This is the art of seeing the other party as a human just like you. There are times when each party will need understanding and flexibility. One mother described this dynamic and letting go of her frustration with the last-minute change in plans because she may need him to be understanding in the future. Getting along for the sake

of the child's well-being also meant parents were learning the challenging dynamic of being uncomfortable. A common theme was parents sacrificing their comfort by sitting together at sporting events or having dinner together at exchanges so their children could have normative experiences.

The fifth theme to emerge from the data was how much more intentional they had to be in communicating with the other party. As Lederach (1997) describes, conflict transformation in the relational dimension comes from an ability to consider levels of interdependency and hopes for the future. They must decide the balance of communication frequency and autonomy. Without seeing each other every day, parents must learn to navigate the frequency of communication and how they included the other parent when they had the children. All parents struggled with this dynamic, especially when the children were younger. One mother described her greatest challenge was missing the little moments with her son. Both parents tried to record or call when something exciting was happening so the other parent could share in the experience as much as possible. This provided an opportunity for mutual gain so both parents could participate in the experiences of their child. Many parents described the increased challenge of getting the other parent to respond to questions and requests. Without the everyday, face-to-face communication, parents had to have more intentional follow-up. One parent described how being apart allows the other parent to avoid his communications, leaving him in an awkward position to make a time-sensitive decision she may not agree with or have input on. Another parent mentioned the struggle with deciphering what was important enough to request input from the other parent on.

The sixth and final themes to emerge from the data were how the divorce gave parents an opportunity to reconceptualize their definition of family and make sense of their experience

through reflection and personal growth. Conflict transformation requires reconciling how you thought things were going to turnout with a hope of what the future may hold. Time allowed parents to reflect and grow from the experience. Once they are able accept the changes in their lives and the lives of their children, they began to redefine what being divorced and family meant to them. One parent described utilizing a therapist and her current partner to help work through conflicts she experienced in her coparenting relationship. While some parents felt they lost their family, other parents felt they gained from expanding their family. One parent mentioned how his children called his new wife their *MoMo*, their word for their other mom. Another mother mentioned how they use the term *framily* to refer to their expanded family. Serval parents mentioned how including their new partners in group texts helped everyone to feel included and often added helpful new perspectives to their challenges. Of course, reconciling how you thought things would turnout with how they have turned out can be extremely challenging. This resulted in intrapersonal conflict for some parents. One father described the complex dynamic of accepting he was divorced as he did not believe in divorce.

All three of these theories were helpful in understanding the themes present in my data. They helped to frame the conflict, struggles, and processes these parents went through. Coparenting apart required them to negotiate ongoing changes in their parenting relationship with their ex-spouses, changes in the children's needs, and changes in the family system. Conflict transformation takes time and requires a change in perspective and goals. Through reflection and intentionality, these parents began reframing the relational dimensions of their lives. Lastly, the shared narratives of these parents highlighted the unmet needs in their marriages and divorces. When they were able to provide support for the other parent, their needs

were met more often. They also utilized a multitude of strategies to ensure the needs of their children were put first.

Prominent researchers, studies, and authors in the field of divorce, coparenting, and interpersonal conflict were cited previously in Chapter 2. The following section will explore the connections between the findings of this study and the literature previously reviewed.

### **Literature Review Connections to Research Findings**

The research findings of this study coincided with research Amato (2003) conducted utilizing data from the twenty-year longitudinal data from the Marital Instability Over the Life Course study. Amato found the more transitions a family experiences, the more negative impact it has on the children. One father mentioned how his daughter struggled for a couple years after the divorce. His young daughter was clingy and anxious. He had moved back in with his dad and was working two jobs. He then got his own place to live, and now he is remarried. He mentioned in the interview having to reassure his daughter that things were doing to stay the same now, that he and her stepmom were not going anywhere. Another parent talked about his son smoking pot for the first time as they went through their divorce and how he felt he would not have otherwise. Parents felt their children were impacted, at least in the short-term, by the various transitions they endured.

Amato and Keith (1991) suggested that high paternal conflict in the marriage was difficult for the children to navigate. If there were high levels of conflict, a divorce may then be viewed as a protective factor for the children. Many parents in the study mentioned considering these dynamics as they dissolved their marriages. Themes in the data support that some parents made choices to leave their marriage so their children would be exposed to less conflict. It gave children an opportunity to see them getting along versus only having memories of them fighting.



One mother shared that her daughter told her she was glad her parents got divorced because it reduced the fighting, and everyone seemed a lot happier. She thought her parents were better apart.

Malcore and colleagues (2009) found a negative correlation between court involvement and interpersonal conflict. Often, the more parents returned to court, the more severe and prolonged their interpersonal conflict was. The narratives of parents support these findings. For parents who were able to establish a stable parenting agreement, there was security in being able to get along in their coparenting relationship. Parents who worried their partner would take them back to court when they did not agree on a parenting issue were most fraught with worry and dread when they were not able to mutually agree on a parenting decision. One mother mentioned constant conflict and intense fear that if her children thought their rooms were too small and told their father, he would take her back to court for full custody of the children. Another parent mentioned a disagreement with her ex-husband and in an exasperated tone said she knew she would have to take him back to court to resolve it.

Several researchers developed typologies of coparenting (Baum, 2004; Feinberg, 2003; Beckmeyer, 2014). These types were defined by the amount of communication, cooperation, compromise, communication, and support in the coparenting relationship. The research findings support the various array of coparenting types. All participants varied in the amount of communication they desired and had with the other parent. Some parents mentioned communicating well and often, finding themselves on the same page with decisions and approaches to resolving issues. Other parents preferred to have a parallel style of coparenting, allowing each parent to have their own rules with the attitude that your time is your time, and I do not interfere with the decisions you make and you do not interfere with mine. Some parents

were not able to get along and make joint decisions. While they tried to minimize the amount of overt conflict, they were not able to communicate or collaborate well with each other. The findings from the research move beyond these categories to capture the nuances of coparenting relationships. Participants spoke of the ups and downs of coparenting. They were aligned on some decisions and facets of the coparenting relationship and not at all on others. This study expands our understanding of the many factors that impact how coparents communicate and resolve ongoing issues.

The research findings align with Whiteside's (1998) research presented through a family systems lens. Her research suggests the impact of divorce and coparenting on children and parents is reciprocal in nature. Through the telling of their experiences, parents described their level of comfort with their circumstances and the impact that had on their relationship with the other parent and their children. Parents who wanted to be the best coparents for their children found ways to appreciate and support the other parent. They felt if they offered the support and flexibility in their approach, it would directly impact and benefit the experience of their children. Many parents mentioned making attempts to speak well of the other parent in front of the children to support the children's relationship with the other parent. One father mentioned having a better relationship with his daughter since the divorce. The review of the literature also discussed the work of several other researchers (Camara & Resnik, 1989; McKinnon, 1989) who focused on similar dynamics of parental support. For parents who were not able to trust and support each other, joint decision making was a greater challenge. Parents shared stories of feeling left out of important decisions or arguments over what the other parent was allowing the children to do. The foundation of support for each other lead to better outcomes for parents and children.

Finding from this study align with the findings of Maccoby and colleagues (1990) and the Stanford Custody Project, that increased coparenting may provide opportunities for conflict though conflicts were often non-serious challenges. With some effort to increase communication and cooperation, the benefits of coparenting outweighed the challenges. Parents in this research study who reported good communication and pleasant relationships with their ex-spouse, also mentioned the challenges coparenting brought. They spoke of the need to continue communicating regularly around issues impacting their children. Coordinating schedules and logistics were not always easy, but they felt their small moments of discomfort were worth the benefit of the children having a close relationship with both parents. One mother stated it is not about us; it is about what is best for our child.

Review of the literature in Chapter 2 discussed several researchers' findings that the level of conflict before the divorce impacted the level of conflict while coparenting after the divorce (Sbarra & Emery, 2005; Baum & Shnit, 2003; Grych & Fincham). The findings of this study do not fully support their findings. Several parents' stories were ones in which they reported high conflict and low communication before the divorce and better communication and ability to resolve conflict after the divorce. Sbarra and Emory (2005) found that even 12 years after the divorce 41% of mothers reported they can never talk to the other parent about problems with the children and 19% reported on-going conflict with their former spouse and 14.5% of fathers reported still feeling hostile toward their former spouse. One of the parents in the study stated, "We weren't good together. Let's be great apart." She goes on to share they have a good friendship and she spends holidays with her ex-spouse and his family. Several other parents reported having a better relationship with their spouse now than they did when they were married.

While there were no questions in this study directly targeting who they felt was responsible for the divorce, the findings from this study correlate with the findings of Walzer and Oles (1993) and Bonach (2005) on the influence of shared responsibility in the demise of the marriage and amount of conflict in their coparenting relationship. Several parents mentioned sharing the responsibility in factors leading to the divorce whether it was because they did not communicate, held a grudge, or did not prioritize their relationship. Some parents mentioned only once they had time to reflect, did they realize some years later, with the help of a therapist or journaling, that they had some maladaptive behaviors. One mother mentioned learning later in therapy that she was a terrible of a communicator during her marriage. She now communicates well with her ex-husband and deals with conflict rather than avoiding it. Bonach's research focuses heavily on the role of forgiveness is facilitating the ability to resolve conflict and move forward as coparents. While none of the participants mentioned forgiveness directly, they did mention an ability to let the past go so they could move on to make decisions that benefited the children.

As Whiteside (1998) states, "Advice to divorcing parents inevitably includes the challenge: Separate your parental interactions from your feelings as former spouses" (p.12). Review of the literature supports a dynamic coparents face: their relationship as spouses ends and their relationship transitions to relating to each other as coparents only. This relationship may have different boundaries for what they discuss and how often they communicate. Findings from this study provided narratives in which no two experiences were the same. There were themes of establishing new ways of communicating and the focus of their conversations changing from one of sharing personal details of their lives to communicating only around topics involving their children. Several parents mentioned not sending them texts encouraging them to

have a good day or ask how they were feeling. Instead they sent factual information with all emotion removed. One mother mentioned when issues came up between her and her ex, there was no need to resolve anything that did not involve parenting. She states, “I hate to have to use the word ‘resolve’ but like, it’s kind of like we don’t have to because why do we need to? You know what I mean like there’s no reason to like, you know, talk it through or, you know, mend whatever it might be because we don’t have to deal with each other really in any capacity outside of our child.” The communication became more about the children, fact based, and focused on decisions needing to be made concerning the children.

The findings in this study support the work of several researchers regarding how conflict management styles and personality impact their coparenting relationships (Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2012; Baum & Shnit, 2003; Wetheim & Donnoli, 2012). The research findings in Chapter 4 serve as examples of how parents manage their coparenting relationships. Parents learned to yield to their partner’s style of communication to avoid conflict. A mother mentioned her ex-husband was black and white while she was very flexible. She learned to tell him things up front even though she was not much of a planner. Parents also learned to avoid communicating with the other parent when emotions were high. One father waited until he was calm and then sent messages to convey only factual information. Given their desire to lessen conflict exposure to their children, parents often sent emails and text messages. One father described waiting until there were enough things he needed to discuss with his wife. He would then schedule time to sit down face to face, and they would go through all the items together. Most parents had a compromising approach in dealing with the other parent. Since they shared parenting their children, they acknowledged a need to give and take to benefit their children. One

parent mentioned she and her ex-husband both liked to win, so they had to focus on negotiating and compromising instead of their natural inclination to get what they want.

Christensen and Shnek (1991) and other researchers studied how couples' conflicting preferences for closeness and autonomy resulted in a demand/withdraw cycle on communication. The cycle impacted how they communicated and managed conflict. Findings from this study correlate with this dynamic. One parent spoke of calling and texting questions to the other parent and receiving no answer. He expressed how frustrating it was when he needed to make a decision about signing his daughter up for a sports league. He would utilize additional modes of communication (calling, texting, leaving phone messages), none of which she responded to. He ultimately had to make an opportunity for them to physically be in the same place, so he could corner her into responding to him. One option parents utilized was avoiding the other parent's attempts at communication a majority of the time. If they did not have factual information to share (our son is sick and home from school today), they would ignore communications from the other party. However, Whiteside (1998) found over half of divorced couples rated themselves as having excellent or cooperative relationships with their ex-spouse. The research findings described in Chapter 4 are evidence that parents found ways to work well together. Communication and resolving conflict are dynamic. Most parents shared they were able to talk with the other party when they had concerns. Over time they often established a pattern that worked.

The previous two sections presented connections of the findings in the study to the review of prominent research in the field of divorce, coparenting, and interpersonal conflict and communication. These sections also presented connections using theoretical frameworks as a

lens to understand the collective themes found in the study. The following section will discuss contributions this study makes to the conflict resolution field.

### **Contributions to the Conflict Analysis and Resolution Field**

The emergent themes found in this study contribute to the existing literature in conflict analysis and resolution and its relevance to dynamics of coparenting after divorce. In the field of conflict resolution, results from this study can be applied to help conflict resolution practitioners. The insights gained from the participant's experiences can help mediators, family educators, social workers, judges, and therapists to better assist families going through divorce by considering the applicability of these findings within the conflict resolution field. Better understanding the lived experiences of people going through this process may assist them in finding more effective resolutions. For example, classes offered to or required for parents going through divorce or custody issues may use these findings to develop curriculum that best addresses and equips parents to reduce conflict and increase communication and cooperation. This research lends a deeper understanding into what parents need to be successful.

Increasing therapists' and social workers' awareness of parent's challenges in coparenting may encourage them to apply pertinent constructs in helping their clients achieve more successful coparenting relationships. Their increased awareness of the grief and loss parents experience when un-coupling and reorganizing their families can help them establish new roles and boundaries that support them having good communication and therefor lessen the negative impact on their children. In addition, therapists and social workers may utilize assessment tools of conflict styles and emotional intelligence to increase the self-awareness of their clients. Also, activities regarding control (e.g. control wheel exercise) demonstrating what individuals have control over, what they do not, and what they may want to be assertive about

regarding decisions or behaviors in the other party. Becoming more aware of the parent's experiences of communication and conflict resolution patterns will lend them insight when making recommendations to parents.

Given divorce impacts almost a million people each year, insight into the lived experiences of parent and families is useful to mediators and judges. In many ways legal structures and institutions impact the likelihood parents are given the chance to coparent. The number of families coparenting after divorce is increasing. States are providing more bills and court procedures that encourage continued coparenting. The findings from this study can demonstrate to judges that coparenting can be successful and parents find the challenges they experience are worth it to provide what they feel is best for their children. Developing a greater awareness for what parents' experience will help inform judges and mediators as to the importance of coparenting after divorce and will provide insight into how they can best support parents in being successful in resolving coparenting conflict.

Conflict resolution is an interdisciplinary field focused on the way people function in various systems and contexts. This study contributes to understanding just how diverse the approaches to resolving conflict are for those coparenting after divorce. The intersectionality of parent's needs, children's needs, and the complexities of family systems requires insight into the lived experience of individuals to aid in effective ways of resolving conflict. Adopting awareness of these varying approaches gives a deeper understanding into the needs of parents and the transformation of conflict. Understanding the lived experience through their collective voice gives deeper insight into how these experiences shape individual narratives.

This section discussed the many ways findings from this study contribute to the interdisciplinary field of conflict analysis and resolution. Insights from the results will aid



various practitioners in understanding the lived experiences of managing conflict in coparenting after divorces. The following sections will discuss limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

### **Limitations**

While the shared experiences presented in this study contribute greatly to the field of conflict analysis and resolution by providing a better understanding of the lived experiences of coparents managing conflict after divorce, the insights from this research are limited in its design. Because of the necessity to narrow the scope to understand the lived experience of a particular phenomenon, the sample was comprised of a homogenous group of individuals. All participants but one lived in North Carolina. Except for one participant, all participants were White. This was a result of purposeful sampling. In addition, a snowball recruiting technique was used because participants were able to suggest other parents who may be interested in participating. For example, one father was a part of a divorced men's group and suggested two other participants from his group. Parents had to be legally divorced implying they were also once legally married. In the state of NC this ensured they had gone through at least a one-year transition people from separation to divorce as it's required by law. Participants were also required to share parenting meaning the child had to spend time living with each person.

Several questions in this study were worded as such: (1) How would you describe your relationship with their ex-spouse now? and (1a) how is it different than before the divorce? (2) How do you manage your coparenting relationship with your ex-spouse now? (2a) How is it different than before your divorce? Because parents did not go directly from being married to divorced, many asked for clarification regarding do you want to know when we were separated

or just since the divorce? Rewording the question to say, “how is this different than when you were married?” would have caused less confusion.

Having done the interviews on Skype with voice only resulted in me depending on voice tone and inflection only when making sense of their pauses, laughter, and stutters. While it did provide a level of anonymity, I was unable to read their body language and was dependent only on their verbal communication. Also, making sense of an experience requires reflection. The parents did not know what I was going to ask, and therefore they were giving me answers on the spot.

### **Future Research**

In reviewing the literature on dynamics of divorce, post-divorce coparenting, and interpersonal communication and conflict there were many studies on high conflict couples. As Finzi-Dottan and Cohen (2014) suggest, those who are able to coparent may have been more amicable through the entire divorce process. Because participants in my sample were actively coparenting, they may have been managing smaller amounts or a lower magnitude of conflict. Hearing the narratives of parents who tried but were unsuccessful in coparenting would lend a different perspective and insight into additional barriers to coparenting.

North Carolina recently passed the Family First Act. I work at a child welfare agency and participated in the making of a new model of practice for our foster parents. This model highlights the importance of coparenting with the children’s birth parents whenever possible. I was able to provide valuable insights into the potential challenges foster families my encounter based upon the themes in this study. Exploring the experiences of these dynamics of coparenting would further expand the field of conflict resolution.

In reviewing the literature available on the prevalence of divorce and coparenting after divorce, it raises the question of how do parents coparent after dissolving a long-term relationship in which they were not married? With the rise of cohabitation, this is becoming more common. It seems understanding these dynamics would expand our understanding of how coparents manage conflict resulting from a separation with the other biological parent.

Another dynamic prominent in divorce literature is understanding the role and impact of stepparents on children's development and satisfaction of parents. Several parents in the study referenced their new partner or spouse or their ex-spouse's new coupling arrangement. These dynamics create more complexities in coparenting after divorce. There are more adults and children involved in the dynamics of shared decision making and boundary setting. Exploring the lived experiences of these parents or stepparents would add an additional lens on how conflict is managed within the household.

Utilizing different methodologies would expand the diversity of the research beyond an IPA approach. A paired sampling approach would expand the views and interpretations of both parents on the same coparenting relationship. Adding observations of parental interactions would document their experiences in a different manner. Interviewing older children would lend insight into their lived experience in addition to how their parents perceive their experience. Pairing qualitative data with quantitative assessments would add context to what is measured numerically.

Lastly, several of the studies reviewed in Chapter 2 compared groups of married parents and divorced parents regarding parental conflict and satisfaction in regard to the well-being of parents and children. Coparenting is a term relating to the coordination of parents raising a child.

Coparenting is not a phenomenon only divorced parents experience. Understanding how married parents make decisions and address conflict under the same roof would be valuable to explore.

This section outlined additional opportunities for research in the field of conflict analysis and resolution. Having chosen an interpretive phenomenological approach as my methodology, required me to have an introspective role as a conflict resolution scholar. The following section concludes the study with a brief description of the researcher's reflection on the impact this process had not only in the field of conflict analysis and resolution, but also on myself as an individual.

### **Conclusion**

As Smith and colleagues state (2009), an interpretive phenomenological approach involves a 'double hermeneutic'. "The researcher is making sense of the participant, who is making sense of *x*" (p. 35). The interpretative nature of qualitative research intrinsically involves the researcher. The interpretive design of this methodology invited me to reflect on my own experiences, causing personal growth and increased awareness of myself as a novice researcher in collecting and analyzing phenomenological data. As I explored my role as a researcher, it encouraged me to hold space for their experiences and to honor their experiences and interpretations of meaning. As I analyzed the interviews, my empathetic approach allowed for a rich dialogue as I entered their world of experience and understanding. With each interview I began anew. The interpretive design of this study encouraged me to make sense of my own experience as the researcher. My engagement and increased understanding of myself expanded my ability to gain insight into their experiences. Here I was the keeper of the stories parents so generously shared with me. I developed a better understanding of my complex self. In doing so, I was better able to understand the complexities in the lives of my participants.

Beginning this research endeavor, I reflected on my personal experiences and suspended any judgement or preconceived notions I had around coparenting and divorce. My personal growth throughout this process helped me as I became immersed in listening to them share their stories and later transcribed their interviews. As the themes emerged, reflections of myself and my experiences emerged as well. I realized biases I had concerning what made coparents successful. These reflections expanded my own mental models for how individuals deal with challenging situations, and what implications those decisions had on their lives.

Conducting this research and listening to their stories, changed my perspective on how conflict can be managed and how it impacts on-going parental relationships. This was especially true regarding working toward a shared goal of something so important as maximizing stability and love for a child. As I reflected on their experiences, I began to make sense of my experiences and this provided increased empathy for my own family. I began to soften some of the judgement I had toward my parents and how they managed conflict. I believe these stories support and honor all the effort these parents put into doing what is best for their children while balancing taking care of themselves. It was truly an honor to listen to their stories and gain insight into their world. It was truly an honor to look for commonalities across their experiences. And it was truly remarkable to be reminded how we each bring unique attributes to a shared experience. We are all different and yet we share similarities in how we learn to navigate our current circumstances.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of divorced parents managing conflict as they continue to coparent in a concerted effort to expand the understanding of how they create meaning from their experiences. Participants were asked questions that encouraged them to recall, reflect on, and make sense of their experiences. Results from this

study illuminate some of the shared experiences of the grief and loss, acceptance of change, relinquishing of control, increased intentionality to include the other parent, reconceptualizing family, and the personal growth of these parents.

The findings in this study make a meaningful contribution to the conflict analysis and resolution field. This study provides insight and depth into understanding the unique challenges of communicating and resolving conflict with an ex-spouse who share a desire to raise a healthy and loved child. The collective voice of their lived experiences provides valuable and rich information to equip conflict resolution practitioners developing programs and court-ordered processes for families in hopes of mitigating the potential negative impact on parents, their children, and society.

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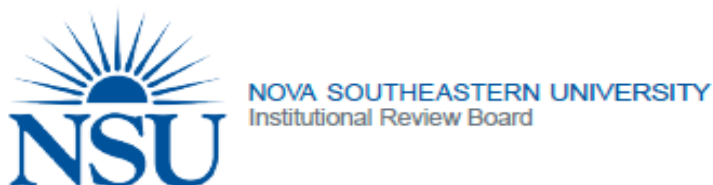
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## Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

**MEMORANDUM**

**To:** Rebecca Anderson  
College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

**From:** Ashley Russom, Ed.D.  
2nd Chair, Institutional Review Board

**Date:** September 28, 2018

**Subject:** IRB Initial Approval Memo

**TITLE:** Managing conflict while divorcing with children: An interpretative phenomenological analysis– NSU IRB Protocol Number 2018-481

Dear Principal Investigator,

Your submission has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board under Expedited review procedures on September 28, 2018. You may proceed with your study.

*Please Note: Stamped copies of all consent, assent, and recruiting materials indicating approval date must be used when recruiting and consenting or assenting participants.*

**Level of Review:** Expedited

**Type of Approval:** Initial Approval

**Expedited Review Category:** Expedited Category 6  
Expedited Category 7

**Level of Risk:** Minimal Risk

**Continuing Review:** Continuing Review is due for this protocol on September 27, 2019. A continuing review (progress report) must be submitted one month prior to the continuing review date.

Page 1 of 2

**Changes:** Any changes in the study (e.g., procedures, consent forms, investigators, etc.) must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation using the Amendment Form.

**Post-Approval Monitoring:** The IRB Office conducts post-approval review and monitoring of all studies involving human participants under the purview of the NSU IRB. The Post-Approval Monitor may randomly select any active study for a Not-for-Cause Evaluation.

**Final Report:** You are required to notify the IRB Office within 30 days of the conclusion of the research that the study has ended using the IRB Closing Report Form.

**Your study was approved under the following criteria:**

- Consent Participants according to criteria of 45 CFR 46.116 and 45 CFR 46.117

**Translated Documents:** No

*Please retain this document in your IRB correspondence file.*

CC: Ransford Edwards

Robin Cooper, Ph.D.

## Appendix B: Consent Form

NSU IRB APPROVED:  
 Approved: September 28, 2018  
 Expired: September 27, 2019  
 IRB#: 2018-481-Non-NSU



NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY  
 College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

**General Informed Consent Form**  
**NSU Consent to be in a Research Study Entitled**

*Managing conflict while divorcing with children: An interpretative phenomenological analysis*

**Who is doing this research study?**

College: College of Art, Humanities, and Social Sciences. Department of Conflict Resolution Studies.

Principal Investigator: Rebecca Anderson, MA

Faculty Advisor/Dissertation Chair: Robin Cooper, PhD

Co-Investigator(s): n/a

Funding: Unfunded

**What is this study about?**

This is a research study, designed to test and create new ideas that other people can use. The purpose of this research study is to explore how parents manage and experience conflict through and after the divorce process. Understanding this experience is important in developing programs to assist families through the transitions and hardships as well as lending insight in to how to lessen the negative impact by understanding the experience more thoroughly. Exploring and learning how parental conflict is managed as they separate, adjust, and move on is key to realizing how people function and how they experience and manage conflict. This knowledge might then be infused in intervention programs and the field of conflict resolution may continue to support and understand the process more thoroughly.

**Why are you asking me to be in this research study?**

You are being asked to be in this research study because of your direct experience with co-parenting after divorce. This study will include about 16 people.

**What will I be doing if I agree to be in this research study?**

While you are taking part in this research study, you will be asked to participate in one 45-60-minute interview on the phone, Skype, or at a location convenient to you.



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**Research Study Procedures** - as a participant, this is what you will be doing:

You will be asked to participate in one 45-60-minute individual interview. This interview will include questions focusing on your experience of co-parenting while divorced. This can be done via phone, Skype, or at a location convenient to you.

**Are there possible risks and discomforts to me?**

This research study involves minimal risk to you. To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would have in everyday life.

As part of this research, you will be asked to consider potentially challenging aspects of your co-parenting experience. The sensitive nature of the questions asked may potentially cause some psychological discomfort to you. You may find some questions we ask you to be upsetting or stressful. If so, we can provide some helpful resources to address the discomfort.

**What happens if I do not want to be in this research study?**

You have the right to leave this research study at any time, or not be in it. If you do decide to leave or you decide not to be in the study anymore, you will not get any penalty or lose any services you have a right to get. If you choose to stop being in the study, any information collected about you before the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the conclusion of the study, but you may request that it not be used.

**What if there is new information learned during the study that may affect my decision to remain in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to whether you want to remain in this study, this information will be given to you by the investigators. You may be asked to sign a new Informed Consent Form, if the information is given to you after you have joined the study.

**Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?**

There are no direct benefits from being in this research study. We hope the information learned from this study will help us better understand your experience and others in similar situation. You will be provided a copy of the research results.

Understanding this experience is important in developing programs to assist families through the transitions and hardships as well as lending insight into how to lessen the negative impact by understanding the experience more thoroughly.

**Will I be paid or be given compensation for being in the study?**

You will not be given any payments or compensation for being in this research study.

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**Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you for being in this research study. Ask the researchers if you have any questions about what it will cost you to take part in this research study (for example bills, fees, or other costs related to the research).

**How will you keep my information private?**

Information we learn about you in this research study will be handled in a confidential manner, within the limits of the law and will be limited to people who have a need to review this information. However, the researcher is obligated to report if the participants reveal information that necessitates mandatory reporting (e.g. child abuse) to appropriate authorities. This information will not be stored with identifying information like your name or any other personal details. This data will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution, and any regulatory and granting agencies (if applicable). If we publish the results of the study in a scientific journal or book, we will not identify you. All confidential data will be kept stored on a secure server and can be accessed by only authorized Nova Southeastern researchers for 3 years. Any paper notes or consent forms will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's private residence without identifying information. All data will be kept for 36 months from the end of the study and destroyed after that time by removing and deleting it from the server and paper documents will be shredded. Headphone will be worn while transcribing the interviews to ensure other people will not hear. The transcription will be used to analyze the data and will not be connected to participant's names.

**Will there be any Audio or Video Recording?**

This research study involves audio recording. This recording will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution. The recording will be kept, stored, and destroyed as stated in the section above. Because what is in the recording could be used to find out that it is you, it is not possible to be sure that the recording will always be kept confidential. The researcher will try to keep anyone not working on the research from listening to or viewing the recording by reviewing it only when alone and with headphones on.

**Whom can I contact if I have questions, concerns, comments, or complaints?**

If you have questions now, feel free to ask us. If you have more questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact:

**Primary contact:** Rebecca Anderson can be reached at 336.995.6844,  
rc1362@mynsu.nova.edu

If primary is not available, contact: Robin Cooper can be reached at 954.262.3048



NSU IRB APPROVED:  
Approved: September 28, 2018  
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### Research Participants Rights

For questions/concerns regarding your research rights, please contact:

Institutional Review Board

Nova Southeastern University

(954) 262-5369 / Toll Free: 1-866-499-0790

[IRB@nova.edu](mailto:IRB@nova.edu)

You may also visit the NSU IRB website at [www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants](http://www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants) for further information regarding your rights as a research participant.

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**Research Consent & Authorization Signature Section**

Voluntary Participation - You are not required to participate in this study. In the event you do participate, you may leave this research study at any time. If you leave this research study before it is completed, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

If you agree to participate in this research study, sign this section. You will be given a signed copy of this form to keep. You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this form.

**SIGN THIS FORM ONLY IF THE STATEMENTS LISTED BELOW ARE TRUE:**

- You have read the above information.
- Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction about the research.

**Adult Signature Section**

I have voluntarily decided to take part in this research study.

_____	_____	_____
Printed Name of Participant	Signature of Participant	Date
_____	_____	_____
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent and Authorization	Signature of Person Obtaining Consent & Authorization	Date



## Appendix C: Recruitment Email

NSU IRB APPROVED:  
Approved: September 28, 2018  
Expired: September 27, 2019  
IRB#: 2018-481-Non-NSU

Dear (name),

My name is Rebecca Anderson. I am a doctoral candidate at Nova Southeastern University. I am conducting a study to explore how couples continue to co-parent, communicate, and handle conflict after divorce. I am writing to request your involvement or anyone who may be eligible in my study. Below is a little bit more about me and my study. Please respond to this email or via phone at the number listed below.

I have worked with children and families for over 20 years. I have taught a co-parenting course for over two years and have had the pleasure of listening to many stories. I am also passionate about my work in Leadership & Development.

My study will involve an interview via face-to-face, phone, or Skype and will last approximately 45 minutes. During this time I will ask questions about your co-parenting experience after divorce. Below are the criteria for participation.

**To participate in the study, we need:**

- People who are legally divorced
- People who are co-parenting
- People who share custody
- People who have/had a child under the age of 18 at the time of divorce

Please see the attached flyer for more details.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Anderson

336.995.6844

Rc1362@mynsu.nova.edu

## Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer

NSU IRB APPROVED:  
 Approved: September 28, 2018  
 Expired: September 27, 2019  
 IRB#: 2018-481-Non-NSU

## An Opportunity to Share Your Story

**This study is being carried out as part of my studies at Nova Southeastern for completion of my doctorate in conflict analysis.**

Statistics published in 2015 estimate that divorce is a reality affecting over 800,000 families in the U.S. While the causes and impacts of divorce are diverse and not always fully known, conflict during the divorce process can have negative effects on both parents and children. Given so many marriages end in divorce, it is important to understand how people cope with the transition, especially when children are involved.

While there is extensive literature detailing some of the impacts and origins of the dynamics, there is less information about the lived experience of individuals continuing to parent after divorce. How communication and conflict is managed remains largely unknown. How do co-parents disagree and how do they manage those disagreements? Understanding this experience is important in developing programs to assist families through the transitions and hardships to lessen the negative impact and offer support.

**My study is designed to explore how couples continue to co-parent and deal with conflict after divorce. This will be carried out via face-to-face interviews (I'll meet you at a location convenient to you), phone, or Skype and will last approximately 45 minutes.**

### To participate in the study, we need:

- People who are legally divorced
- People who are co-parenting
- People who share custody
- People who have/had a child under the age of 18 at the time of divorce

### A little about Rebecca:

Rebecca has worked with children and families for over 20 years. She has taught a co-parenting course for over two years and has had the pleasure of listening to many stories and is passionate about her work in Leadership & Development.

"To be a person is to have a story to tell."

-Isak Dinesen



### Next Step:

If you would like to participate or find out more about this project, please contact:

**Rebecca Anderson**

336.995.6844

rc1362@mynsu.nova.edu



## Appendix E: Interview Questions

**Coparenting Interview Questions:**

## Demographics:

- Age:
- Current relationship status:
- How long were you married before you divorced?
- How long have you been divorced?
- How many children do you have together?
- What were the ages of your child(ren) when you divorced?
- Current custody agreement and visitation schedule:

## Interview Questions:

1. How would you describe your relationship with your ex now?
  - a. How is that different than your relationship before your divorce?
2. How do you manage your coparenting relationship with your ex-spouse?
  - a. How is it different than before your divorce?
3. How do you manage conflict in your co-parenting relationship?
  - a. What specific strategies do you use?
4. What types of conflict do you have?
5. How would you describe your communication with your ex-spouse?
  - a. How is it different than before your divorce?
6. What has been the most challenging aspect to overcome?
  - a. How have you overcome it?

Anything else you'd like to add?

## Appendix F: Example Participant Theme Summary









## Participant 12

- D Better friends since divorce because communication is better (line 2 and 6)
- D Have a goal in common they plan and discuss now
- D Have grown by working on themselves (line 11)
- D Saw herself as a horrible communicator
- D Text at least every day
- D Both involved whereas before it was all her
- D Just getting by – flew by the seat of our pants (line 12, 18)
- D Children have input
- D Seen as a partnership and sharing, takes a village (L 19, 21, 23)
- D Felt like single parent when together – played martyr role and stay at home mom, resentful (L 26, 33)
- D Kids #1 (L 31)
- D Deal with conflict right away – “the minute I feel something isn’t right” “it doesn’t help anything to have any conflict just sitting there and not being addressed. (L 36, 40)
- D Want to be an example to their children of how to work through things
- D Resolve conflict by talking via phone or in person
- D Eat dinners together and visitation so it would “allow them to have kind of like normal, you know, situation.” (L 47)
- D Doesn’t want her children to suffer
- D Pride gets in the way of co-parenting well (L 53)
- D “We weren’t good together. Let’s be great apart.” (L 55)
- D Have holidays together with extended family
- D She thinks he’s an amazing parent

- D "Family" L 58 works well with his girlfriend (including 3<sup>rd</sup> party)
- D Can work through anything – unfortunate it took us a divorce to get there L 61
- D Addresses his I'll do what I want attitude now instead of resentment
- D Being flexible is important L 74
- D "You know, they're both of ours." – low conflict L 77
- D Communication went from 3 to an 8 or 9 post-divorce
- D She now is open with problems vs resentful – conflict must be brought out and resolved
- D He has her back now L 82
- D Having stable parents on both sides is what's good for our children L85
- D Closed up and resentful before divorce L 91
- D Able to see through the minutia now L 94
- D Hardest thing his new wife's religion and feeling like he wasn't listening to his daughter by requiring her to go to church L 105 and feeling like his new wife was now the priority and not his daughter
- D As pre-teens and teens, he's gotten a lot better at listening to them and not making them do things, and then not punishing them because, you know, they questioned what he wanted them to do L 111
- D Therapy to work on herself
- D Introspection allowed her to not always react but pause L 117
- D Learned to verbalize – he can't read minds L 122
- D "Um, and sometimes just letting each other know how you're feeling and what you need, um, and what you want, really, it really makes a difference." L 129



## Appendix G: Sample Comment Annotations

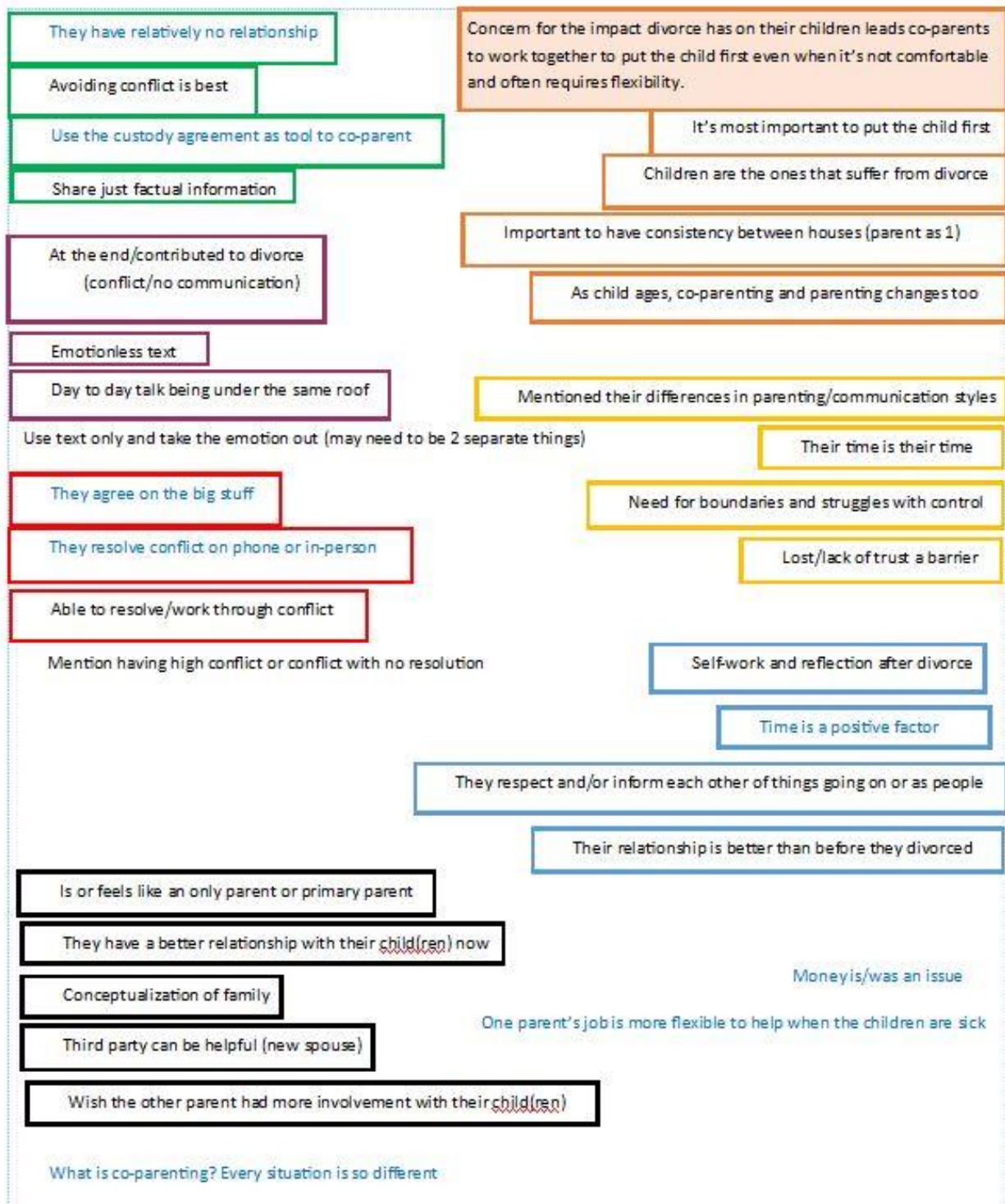
Participant 11	
1	How would you describe your relationship with your ex now?
2	Um, a lot better. We actually communicate, uh, a lot better than, uh, than I think we did towards the,
3	uh, end of, the divorce. Um, we communicate better back and forth. I think we both tend to listen a
4	little bit more, instead of just, you know, she used to see things her way and that was just the way it
5	was.
6	How is your relationship different now than before you got divorced?
7	Um, co-parenting, it, it, it's great now. Um, you know, it's, it's we get along a little better. I think the kids
8	are happier. (laughs) Um, it was just a little bit of a mess when we were together. A lot of arguing and
9	stuff, and you know, it, it was just getting to be a bit much. But, um, we co-parent great. Um, you know,
10	she's a great mom. She, she's, you know, academically there for them in their school and support. And,
11	uh, you know Dane plays an instrument and, you know, he plays lacrosse and Luna's in gymnastics with
12	us so we have to cross schedules back and forth, and you know we have to travel up north for events
13	and we do and Maria has to travel south for events and, uh, we just, we just make it work. We always
14	just kind of meet in the middle on it. And we make sacrifices on weekends, and we just, uh, we do
15	what we have to get the kids where they need to be.
	<p> <b>Rebecca Anderson</b> D: 10-19-19 He describes their relationship as better and the communication being better</p> <p> <b>Rebecca Anderson</b> C: 10-19-19 He seems to acknowledge better communication is also listening and a dialogue.</p> <p> <b>Rebecca Anderson</b> C: 10-19-19 It seems everything about their co-parenting has gotten better and the kids are happier with them apart.</p> <p> <b>Rebecca Anderson</b> D: When they were together, there was a lot of arguing.</p> <p> <b>Rebecca Anderson</b> L: 10-19-19 Second time he's mentioned their co-parenting being great within 3 sentences.</p> <p> <b>Rebecca Anderson</b> D: 10-19-19 He thinks she is a great mom and is supportive of the children.</p> <p> <b>Rebecca Anderson</b> D: 10-19-19 Their schedules cross with transporting the children and they just make it work.</p> <p> <b>Rebecca Anderson</b> C: 10-19-19 It seems they have a collaborative parenting style and make an emphasis of putting the children first.</p>

## Appendix H: Developing Emergent Themes

### Developing themes across interviews

1. Wish the other parent had more involvement with their child(ren)
2. They have a better relationship with their child(ren) now
3. Mentioned their differences in parenting/communication styles
4. They respect and/or inform each other of things going on or as people
5. Conceptualization of family
6. Is or feels like an only parent or primary parent
7. At the end/contributed to divorce (conflict/no communication)
8. Self-work and reflection after divorce
9. Lost/lack of trust a barrier
10. Day to day talk being under the same roof
11. Their time is their time
12. Share just factual information
13. Use text only and take the emotion out (may need to be 2 separate things)
14. As child ages, co-parenting and parenting changes too
15. Children are the ones that suffer from divorce
16. Avoiding conflict is best
17. It's most important to put the child first
18. Important to have consistency between houses (partner as 1)
19. Mention having high conflict or conflict with no resolution
20. Need for boundaries and struggles with control
21. Third party can be helpful (new spouse)
22. Their relationship is better than before they divorced
23. Able to resolve/work through conflict
24. One parent's job is more flexible to help when the children are sick
25. They agree on the big stuff
26. They resolve conflict on phone or in-person
27. Use the custody agreement as tool to co-parent
28. Time is a positive factor
29. They have relatively no relationship
30. Money is/was an issue
31. What is co-parenting? Every situation is so different

Appendix I: Early Conception of Super-Ordinate Themes





## Appendix J: Resources for Parents

*Please note that items have not been listed by preference nor do they suggest a direct endorsement of the material.*

### Online Resources

<https://www.divorcecare.org/>

- Helps parents locate nearby support groups where parents can share experiences and rebuild their lives and children aged 5-12 can participate in activities and make friends with others going through similar transitions.

<http://www.divorceandchildren.com/resources/>

- A website written by a divorce coach to provide resources for parents and children

<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/separation-and-divorce>

- Information and resources for adjusting to divorce

<https://uptoparents.org/>

- Free help for separated, divorced, and never-married parents. *Because peace for children is success for parents.*

[www.nccourts.org](http://www.nccourts.org)

- Information about the NC court system and court mediation, a copy of the NC Child Support Guidelines, and answers to commonly asked questions.

[www.divorcemagazine.com](http://www.divorcemagazine.com)

- Since 1996, *Divorce Magazine* has been offering quality information on legal, financial, emotional, and children's issues

<http://www.crckids.org/>

- The Children's Rights Council

### Books

- [Crucial Conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high](#) by Kerry Patterson
- [Difficult Conversations: How to discuss what matters most](#) by Douglas Stone
- [Putting Children First: Proven parenting strategies for helping children thrive through divorce](#) by JoAnne Pedro-Carroll
- [The Co-Parenting Survival Guide: Letting go of conflict after a difficult divorce](#) by Elizabeth Thayer