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Separated Parents' Experiences of Entrenched Co-Parenting Conflict and the Australian Family Law System

Leanne Francia

(AssocDegLaw, BSocSC (Psych), BSocSc (Psych)(Hons), Cdec)

In fulfilment of the award for

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Social Sciences

University of the Sunshine Coast, Sippy Downs, Queensland, Australia

Submitted on: 6 April 2020

ABSTRACT

For some parents following separation, shifting from a spousal and parental system to a parental system only can be difficult. The current thesis explored post separation entrenched co-parenting conflict within the context of the Australian family law system. Previous research has evidenced a broad, vague, and disparate body of knowledge around entrenched co-parenting conflict. In Australia only 3% of separated parents use the courts as their main pathway to finalise parenting arrangements, however one third of separated parents' co-parenting relationships comprise acrimonious behaviours which are constituted by high levels of conflict. Following separation legal processes may be drawn out and closure inhibited, with court and legal professionals reportedly spending 90% of their time on this separating population. The current thesis explored entrenched co-parenting conflict across two studies. Firstly, within a quantitative research design (Study 1) comprising online surveys and dyadic analysis. Secondly, within a qualitative research design (Study 2) comprising interviews.

Study 1 sought to, firstly identify specific conflict behaviours within entrenched co-parenting conflict, and secondly, investigate the emotional and psychological consequences of entrenched co-parenting conflict on children. Due to an inadequate sample size no meaningful data analysis was able to be undertaken, however the use of contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling were identified. Qualitative indicators were evident in Study 2 that point to the potential presence of specific conflict behaviours within entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Study 2 comprised five stages. Study 2 – Stage 1 systematically reviewed the available qualitative research on post separation high conflict co-parenting relationships. The review identified (N = 8) studies that comprised (N = 186) participants. Methodological quality was assessed using ConQual. Separated parents' experiences of high conflict were embedded in pervasive mistrust, disdain, and underpinned by concerns over differing parenting styles, or the other parents' ability to adequately care for the child. What maintained conflict were parental concerns as to the child's safety and well-being when in the care of the other parent. What escalated conflict was disdain directed at the other parents' concerns.

Study 2 – Stages 2 to 5 utilised the same sample, or part thereof. Study 2 – Stage 2 explored cognitive dissonance within entrenched co-parenting conflict by drawing on interviews from English speaking separated parents (N = 40) being (n = 36) females and (n = 4) males. Utilising the method of thematic analysis, and guided by the theoretical frameworks of grounded theory and cognitive dissonance, the mature defense mechanisms of altruism, suppression, anticipation, and humor were identified as potential adaptive responses within entrenched co-parenting conflict. Anxiety was the

predominant affective state reported within entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Study 2 – Stage 3 explored the phenomenon of hate within entrenched co-parenting conflict by drawing on interviews with English speaking separated parents (N = 40) being female (n = 36) and male (n = 4). Findings suggest that hate may be present within entrenched co-parenting conflict. Thematic analysis was guided by the theoretical framework of grounded theory and based on the theoretical perspectives of Shand's (1920) hate work, and Sternberg's (2003) triangular theory of the structure of hate. Three themes that may contribute to understanding hate's genesis, growth, and stability following separation, were identified. Firstly, an inability or unwillingness to self-reflect, secondly, inverse caring (care of self, not care of the child), and thirdly, relentlessness. Within grounded theory a conceptualisation of hate, being the circular theory of hate in co-parenting conflict, was developed. This conceptual model theorised that hate may functionally serve as a self-protective mechanism following separation that enabled a parent to either avoid experiencing their own emotions, avoid confronting or taking responsibility for their own behaviour, or avoid facing their own lived experiences.

Study 2 – Stage 4 explored separated mothers' (n = 36) lived experiences of entrenched co-parenting conflict within the context of the Australian family law system. A thematic analysis guided by the theoretical framework of social conflict theory was conducted on the interviews of separated mothers. Findings revealed that the experience of engaging with the Australian family law system caused considerable anxiety and distress for these separated mothers. Principal themes related to a gendered narrative, mother's concerns not been taken seriously, perceived inadequacies in knowledge or competence of experts and decision makers in relation to family violence, and coercion from some professionals within the family law system.

Study 2 – Stage 5 explored separated mothers' (n = 36) lived experiences in the aftermath of involvement in the Australian family law system and entrenched co-parenting conflict. A thematic analysis was guided by the contextual framework of the three planets model. Results revealed that mothers experienced systemic erasure of family violence in their interactions with the Australian family law system. In the aftermath mothers described losses in their careers, finances, health, personal relationships, and mothering.

DEDICATION

To Olivia and Audrey, the shining stars in my night sky

To every child that grew up in the shadow of the family court system

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I attest that the enclosed work is original. The thesis is my own account of research undertaken by me and has been wholly completed during candidature. The thesis does not contain as its main content any work or material which is embodied in a thesis or dissertation previously submitted by me or any other person for a university degree or similar qualification at this or any other higher education institution. The thesis includes the required acknowledgment of the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Signed: Date: 6 April 2020

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Francia, L., Millear, P., & Sharman, R. (2019). If love is blind, then hate cannot see – Hate within enduring parenting disputes. (2019). *Journal of Child Custody, 16(3),* 248-267. doi:10.1080/15379418.2019.1568947

Francia, L., Millear, P., & Sharman, R. (2019). Mothers and fathers' experiences of high conflict past two years post separation – A systematic review of the qualitative literature. *Journal of Child Custody,* 16(2), 170-196. doi:10.1080/15379418.2019.1617821

Francia, L., Millear, P., & Sharman, R. (2019). Separated parents' adaptive responses and states within intractable parental disputes. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 60(7),* 501-517. doi:10.1080/10502556.2019.1586229

PREFACE

The overarching aim of the current thesis was to better understand entrenched co-parenting conflict following separation. Two original studies are presented to address this aim. The aim of Study 1 was to extend the post separation literature by examining the four conflict behaviours of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling within entrenched co-parenting conflict. Findings from Study 1 were anticipated to form a partial framework for Study 2. The aim of Study 2 was to extend the post separation literature through an exploration of entrenched co-parenting conflict and separated parents' experiences within the context of the Australian family law system. Based on previous research which evidenced a broad, vague, and disparate body of knowledge around entrenched co-parenting conflict, the research aims of the thesis focused on high conflict, family violence, hate, cognitive dissonance, systemic erasure within the Australian family law system, and the aftermath. Given the dearth of research on separated parents' lived experiences, a qualitative, exploratory approach was primarily adopted.

The current thesis starts in Chapter 1 and provides an overview and rationale for the research program. Chapter 2 provides a background of the family law system and discusses the recent history of family law reform in Australia. Chapter 3 provides a literature view and introduces the key concepts. Chapter 4 introduces the methodological and theoretical approaches applied in the current thesis. Chapter 5 details the quantitative Study 1 that was undertaken. Chapter 6 provides a systematic review of qualitative studies that have explored post separation high conflict co-parenting relationships. Chapters 7 to 10 detail Study 2 – Stages 1 to 5 that were undertaken. Finally, Chapter 11 presents an overall discussion and conclusion for the current thesis. There have been four papers published from the current thesis and these are listed in the List of Publications, with links provided in the relevant chapters.

CHAPTER ONE

Overview

Ambiguity and controversy surround the interactional exchanges and emotional climate within post separation entrenched co-parenting conflict (Walzer & Oles, 2003). One of the roles of responsible research is to bring logic and order to potentially emotive social climates through the injection of data and a focus on opportunities and risks. The current thesis aimed to contribute further to this role through an investigation and exploration of the nature of post separation entrenched co-parenting conflict within the context of the Australian family law system. It is a privilege to have the opportunity to publish throughout a doctoral degree, however alongside the opportunity, this pathway has limitations. In order to address potential limitations all published articles are listed in the List of Publications, with research findings addressing the scholarly requirements of the doctoral degree set out in the main body of the current thesis.

Broadly, within the Australian family law system matters dealing with separation, divorce, and related issues primarily lay with the Federal system. Matters dealing with child protection and family violence primarily lay with the state and territory systems. In the current thesis the Australian family law system comprised not only the Family Court of Australia, the Family Court of Western Australia, and the Federal Circuit Court of Australia, but also government and non-government mediation and family relationship services, state child protection services, non-government community organisations, police services, child support services, and government and non-government child contact centres.

In the current thesis entrenched co-parenting conflict is defined as conflict in the co-parenting relationship that has continued past two years post separation that may involve high conflict or family violence. The overarching aim of the current thesis was to better understand entrenched co-parenting conflict following separation. The magnitude of post separation conflict, and the inability of some parents to separate without the involvement of statutory services is evident in the following figures. In 2016/2017 there were 49,032 divorces in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, n.d.). In 2015 the Family Court and Federal Circuit Court of Australia had 20,418 applications filed, with 13,357 consent orders finalised (Federal Circuit Court of Australia, n.d.). The 2015/2016 Family Violence Data Set reported 76.12% of matters before the Federal Circuit Court of Australia as involving allegations of family violence (Harmon, 2017). The next part will discuss ambiguity within the literature between the terms high conflict and family violence and provide a definitional framework and rationale for inclusion of both terms under the umbrella term of “entrenched co-

parenting conflict" in the current thesis.

Rationale for Inclusion of High Conflict and Family Violence in the Term "Entrenched Co-Parenting Conflict"

High Conflict

This part will provide two broad definitions and discuss the potential overlap associated with the terms high conflict and family violence. Contemporary researchers have suggested that separated parents entrenched in conflict, commonly referred to as high conflict parents, fall outside the normal responses to conflict following separation (Smyth & Moloney, 2017). Smyth and Moloney (2017) question the over-simplification of the term high conflict within existing research and recommended that focused research on the interpersonal dynamics of co-parents who remain entrenched in conflict continue. This recommendation partially aligns with the aim of the current thesis.

Within the post separation literature, the nature of high conflict is used broadly, and does not fit into a discrete category. It is difficult to find a single account that provides a succinct and up to date empirical definition within a post separation context. Commentaries on high conflict have offered definitions derived from theoretical frameworks, reviews of previous literature, observations of court personnel, or an author's personally derived clinical experiences (Anderson, Anderson, Palmer, Mutchler, & Baker, 2010; Donner, 2006; Smyth & Moloney, 2017). Accordingly, in the current thesis, any reference to high conflict is set within the context of entrenched co-parenting conflict that has continued past two years post separation. This conflict is generally characterised by hostility, ongoing litigation or threats of litigation, access sabotage, acrimony, denigration, involvement of child protection or other related family law services, withholding of financial resources, or other difficulties arising from sharing care of a child (Johnston, 2006). The issues in dispute may involve, but are not limited to, disagreement over children's contact or residence with each parent, family violence, neglect, changeovers, attendance at sporting activities, schooling, friendships, medical treatment or medical practitioners, or financial contributions (Haddad, Phillips, & Bone, 2016; Johnston, 2006).

Family Violence

Within Australia, family and domestic violence has profound economic and social consequences, not the least being the devastating psychological, emotional, and physical consequences on women and children. One in six Australian women and one in 16 Australian men have been subjected, since the age of 15, to physical or sexual violence from a previous or current partner. Nearly 2.1 million women and men in Australia have witnessed violence towards their

mother by a partner (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2018). Family violence remains a serious social issue in Australia, despite a policy agenda in Australia to strengthen families at key turning points across the life span. Family and domestic violence costs the Australian government $13.5 billion (AUD) per annum (Smyth et al., 2018). In order to address the issue of family and domestic violence the Federal, state and territory governments have committed to a National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-2022 (Council of Australian Governments, 2011).

The report Family, Domestic, and Sexual Violence in Australia ("FDSVA") identified gaps in key research areas which include "… services and responses that victims and perpetrators receive, including specialist services, mainstream services, and police and justice responses." (AIHW, 2018, p. xii). The FDSVA found that more Australians recognise physical behaviours such as hitting, rather than non-physical behaviours such as criticism, intimidation, or stalking, as forms of violence (AIHW, 2018). The National Community Survey reported that, in the context of separation, more than half of Australians view mother's allegations of family violence following separation as a tactic to gain advantage in family law decisions (Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, 2014). From this reporting it appears there is still some way to go before family violence becomes unacceptable in Australian society.

The literature further reports that allegations of family violence have either not been taken seriously, or are not addressed, in family law proceedings (Aris & Harrison, 2007; Trinder, Firth & Jenks, 2010). Indeed, Alexander (2015) reported that, although family violence is front and centre of the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) (Austl.) courts at times remain reluctant to prioritise the safety of children over a child's meaningful relationship with both parents. Within the current thesis, the definition of family violence, in addition to the expansion of the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) (Austl.) in 2011 to incorporate notions of coercion and control, includes broadly:

> … acts of violence that occur between people who have or have had an intimate relationship … the central element … is an ongoing pattern of behavior aimed at controlling a partner through fear … by using behavior that is violent and threatening … is part of a range of tactics to exercise power and control … and can be both criminal and non-criminal (Council of Australian Governments, 2011, p. 2).

Some researchers, in arguing that the term high conflict ought to be differentiated from family violence, acknowledge that family violence may be masked as high conflict and poor communication (Archer-Kuhn, 2018). O'Leary, Smith-Slep and O'Leary (2007) report that many

characteristics associated with high conflict such as jealousy, negative attributions, or a lack of resolution of conflict are frequently correlates of relational violence. Johnston (2006) similarly argued that, although high conflict relationships may involve violence, they need to be differentiated from violent relationships. Johnston (1995) also described a similar pattern as situational couple violence. Both within Australia and internationally the boundaries between high conflict and family violence continue to be argued. The distinction between family violence and mutual aggression within high conflict needs to be made in order to provide a framework for assessing and evaluating separated parents labelled as experiencing entrenched co-parenting conflict. Johnston (2017) referred to high conflict as entrenched hatred and suggested that if entrenched hatred can be reliably identified, it might signal a heightened risk that might in turn inform family court decision making, or at least offer a tool for helping. Due to there being no clear delineation between the terms high conflict and family violence, Study 2 recruited separated parents who reported experiencing either or both, high conflict and family violence that had continued past two years post separation.

Current Limitations in Co-Parenting Conflict Research

Bauserman (2002) in his systematic review reported several limitations in co-parenting conflict literature, being that studies generally comprise relatively small sample sizes, that studies evidence a lack of adequate controls for confounding variables, and that there is an inadequate reporting of statistical results. Other researchers similarly identified limitations in relatively small, unrepresentative, highly selected samples (Kelly & Emery, 2003). A later meta-analysis by Bauserman (2012) again reiterated the need for larger representative samples and longitudinal studies. Furthermore, reviews of the literature, rather than maintaining a sole focus on the conflictual co-parenting relationship, have generally adopted a broader approach. For example, in reviewing the impact of high conflict on child adjustment, or in reviewing the impact of post separation interventions on high conflict (Haddad et al., 2016; Johnston, 1994). Although it was not envisioned that the current thesis would overcome these limitations, this information highlights the ongoing difficulties faced in researching this complex post separation area, and the hard to reach and vulnerable population that inhabit it. Herein lies the rationale for the chosen program of research. It is suggested that even small understandings or gains in knowledge are still valuable contributions to the post separation literature, as small pieces of knowledge might serve as meaningful ones that other researchers may build upon and refine.

Program of Research

By beginning with an examination of specific conflict behaviours, followed by a qualitative

analysis of separated parents' experiences, the current thesis sought to advance the Australian research story of these parents' post separation journey in the years following separation.

Study 1

The aim of Study 1 was to extend the post separation literature by examining the four conflict behaviours of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling within entrenched co-parenting conflict. This examination was primarily underpinned by the theoretical framework of the four horsemen of the apocalypse ("4HA") (Gottman, 1994). These conflict behaviours are reportedly so destructive that their continued presence in a relationship potentially spells the end of the relationship. This examination is necessitated in the context of earlier findings for couples in intact families who not only evidenced these behaviours, but were reported as being more ineffective in co-parenting their children, being more conflictual, and having children who experienced behavioural problems (Katz & Low, 2004; Katz & Woodin, 2002). Although there exists a large body of research on these four conflict behaviours within the context of intact relationships, there exists a gap in research within post separation co-parenting relationships. Study 1 comprised six research questions:

1. Firstly, it was hypothesised that if there were greater levels of the four conflict behaviours in the co-parenting relationship, there would be greater acrimony between co-parents.
2. Secondly, it was hypothesised that if parents reported greater acrimony, then parents would report their children having increased internalising and externalising difficulties.
3. Thirdly, it was hypothesised that if parents reported greater levels of the four conflict behaviours in the co-parenting relationship, that children would experience increased internalising difficulties, increased externalising difficulties, and increased painful feelings originating from their experiences of parental separation.
4. Fourthly, it was hypothesised that if there was parental reporting of increased child internalising and externalising difficulties, then children would report greater co- parenting hostility and increased painful feelings about their parents' separation.
5. Fifthly, it was hypothesised that gender differences would exist between father and mother experiences of the four conflict behaviours.
6. Sixthly, it was hypothesised that gender differences would exist between son and daughter experiences of parental conflict.

Findings from Study 1 were anticipated to form a partial framework for Study 2.

Study 2

The aim of Study 2 was to extend the post separation literature through an exploration of the nature of entrenched co-parenting conflict and separated parents' experiences within the context of the Australian family law system. A qualitative research design was chosen as the literature suggests that a qualitative exploration contributes to better policy framing and administrative systems, in that it touches on the emotional aspects embedded within parents' experiences of separation (Brady, 2015). In line with the broad findings in the literature, that the conflictual co-parenting relationship may be defined by a number of factors, behaviours, or characteristics, it was important to explore separated parent's experiences from two perspectives. Firstly, as high conflict, family violence, cognitive dissonance, and hate. And secondly, within the context of the primary statutory and community organisations responsible for post separation parenting and financial matters, wholly referred to as the Australian family law system. Therefore Study 2 was developed through five stages that built upon each other. Stage 1, a systematic review of the qualitative studies of separated parents' experiences of high conflict. Stages 2 to 5 being the qualitative exploration of separated parents' experiences of cognitive dissonance (Stage 2), hate, (Stage 3), the Australian family law system (Stage 4), and the aftermath (Stage 5). Hence Study 2 of the current thesis was broadly guided by the following research aims:

1. Stage 1: The guiding research aim within the systematic review was the exploration of the qualitative literature of separated parents' experiences of high conflict in their co-parenting relationship.
2. Stage 2: The guiding research aim was separated parents' experiences, if any, of cognitive dissonance within entrenched co-parenting conflict.
3. Stage 3: The guiding research aim was to explore and understand the phenomenon of hate within entrenched co-parenting conflict.
4. Stage 4: The guiding research aim was to explore separated parents' experiences of entrenched co-parenting conflict within the Australian family law system.
5. Stage 5: The guiding research aim was to explore separated parents' experiences in the aftermath of entrenched co-parenting conflict and the Australian family law system.

Within this design the program of research sought to make a unique contribution to the literature in multiple ways, being firstly, contributing to definitional clarity around high conflict and hate through the formulation of an original model or framework. Secondly, on an intrapersonal level, in better understanding if cognitive dissonance might be present within entrenched co-parenting

conflict. Thirdly, in better understanding how entrenched co-parenting conflict is being addressed within the Australian family law system. The next chapter will set out the historical context of the Australian family law system circa 2006.

CHAPTER TWO

Introduction

Historical Context of the Australian Family Law System Circa 2006

In 2006 the Australian Government introduced sweeping changes to the *Family Law Act (1975),* (Cth) (Austl.) and child support system. These changes were preceded by recommendations from the bipartisan Family and Community Affairs Committee ("Hull Committee") which the then Prime Minister had established to explore the rebuttable presumption that children following separation spend an equal amount of time with each parent. This context in Australia reflected international developments in policy, research, and practice focused on shared parenting following separation.

In Canada in 2001 approximately 9.1% of children were in equal time care arrangements (Swiss & Le Bourdais, 2009). In Britain 12% of separated parents reported that they equally shared care of their children (Peacey & Hunt, 2008). In Arizona 15% of judicially determined arrangements involved shared care (Venohr & Kaunelis, 2008). A more dramatic social shift was seen in Sweden which reported 1% of children in shared care arrangements in 1985 and 28% of children in shared care arrangements in 2006 (Cashmore et al., 2010). Prior to 2006 shared care in Australia was reported in around 3% of post separation arrangements. Reflecting international trends, any growth in shared care arrangements leading up to 2006, occurred largely through self-selection, without a legislative environment that mandatorily required consideration of it (Arditti & Madden-Derdich, 1997).

The Hull Committee considered research-based submissions to inform their decision making. Amongst them was the oral testimony of Professor Jennifer McIntosh who stated that the research findings:

> ... are unequivocal and unapologetic regarding parental conflict and impacts on child development. Yes, children are strong. Yes, development is robust. No, divorce does not have to be damaging. Yes, parents basically want the very best for their children. And yes, enduring parental conflict places the odds against all children in all families (Rhoades, 2008, p. 288).

In its final report the Hull Committee recommended against a presumption of equal time, and instead recommended equal parental responsibility and a legislative presumption against shared parental care in cases of entrenched conflict. However, the government rejected this recommendation and deliberately confined the exemption to violence or abuse (Rhoades, 2008). Prior to 2006, the

courts generally regarded co-parenting conflict as an indicator that a collaborative care arrangement was not a viable option and one that would compromise the child's wellbeing (*T v N (Shared Residence)*, 2004).

The overall policy objectives of the 2006 changes were to build strong healthy relationships, to encourage greater involvement of both parents in children's lives, to protect children from abuse, to help parents decide what is best for their children, and to establish a highly visible point of entry as a doorway to other services (Kaspiew et al., 2009). These legislative changes were designed to articulate the importance of co-operative co-parenting and ensure that a child would benefit from a continuing and meaningful relationship with both parents following separation.

In a legislative context, changes included the *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006* (Cth) (Austl.). Within this Act the court, when deciding on the best interests of a child, primarily considered:

> the benefit to the child of having a meaningful relationship with both of the child's parents; and the need to protect the child from physical or psychological harm from being subjected to, or exposed to, abuse, neglect or family violence (s. 60CC).

Under the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) s.65DAC (Austl.) equal shared parental responsibility placed upon separating parents a duty to consult with each other on major decisions involving health, religion, changes in living arrangements, and education of children. The legislation further required that, where there is a presumption of equal shared parental responsibility, that the option of equal shared time be considered positively (*Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) s. 65DAA (Austl.). If consideration of equal time resulted in contra-indication, then the option of substantial or significant time was to be considered (*Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) s. 65DAA (Austl.). Within the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) s. 63DA (2) (Austl.) an obligation to consider equal shared time was placed not only on the courts, but also family counsellors, mediators, family consultants, and legal practitioners. However, there was no requirement for these advisors to consider issues such as family violence, neglect, abuse, or psychological harm (*Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) s. 60CC(2)(b) (Austl.). Within common law the Full Court of the Family Court in *Goode & Goode* (2006) precedented the intent of the 2006 legislative amendments:

> In our view, it can be fairly said there is a legislative intent evinced in favour of substantial involvement of both parents in their children's lives, both as to parental responsibility and as to time spent with children, subject to the need to protect children from harm, from abuse, and family violence, and provided it is in their best interests and reasonably practicable (p.

72).

Since 2006 shared parenting has emerged in Australia as one answer to maintaining parent-child relationships following separation. However, in the context of entrenched co-parenting conflict shared parenting arguably has bought with it both risk and opportunity. Shared parenting is defined in the current thesis as time a child spends with each parent following separation, generally being between 35% to 65% of nights within a fortnight (Australian Department of Human Services, n.d.). In the current thesis any reference to shared parenting or shared care of a child does not necessarily reflect this specific time split and might include other variations of time split between parents following separation.

Smyth (2009) reported that around 17% of the child support agency population have registered shared parenting agreements, an amount double from the previous five years. McIntosh and Chisholm (2008) found that amongst litigious and high conflict samples, 27% mediated shared care arrangements, and that the courts ordered shared care in 46% cases. Smyth, Weston, Moloney, Richardson, and Temple (2008) reported within data from the longitudinal study of Australian children, the Household Income Labour Dynamics (HILDA), which covered a three-year time span from 2001 to 2004 of 19,914 individuals, that shared parenting was the most fluid parenting arrangement and one that gravitated towards mother residence over time.

Over a decade on in Australia and legislative change has not led to a large increase in families entering long term shared care arrangements, with shared care plateauing at 16%. Earlier literature reports a decline in co-parenting conflict among separated families, which are tentatively attributed to government investment in pre-litigation support and mediation services (Kaspiew et al., 2009; Smyth, McIntosh, Emery, & Howarth, 2016). The situation becomes more complex within judicially imposed shared time. After major legislative reform there disputably came to follow an implicit pressure on separating parents to adopt the Federal sanctioned model of equal shared parental responsibility and presumption of equal shared care. A model that, if it became unworkable and parents were unable to negotiate further, forced parents to litigate. McIntosh (2009) observed "… the attributes that increase the likelihood of shared care arrangements working smoothly … are not typically characteristic of parents who litigate or who otherwise require significant support to determine and administer their post-separation parenting plans" (p. 393).

Of interest, but outside of the Australian context, is an earlier longitudinal study undertaken in Washington State, USA, reportedly the first to research the psychological implications of changing divorce legislation on divorcing families. The study by Dunne, Hudgins, and Babcock

(2000) examined the impact of legislative reform on co-parenting conflict. The relevant legislation, the *Parenting Act (1987*) (USA), was reportedly a novel piece of legislation that sought to reduce conflict by taking the focus off custody arrangements and redirecting it onto parental functioning and responsibility. The study comprised 200 separating parents reporting on 250 children. Participants self-reported on both their and their child's adjustment at separation and again at two years following separation. A comparison group under the old legislation was used. The *Parenting Act (1987)* (USA) required parents to resolve in advance, issues that inevitably arise following separation through the design of their own personalised parenting plan.

The legislation aimed to reduce conflict following separation, reduce the impact on children, increase father involvement, increase reliability of payment of child support, and reduce the frequency of re-litigation. None of the hypothesis were demonstrated with Dunne et al. (2000) reporting that outcomes were worse under the legislative reforms. Parental conflict reportedly continued to have a stronger influence on child adjustment than did legislative reform. Parents reported the process as more difficult emotionally and functionally during the separation and at the two year follow up. Dunne et al. (2000) found that the legislation did not change the distress and dysfunction experienced by children. This legislation reportedly doubled the amount of adversarial litigation required and resulted in a high correlation between the level of parental dysfunction and degree of children's problems. This research suggests that legislative reform alone is inadequate in assisting these families to build healthy relationships following separation. Despite legislative reform being viewed as one of the few policy levers available to influence parental separation related behaviours, entrenched co-parenting conflict remains an important confound in research.

Policy and Legislative Tension Since 2006

In Australia in the years following 2006, entrenched co-parenting conflict and the court's ability to adequately address these issues have been a matter of ongoing public debate and government inquiry. There have been numerous inquiries into the efficiency and financial viability of the courts, some of which propose amalgamation of the Federal Circuit Court of Australia and Family Court of Australia. Examples of reports include the Future Governance Options for Federal Family Law Courts in Australia – Striking the Right Balance (Semple, 2008), Review of the Performance of the Federal Court of Australia, the Family Court of Australia, and the Federal Circuit Court of Australia (KPMG, 2014), and Review of Efficiency of Operations of Family Court (Price Waterhouse Cooper, 2018). Specifically related to conflict and family violence, were inquiries that focused on the family law system including, Every Picture Tells a Story: Inquiry into Child Custody Arrangements in the Event of Family Separation (House of Representatives Standing Committee on

Family and Community Affairs, 2003), A Better Family Law System to Support and Protect Those Affected by Family Violence (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, 2017), and Family Law for the Future – An Inquiry into the Family Law System (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2019).

One recent focus in family law reform has been recommendations that the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) s. 60CC (Austl.) should be amended. It has been suggested that the factors considered when determining parenting arrangements include, arrangements that best promote the safety of the child and the child's carers, including safety from family violence, abuse, or other harm. This recommendation extends out to any relevant views expressed by the child, the developmental, psychological, and emotional needs of the child, the benefit to the child of being able to maintain relationships with each parent and other people who are significant to the child where it is safe to do so, and having regard to the carer's ability and willingness to seek support to assist with caring (Recommendation 5) (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2019). Despite the latest government inquiry putting forward a total of 60 recommendations for change to address issues in family law, the Federal Government has since commissioned another inquiry (Andrews-Hanson Inquiry, 2019).

Broadly, since 2006 a state of tension has existed in Australian family law. Firstly, due to a misconception that following separation equal parental responsibility assumes equal shared care. Secondly, that the prioritisation of a child's meaningful relationship with both parents remains at odds with ongoing concerns of family violence, potentially exposing already vulnerable children to further abuse (Keogh, Smyth, & Masardo, 2018; Smyth, Hunter, Macvean, Walter, & Higgins, 2018). Broadly, since 2006 a protracted state of tension has existed in the Australian family law system. Firstly, due to a misconception that following separation equal parental responsibility assumes equal shared care. Secondly, that the prioritisation of a child's meaningful relationship with both parents remains at odds with family violence (Barker, 2013; Keogh, Smyth, & Masardo, 2018). This tension is broadly characterised within the notion of the indissolubility of parenthood taking priority over concerns that a child might be exposed to further abuse or violence, and a presumption that having a relationship with a parent, even an abusive one, is in a child's best interests (Barker, 2013; Parkinson, 2013). Such presumptions do not acknowledge the risks involved for women and children (Hardesty & Chung, 2006).

Early Findings in Relation to Co-Parenting Conflict Post 2006

Within the literature Kaspiew et al. (2009) reported an increase in judicially determined shared care arrangements being 4% prior to 2006 to 33.9% post reform. Following the 2006

amendments, early research in Australia began to bring to light risks and limitations that the legislation potentially posed to child adjustment. In 2008 the Australian Institute of Family Studies undertook an evaluation of the 2006 family law reforms titled the Longitudinal Study of Separated Families ("LSSF"). The LSSF was the most comprehensive evaluation in Australia, and arguably, internationally, that sought to improve understanding of the early and long-term effects of the new legislation. The LSSF included 28,000 participants from the judiciary, legal profession, parents, grandparents, children, and related family relationship staff and clients. One strong message that came out of the evaluation was that ongoing conflict between parents led to worse outcomes for children (Kaspiew et al., 2009).

Other empirical evidence became available in Australia, primarily from two studies conducted by McIntosh and Long (2005) that focused on the emotional well-being of children post separation. The first study was a longitudinal research program titled Children Beyond Dispute that sampled families that had shared care negotiated through family mediation. The study incorporated child focused and child inclusive interventions that comprised 142 families reporting on 364 children. Of children aged five to 16 years, 193 participated directly. Data on the impact of interventions on parental conflict, acrimony, and parental alliance was collected at three months and twelve months following mediation. At the time of mediation parents reported high to very high acrimony, with children reporting even higher levels of acrimony between their parents. At the time of mediation one third of children had mental health scores in the clinical range. One year on from mediation and 21% of children still had mental health scores in the clinical range. At risk were younger children whose parents remained in conflict, parents who had poor regard for, or little co-operation with each other, and poor mother/child relationships. In this research, co-parenting conflict remained a risk factor for children.

Another study involved a Family Court of Australia sample of high conflict parents and their children (McIntosh, Bryant, & Murray, 2008). The study examined outcomes for 77 parents and 111 children after attending a child responsive intervention. Comprehensive interviews with parents that explored conflict, relationships, co-operation, and child well-being, were undertaken prior to and four months after litigated settlement. Four months after shared care arrangements had been finalised by the courts 28% of children were found to be experiencing a high degree of emotional distress and mental health scores in the clinical range. Five variables highly associated with this outcome were, the child was unhappy with the living arrangements, resident parents' relationship with child had deteriorated, child lived in shared care, one parent held safety concerns around other parent, or parents remained in high conflict. In this research, co-parenting conflict remained a risk factor for

children.

From another perspective contemporary research involving 16 interviews of children aged 8 to 12 years from 11 different families reported that no child mentioned the allotment of time as having any bearing on their felt security. Rather security was reported as being experienced within the availability and responsiveness of a parent (Sadowski & McIntosh, 2015). A summary of post separation parenting arrangements, involving 133 families and 260 children over a four-year period, reported co-operative co-parenting relationships to be a key ingredient for sustaining shared care over time (McIntosh, Smyth, Kelaher, Wells, & Long, 2010). In relation to children's adjustment, McIntosh et al. (2010) reported that children in shared care arrangements experiencing higher levels of co-parenting conflict four years after mediation and were more likely than children in other arrangements to feel caught in the middle of parental conflict. In this study neither the living arrangement, nor pattern of care, independently predicted children's mental health score.

Types of Co-Parenting Relationships

In the current thesis a separated parent refers to a parent of a child who was previously in a married or de facto same-sex or other-sex relationship who has responsibility or care for a child of that relationship. Prior to separation, parents have a shared destiny and shared outcomes in relation to their lives and their child. After separation, the shared destiny alters considerably, however given the existence of a child, still exists in a co-parenting context. In this way the post separation co-parenting relationship is unique, and although parents may no longer wish to remain in an intimate or spousal relationship, the co-parenting relationship continues due to what Parkinson (2013) referred to as, the indissolubility of parenting.

Co-parenting is generally a triadic relationship that consists of two parents and a child (Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004). Talbot and McHale (2004) defined co-parenting as being undertaken by "… two or more adults working together to care for a child for whom they share responsibility" (p. 192). Co-parenting involves agreement or disagreement, on issues that involve the child and extends further to each parents' enactment following agreement or disagreement. Enactment, being whether the parent competes with the other parent to otherwise negatively engage the child and undermine the other parent, or cooperates with the other parent, positively engages with the child, and supports the other parent. The co-parenting relationship is defined in the current thesis as a parent-child triad and enactment of parental behaviours and feelings following agreement, or disagreement on issues relating to the child (Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004).

Four types of co-parenting relationships suggested in the literature are co-operative, parallel,

conflicted, and mixed (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). These typologies were identified as part of a larger study undertaken by the Stanford Centre for the Study of Families, Children and Youth between 1984 and 1985. The study involved more than 1000 families. Co-operative co-parenting was found in approximately 25% to 30% of separated parents. Co-operative co-parenting involved joint planning for children, frequent communication, the co-ordination of children's activities and schedules, low antagonism, and high levels of co-parenting support.

The second typology, parallel co-parenting, was reportedly the most common amongst separated parents. Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) found 41% of separated parents in their sample as fitting this co-parenting type after three years. Parallel co-parenting involved low antagonism and low levels of co-parenting support. The third typology was conflicted co-parenting. Conflicted co-parenting involved high antagonism and low levels of co-parenting support. In over two-thirds of their study Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) reported a co-parenting relationship that was conflicted or parallel. The fourth typology was mixed co-parenting that involved high antagonism and high levels of co-parenting support. Other researchers have suggested similar typologies. Baum (2004) categorised three co-parenting relationships being co-operative, parallel, and conflictual, and research by Ahrons and Rodgers (1987) reported co-parenting relationships categorised as perfect pals, co-operative colleagues, dissolved duos, angry associates, and fiery foes.

Types of Co-Parenting Conflict

Co-parenting conflict is inherently about communication, either individuals communicating about conflict, or individual's communication causing conflict (Horan, Guinn, & Banghart, 2015). Navarra (2011) reported that 69% of arguments are still about the same subject five years later. Conflict can result in behavior that can be on a spectrum from firing out a few harsh words about the other parent, through to violent acts such as murder of either a child and/or the other parent. The emotional aftermath of co-parenting conflict is equally diverse and complex. Following co-parenting conflict, tension might be reduced, and closeness follow, or oppositely, result in ongoing tension and negativity that can deeply embed itself within the co-parenting relationship (Brock & Kochanska, 2016). These broad distinctions have implications for child adjustment and highlight the need for continuing efforts by researchers to formulate theoretically guided hypothesis with greater accuracy when it comes to understanding the exact nature of entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Co-parenting conflict has been reported as falling into three categories. The first two categories are covert (occurs in the presence of the child and one parent) and overt (occurs in the presence of the child and both parents). A third category is encapsulated, wherein parents still

experience conflict but do not put their child in the middle (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Research evidences that children triangulated or caught in the middle of co-parenting conflict experienced poorer child adjustment outcomes (Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1996). When triangulation becomes the main strategy for managing conflict, the conflict remains unresolved. High co-parenting conflict and low co-parenting co-operation is related to children feeling caught in the middle, with children in shared care arrangements less likely to feel caught in the middle when their parents co-operated (Buchanan et al., 1996).

Parents who express anger towards the other parent, denigrated the other parent in front of the child, prohibited the mention of the other parent in their home, or ask their child to carry hostile messages, create loyalty conflicts and stress beyond bearing for some children. Equally, ongoing separation from an attuned parent may be as damaging to the child as the child witnessing the conflict itself (Kelly & Emery, 2003). In summary, what is known about co-parenting conflict is that it is a better predictor of child adjustment than is separation, children's distress is reduced according to the degree to which conflict is experienced or resolved, and triangulation in conflict is destructive to a child (Buchanan et al., 1996; Cummings & Davies, 2002; Francia & Millear, 2015).

Entrenched Co-Parenting Conflict and Child Well-Being

Concerns around entrenched co-parenting conflict are not new. Over 20 years ago Johnston, Kline and Tschann (1989) and Johnston (1994) identified caution against shared parenting where parents remained in conflict or evidenced an inability to encapsulate their children from conflict. Other researchers similarly reported emotional unresponsiveness, ongoing co-parenting conflict, and continued control or violence as impacting child adjustment (McKinnon & Wallerstein, 1986). Child developmental tasks that remain vulnerable following separation include the development of core trust, development of an understanding of cause and effect, the experience of emotional arousal and regulation of affect, the establishment of peer relationships, the development of attachment, and internalised beliefs about self (Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001).

Kelly (2003a) reported a two to three-fold risk of problems for children who experienced separation compared to children whose parents remain married in externalising symptoms such as aggression, disobedience, anti-social behavior, substance abuse; teen child bearing; internalising behaviours including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem; and increased risk in intimate relationships. Effects on developmental adjustment for children can include chronic tension, heightened aggression and anxiety, disturbed emotional regulation and arousal, poor social skills, dysfunctional behavior patterns, and long-term challenges with perception and resolution of conflict

(McIntosh & Long, 2005). National and longitudinal studies using objective psychological measures evidence 20% to 25% of children with separated parents experiencing adjustment problems, compared with 10% of children in married families (Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

For a child the experience of entrenched co-parenting conflict might lead to low coping skills, inefficacy, and emotional dysregulation, rather than the experience of mastery as evidenced in the development of problem-solving skills, self-efficacy, and an ability to organise their own feelings when they become young adults (Francia & Millear, 2015). Where co-parenting conflict continues, children may expend enormous amounts of energy in an endeavor to ensure their own emotional safety and in combating the emotional distress that arises. In summary, the literature points to the existence of different types of co-parenting relationships and conflict, and suggests that entrenched co-parenting conflict may impact children's well-being. The next chapter provides a discussion on the proposed theoretical framework for Study 1 and a comprehensive literature review of the literature for Study 2.

CHAPTER THREE

It was anticipated that the findings from Study 1 would partly inform a framework for the qualitative exploration of entrenched co-parenting conflict in Study 2. Having established the contextual background of the Australian family law system, the current thesis will next discuss the literature and theoretical framework for Study 1. Lastly, Chapter 3 will provide a literature review on cognitive dissonance, hate, systemic erasure, and the aftermath of family violence for Study 2.

Study 1 – Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Given the problems associated with co-parenting conflict for parents and children, Study 1 focused on the examination of specific conflict behaviours within entrenched co-parenting conflict. This examination was primarily underpinned by the theoretical framework of the four horsemen of the apocalypse ("4HA") (Gottman, 1994). The four conflict behaviours within the 4HA are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. These conflict behaviours are reportedly so destructive that their continued presence in a relationship potentially spells the end of the relationship. This examination is necessitated in the context of earlier findings for couples in intact families who not only evidenced these behaviours, but were reported as being more ineffective in co-parenting their children, being more conflictual, and having children who experienced behavioural problems (Katz & Low, 2004; Katz & Woodin, 2002). There exists a large body of research on these four conflict behaviours within the context of intact relationships, however scarce to no research within separated co-parenting relationships. It is important to understand the impact of these behaviours, whose, as evidence suggests, presence may spell the end of an intact relationship, within the context of a relationship that does not end due to the existence of a child.

Gottman's research primarily focused on happily and unhappily married couples wherein he developed a variety of empirical measures that included the 4HA. These measures are widely used within psychology to gain a deeper understanding of relationships. Lebow (1999) reported Gottman's research as a rare combination of theoretical vision, and rigorous and innovative methodology, that powerfully enabled the creation of a science of couple processing. Gehert (2013) reported Gottman's research as able to predict with 97.8% accuracy the longitudinal course of a relationship. Within this sound theoretical framework, the next part will explain each of the four conflict behaviours in more depth.

Within the 4HA the first horseman, criticism, refers to attacks on an individual's character, rather than their behaviour, and usually incorporates an element of blame that has the intent of making the other person wrong. Criticism differs from complaining. For example, instead of asking

if "… you can put down the toilet seat when you are finished" criticism is evident in "… you're a lazy idiot who just can't be bothered putting down the toilet seat". Contempt, the second horseman, evolves from unresolved issues within the relationship. The resulting anger then feeds into a negative thought pattern. Within contempt, there is real intent for an individual's words and actions to hurt, insult, or psychologically abuse. Contempt can include body language that communicates disgust, such as sneering or eye-rolling. The third horseman is defensiveness. When an individual behaves contemptuously, the other individual may become defensive. In its simplest form defensiveness is the individual making excuses for their actions and refusing to accept responsibility. In order to ward off a perceived attack, defensive individuals develop a victim mentality by assuming the other is judging them. The fourth horseman, stonewalling, occurs when an individual withdraws completely from an interaction. Such individuals say they are trying to be neutral and keep an argument from escalating, but the message they send to the other is that they don't care enough to engage. Stonewalling has been reported as being strongly associated with hostility. Stonewalling is evident in icy distance, stony silence, physically removing self, or monosyllabic mutterings. Stonewalling is representative of a total deterioration of the relationship with hostility preceding, coinciding, or following (Busby & Holman, 2009). These elements may help to further elucidate differences between high or low-level conflict, in that low-level conflict tends to be issue focused, whereas further along the continuum the conflict becomes more ex-partner and relationship focused.

Study 2

Introduction to Cognitive Dissonance

With numerous stressors arising from parental separation the initial psychological strain of separation might develop into cognitive dissonance as the ending of the relationship challenges what an individual might have valued, believed, or held closely. An individual might have imagined that their future would follow a normative path that included their partner being faithful to them, bringing up their children together, and growing old together. However, a parent's experience is now non-normative, their partner has left, and they may need to provide for their children as a single parent. Cognitive dissonance is defined in the literature as information and behavioural actions that contradict that an individual is a competent, moral, or reasonable person, which creates psychological distress or discomfort (Festinger, 1957).

Cognitive dissonance generally follows a process wherein there is firstly, a dissonance arousing event (for example, separation); that produces inconsistency between cognitions (for example "we were going to raise our children and grow old together" versus "I am now a single

parent and I never want to see you again"); that leads to dissonance motivation (for example "I need to make some difficult decisions"); and implementation of a dissonance-reducing strategies (for example "you are wrong, and I am right and I am going to make sure our children, friends, and family know this. I know the courts will make orders in my favour because they will see this as well"); that results in the reduction or elimination of the dissonance ("the courts awarded primary care to me, so I am a good parent").

However, where conflict is entrenched final arrangements around parenting may not be the end of disagreements. In this context researchers suggest that inconsistent cognitions alone might not be responsible for continued dissonance. Cooper and Fazio (1984) suggest that dissonance arousal had less to do with inconsistency among cognitions, asserting that an aversive event that had resulted from one's behaviour was a key component in dissonance arousal. This was supported by Oliver (1997) who reported that apprehension arises over events yet to come. Put another way, there exists a fear of what the future will bring.

Arousal might involve differential threshold effects in individuals. Examples of threshold effects include that the decision is now history and consequences both good and bad are inevitable, that the decision involves a great amount of family resources, deep psychological significance or is potentially ego threatening, or that independently made decisions by others can have adverse consequences for individuals, particularly decisions of long term duration (Oliver, 1997). Dissonance might subsist over time. Aronson and Carlsmith (1963) reported a dissonance effect remaining up to forty-five days after manipulation. Freedman (1965) reported that dissonance applied attitudinal changes can subsist six weeks post manipulation. Oliver (1997) suggests that if dissonance continues following decision implementation, apprehension of future events might become cumulative.

Placing cognitive dissonance back into the context of the current thesis, parental separation involves many difficult decisions that comprise unchosen outcomes, particularly if ordered by a court. Examples of decisions may include outcomes that relate to time with children, schooling, location, or medical care. Other unchosen or unavailable outcomes might comprise anticipated regret that leads to feelings of general apprehension. Co-parenting is now a reality and all unchosen outcomes are forgone. If what was arranged, ordered, agreed to or not, does not proceed as planned, dissonance might arise. Once the reality is known in the context of continued co-parenting there can be not only current observations of outcomes, but each observation might cumulatively generate outcomes of dissatisfaction and unpleasant apprehension of future outcomes.

Following dissonance arousal, a separated parent might endeavour to alleviate the

psychological discomfort arising from dissonance through implementation of a dissonance reducing strategy such as reducing self-interest behaviour, engaging in self-deception, or a combination of both. Other strategies might include changing to the contradiction, justifying against the contradiction, or being indifferent to the contradiction (Festinger, 1957). In the post separation context, an individual might believe they must decrease the value of the other parent or increase the value of self as a parent. This might enable a parent to not have responsibility for modifying their behaviour (Cooper & Fazio, 1984). It is further suggested that if conflict is entrenched then the very nature of the adversarial family law system might further support cognitive dissonance where the applicant and respondent (no longer a mother and father) are pitted against each other and now need to prove that they are right and the other is wrong. When individuals behave immorally according to their own standards, they can feel bad and under pressure to convince themselves that their behaviours are in fact moral.

In summary, cognitive dissonance may contribute to an explanation for the contradictory behaviour of parents who are willing to incur personal harm or harm to their children as an attempt to retain personal consistency. In this context the current thesis aimed to explore cognitive dissonance and its part, if any, in sustaining conflictual behaviours in entrenched co-parenting conflict. The next part will discuss the concept of hate and the rationale for inclusion in the current thesis.

Introduction to Hate

Researchers examining hate have struggled with sparse literature that often does not validate proposed theories, nor clearly specify mechanisms through which hate manifests itself (Royzman, McCauley, & Rozin, 2005). The existing literature evidences three areas where hate is identified being psychoanalysis (Blum, 1997), social psychology (Allport, 1950), and emotion research (Fitness, 2000). Themes include hate as a relatively stable experiential state, hate as comprising motivational implications associated with a desire to harm or destroy the hated other, and hate as an emotion (Allport, 1950; Rempel & Burris, 2005).

From a psychological perspective, Sternberg's (2003) duplex theory of hate proposes that hate is neither the opposite of love, nor the absence of love, but instead has its origins in personal stories that characterise the object of hate. Sternberg's (2003) triangular theory of the structure of hate suggests hate comprises three components being negation of intimacy (evidenced through disgust and distancing), passion (expressed through anger or fear), and decision-commitment (characterised by cognitions of devaluation and diminution through contempt). Sternberg (2003) argued that these three factors contribute to the ease with which a cognitive commitment to hate is

generated.

Hate can have instrumental goals and subtypes that are distinguishable by their goal. Subtypes include a wish to forestall abandonment (tethering), the elevation of self by bringing the other down (denigration) or restoring order or justice (redress) (Rempel & Burris, 2005). Sternberg (2003) suggested one goal for a hater is to change the thought process of the preferred population so that they will conceive of the targeted individual in the hater's devalued way. This can potentially occur post separation within family law proceedings, related professional organisations, and children connected to the hated other. In this context, social and legal restraints, such as court orders and processes, mediated agreements, and legislation, although aiming to provide frameworks to support separating families, at the same time might be inflammatory to hate.

The literature suggests that hate may include an element of justice that is dependent on moral judgments. A moral judgment was also identified in the discussion on cognitive dissonance, where a parent might feel pressured to convince themselves that their behaviour is moral. Without this justificatory framework of moral exclusion, it is suggested that hate wanes more readily or remains unexpressed (Staub, 2005). Elster (1999) argued that hate is an emotion caused by a judgment that the other is evil. Shand (1920) suggested that in hate, not only is there an absence of sympathetic emotions, but a replacement of sympathetic emotions with antipathetic emotions. Shand (1920) suggested that this replacement enabled a hater to be insensitive to pity and gratitude.

Researchers have suggested that hate may be a way for an individual to psychologically and physically structure or develop protective factors that enabled them to continue navigating their psychological world (Alford, 2005; Aumer & Bahn, 2016). As a self-protective mechanism, contemporary researchers suggest that hate is a reaction to others an individual has loved and invested themselves in, that manifests itself when an agreement that was vital to the maintenance of the relationship is broken (Aumer-Ryan & Hatfield, 2007).

Neurologically, research evidences a unique pattern of activity for hate in the brain. Zeki and Romaya (2008) reported that the large parts of the cerebral cortex involved in evaluating others, planning, voluntary movements, and organisational skills become deactivated during love. Only small parts of the cerebral cortex become deactivated during hate. Shapiro (2016) suggested that in love individuals shut off negative judgment, in hate individuals shut off their ability to self-reflect.

A definition of hate remains elusive and little is known about it from the perspective of separated parents who remain entrenched in conflict. In this context, it is argued that a qualitative approach offers a means for bringing separated parents' voices and experience into contemporary

reflection. An "… examination of the hater's mind … what he/she thinks and feels and what motivates him/her …" in the context of entrenched co-parenting conflict may enable a genuine insight into a subjective experience (Gaylin, 2003, p. 15).

It is further suggested that the creation of stories of hate are attempts to find self-esteem, meaning and autonomy, the good victim, and the bad perpetrator (Gabbard, 1993). The general hate literature suggests that hate potentially has emotional, motivational, or cognitive components, and that hate might act as a goal or self-protective mechanism. Smyth and Moloney (2017), Johnston (2017), and Demby (2017) suggest that more focused research in this context is required and the current thesis partly focused on this gap. The next part will discuss the relevance of systemic erasure in the aftermath of entrenched co-parenting conflict for separated mothers.

Introduction to Systematic Erasure and the Aftermath

Over the decades, researchers and the broader community have become increasingly aware of the prevalence and pervasiveness of violence towards women and children. Given that separation is a well-known trigger for homicide, it is vital that women and children are supported once they leave controlling or violent relationships (Holland, Brown, Hall, & Logan, 2018). Despite an increasing awareness Jaffe, Lemon, and Poisson (2003) poignantly state that "… separation is not a vaccination against domestic violence…" (p. 29). Bancroft, Silverman and Ritchie (2012) similarly suggest that where the dynamic of family violence is overlooked within the family law system, separated mothers may find themselves and their children experiencing further abuse.

In Australia, the prevalence of family violence claims in post separation parenting matters has led to family violence being described as the core business of the family court (Easteal, Young, & Carline, 2018). Despite this, there is limited research on the long-term consequences on health, finances, interpersonal relationships, and mothering for mothers who experience entrenched co-parenting conflict and long-term involvement in the family law system in Australia (Ragavan et al., 2017). In this context the current thesis sought to explore the aftermath of separation in a sample of mothers in Australia who experienced entrenched co-parenting conflict. Within the literature it is suggested that shared responsibility and care of children may provide opportunities for conflict and family violence to continue, and mothers may be challenged when they are ordered to co-operate with reportedly unsafe ex-partners (Tiovonen & Backhouse, 2018). In summary, the current thesis aimed to contribute further to the post separation literature through an exploration of the aftermath of entrenched co-parenting conflict for separated mothers.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a theoretical background and literature review. From the reviewed literature it was argued that there is more that is unknown, than known in relation to the exact nature and characteristics of post separation entrenched co-parenting conflict. The current thesis theorised that the conflictual co-parenting relationship may be influenced by several factors including cognitive dissonance, hate, family violence, or high conflict. The next chapter will focus in more detail on the theoretical framework and methodological approaches applicable to Study 1 and Study 2.

CHAPTER FOUR

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The previous chapters provided the rationale, contextual background, and literature review for the current thesis. This chapter will discuss the methodology and theoretical frameworks for Study 1 and Study 2. The aim of Study 1 was to extend the post separation literature by examining the four conflict behaviours of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling within entrenched co-parenting conflict. This examination was underpinned by the theoretical framework of the 4HA (Gottman, 1994). This examination is necessitated in the context of earlier findings for couples in intact families who not only evidenced these behaviours, but were reported as being more ineffective in co-parenting their children, being more conflictual, and having children who experienced behavioural problems (Katz & Low, 2004; Katz & Woodin, 2002).

In line with the primary aim of the current thesis that the conflictual co-parenting relationship may be defined by a number of factors, behaviours, or characteristics, it was important to carry out further exploration of separated parent's experiences within the context of the primary statutory and community organisations responsible for post separation parenting and financial matters, wholly referred to as the Australian family law system. Herein lie the rationale for breaking up the analysis and aims into five stages that build upon each other.

Following Study 1, Study 2 comprised Stage 1 being a systematic review of the qualitative research studies of separated parents' experiences of high conflict. Stages 2 to 5 comprised a qualitative exploration of separated parents' experiences of cognitive dissonance (Stage 2), hate (Stage 3), the Australian family law system (Stage 4), and the aftermath (Stage 5). Each of Study 1 and Study 2 methodological approach and theoretical frameworks will now be discussed in detail.

Study 1 - Parent's Ability to Resolve Conflict Following Separation and its Impact on Mastery or Misery for Children

Aims

Study 1 had three overarching aims. Firstly, to examine the four conflict behaviours of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling within co-parenting conflict. Secondly, to examine children's externalising difficulties, internalising difficulties, problem-solving, and emotional regulation within co-parenting conflict. Thirdly, to examine acrimony, hostility, and children's painful feelings within co-parenting conflict. It was anticipated that the findings from Study 1 would identify specific conflict behaviours and in doing so provide a framework within which to further explore separated parents' experiences in Study 2.

Research Questions

Study 1 comprised six research questions:

1. It was hypothesised that if there were greater levels of the four conflict behaviours in the co-parenting relationship, there would be greater acrimony between co-parents.
2. It was hypothesised that if parents reported greater acrimony, then parents would report their children having increased internalising and externalising difficulties.
3. It was hypothesised that if parents reported greater levels of the four conflict behaviours in the co-parenting relationship, that children would experience increased internalising difficulties, increased externalising difficulties, and increased painful feelings originating from their experiences of parental separation.
4. It was hypothesised that if there was parental reporting of increased child internalising and externalising difficulties, then children would report greater co- parenting hostility and increased painful feelings about their parents' separation.
5. It was hypothesised that gender differences would exist between father and mother experiences of the four conflict behaviours.
6. It was hypothesised that gender differences would exist between son and daughter experiences of parental conflict.

Study 1 - Theoretical Frameworks

Seated within the theoretical frameworks of Gottman's (1994) 4HA and the conceptual cooperative competitive parental conflict model (CCPCM) (Francia & Millear, 2015) the four conflict behaviours of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling were examined within entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

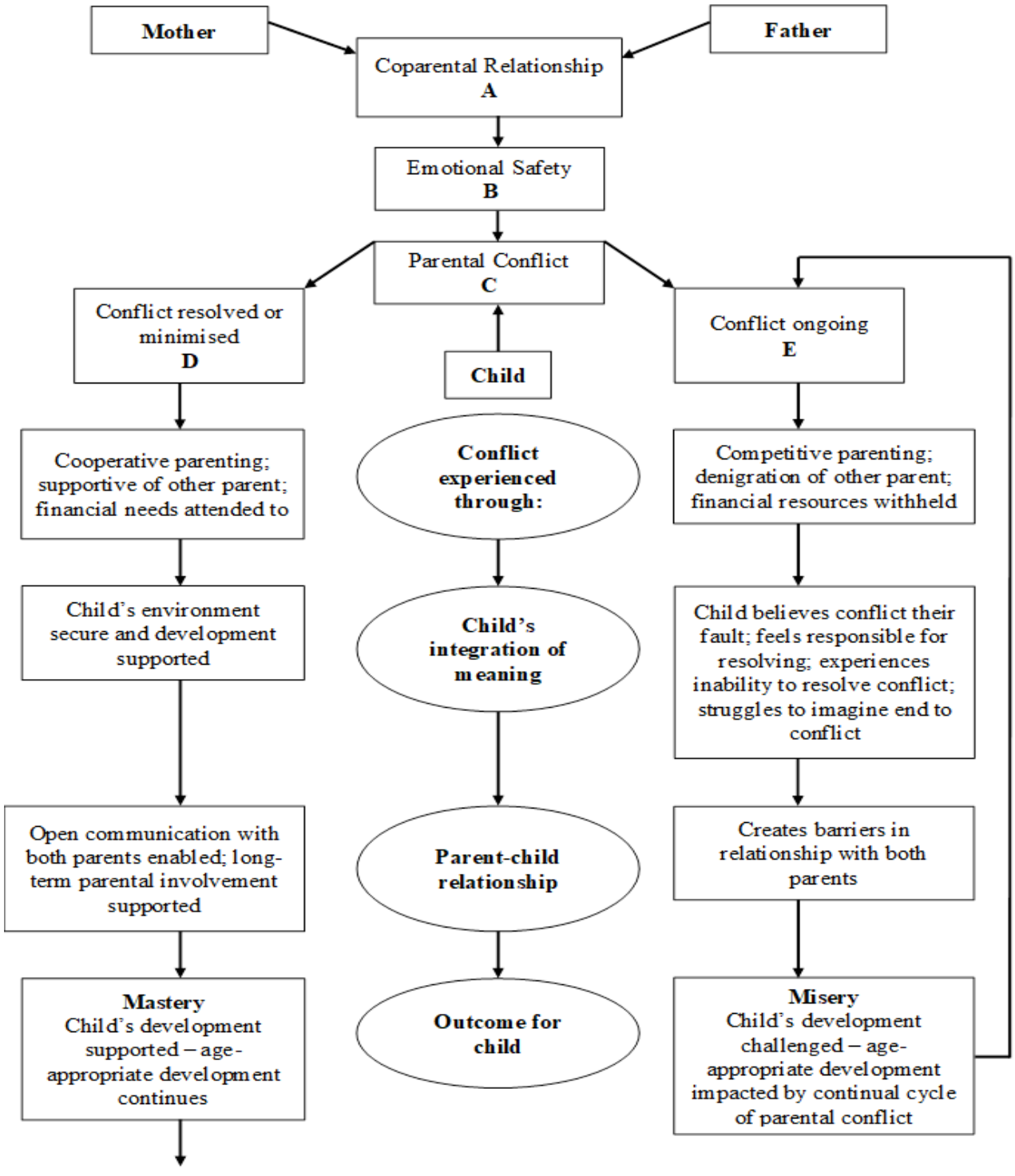
Parental separation is a risk factor for both internalising and externalising difficulties in children and young adults and entrenched co-parenting conflict potentially adds an additional risk factor (Averdijik, Malti, Eisner, & Ribeaud, 2012). Some researchers assert the quality of parent-child relationships to be more closely linked to child outcomes, than the quality of co-parenting relationships (Nielsen, 2017). Other researchers take a different approach and argue that it is more important to identify specific aspects of conflict within co-parenting relationships (Smyth & Moloney, 2017). Contemporary literature remains inconclusive and Study 1 sought to identify

specific conflict behaviours within entrenched co-parenting conflict, and examine the impact, if any, on the child. Study 1 is the first to examine the four conflict behaviours and potential consequences on the child in a post separation co-parenting context in Australia.

Cooperative Competitive Parental Conflict Model

The CCPCM consists five parts. The upper part of the diagram (A and B) showed the family at the start of separation, and the lower part (C, D, and E) explored what happened over time following separation. Part A represents the establishment of a co-parenting relationship following separation. Part B represents the child's world as a triadic base supporting their physical, psychological, and emotional well-being. Part C represents the presence or absence of parental conflict as a moderator between the child and their emotional security. This is affected by whether co-parenting conflict is resolved (Part D) or ongoing (Part E). Resolution or lack of resolution of co-parenting conflict flows into the child's experience of co-parenting (shared or disparate), attitude to the other parent (respectful or derogatory), and the sharing of material resources (available or withheld). Part D represents how resolution of the conflict assists the child when parents are responsive to the threats that affect the child's emotional security. It suggests that the child in this context maintains a relationship with both parents, and their development supported. In contrast, Part E represents the negative consequences of ongoing co-parenting conflict. In this context parenting became disparate and unresponsive and the child's relationship with both parents may be affected. The CCPCM proposes that co-parenting conflict is a moderator between the child and emotional security (Francia & Millear, 2015).

Figure 1. Cooperative Competitive Parental Conflict Model



Cooperative Competitive Parental Conflict Model

(*Figure 1* reprinted by permission of the publisher Taylor & Francis Ltd, http://www.tandfonline.com, article Francia, L., & Millear, P. (2015). Mastery or misery: Conflict between separated parents a psychological burden for children. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 56*, 551-568. doi:

10.1080/10502556.2015.1080090**)**

Method

Dyadic Analysis

Dyadic analysis contributes richly to the understanding of social life. In order to contribute to the limited literature, dyadic analysis was chosen to examine parent/child reporting of conflict and child adjustment across two individuals. Study 1 aimed to examine the dyad in a deeper way that included bidirectional effects, partner effects, or actor effects. (Gonzales & Griffin, 2012). Within Study 1 the richness of the dyadic data and analysis complimented the research questions that involved variables that spanned the parent and their child. Dyadic analysis further complimented the aims of Study l by including multiple variables and interpersonal influences within the variables of interest. In summary, the method of dyadic analysis enabled an examination of both dyadic individual's influence on each other, similarities, and dissimilarities.

Surveys

Participation took place by means of an anonymous online survey (Graziano & Raulin, 2010). Survey Monkey software enabled both the professional and confidential automatic compilation of data, together with safe and secure data storage. It was expected that a N of approximately 60 to 80 dyads would be enough to detect a medium effect size (Amato & Keith, 1991; Timmer, Urquiza, Zebell, & McGrath, 2005). Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006) reported that the power of 0.80 could be achieved with (N = 80) for a medium effect size (r = 0.3). Electronic surveys provided a cost-effective way to conduct research where it was impractical to adequately access both these populations (Couper, 2000). Results from electronic surveys are similar to written surveys but have the advantage of fast response rates (Andrews, Nonnecke, & Preece, 2003). Some benefits of electronic surveys include the ability to present questions in a logical manner, use paper questionnaire design principles, and prevent survey alteration.

Participants

Participants comprised male and female separated parents for the parent survey, and male and female older adolescents and young adults (aged 16 years old upwards) for the child survey. Inclusion criteria for parent survey were:

- Married or de facto parents who had experienced separation
- Had at least one child at separation
- Spoke/read English at a Grade 7 level or above

- Experienced co-parenting care of child following separation

Inclusion criteria for child survey were:

- Had married or de facto parents who separated during their childhood
- Spoke/read English at a Grade 7 level or above
- Experienced a level of care with both parents following separation

Participants were eligible to participate, regardless of the time since separation. The separation experience could range from co-operative to conflicted. The data collected would potentially comprise retrospective data for some participants, for example, who had experienced separation during their childhood, and current data, for example, if children were still in their care.

Recruitment

Prior to the collection of any data ethics approval was obtained from the University of the Sunshine Coast Human Ethics Committee being approval number S16/993. All participants self-selected into the survey. Participant recruitment took place both on and off-line, however participation was restricted to participants with on-line access. The online survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Parent and child participants each had separate surveys which could be completed anonymously at a time that suited. One challenge of the research method was obtaining the participation of both a parent and a child from the same family.

Participants were recruited through local law firms, community legal services, family support organisations, child and youth advocacy services, media releases, women's health centres, council libraries, and sporting clubs. Approaches to these organisations were made directly through a written letter or email. First year psychology students had the opportunity to take part in the research and obtain extra course credits. To recruit dyads of parents and their children, the individual participants were first recruited through the avenues mentioned above. The individual was asked to recruit their child (if the parent) or their parent (if the child). Dyads then devised a unique joint linking code that had a total of six letters/numbers. This was the link with which dyads were able to be identified in the data set. Neither parent nor child had access to the other's survey.

Table 1. *Study 1 Dyad Participants*

	Male	Female	Total
Parent Dyad	5	9	14
Child Dyad	3	11	14

Table 2. *Study 1 Parent Participants*

	Male	Female	Total
Participants	36	69	105

Table 3. *Study 1 Child Participants*

	Male	Female	Total
Participants	7	77	84

Materials

The parent survey assessed parental behaviour, co-parental conflict, parent emotional regulation, personality, well-being, and children's strengths and difficulties (See Appendix A). The child survey measured self-efficacy, problem solving, emotional regulation, the experience of parental conflict and separation, the parent-child relationship, and well-being (See Appendix B). Participation was voluntary and could be discontinued at any time.

Measures for parent survey

Demographics. Participants reported their gender, age at separation, number of biological children, age of biological children at separation, gender of children, time spent with each child following separation, post separation care arrangements, and education.

Parent behaviour. The measure for parent behaviour was the Self-Test (The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse) (Gottman, 1994). Twenty-six items relating to criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and

stonewalling. Sample item “During an argument I keep thinking of ways to retaliate”. Items were rated as No (0) or Yes (1), with items summed for Yes giving a range of 0 to 26.

Parent perception of child behaviour. The measure for parental perception of child behaviour was the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997). Twenty- five items comprising five scales of five items relating to emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems, and prosocial behaviour. Sample item “My child often loses their temper”. Items were rated as “not true (1), somewhat true (2), certainly true (3)” with items summed “somewhat true” scoring as one and items summed “not true/certainly true” varying with each item.

Parent personality. The measure for parent personality was the Ten Item Personality Inventory (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003). Ten items relating to extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experiences. (i.e., two items per facet). Sample item “I see myself as reserved, quiet”. Items were rated as “disagree strongly” to “agree strongly”. Items were rated as strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) and summed with higher scores indicating more agreement with that facet.

Parent emotional regulation. The measure for parent emotional regulation was the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003). Ten items relating to cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. Sample item “I keep my emotions to myself”. Items were rated “strongly disagree (1)” to “strongly agree (5)”. Items were summed with higher scores indicating greater emotion regulation.

Co-parenting relationship. The measure for co-parenting relationship was the Acrimony Scale (Emery, 1982). Twenty-five items relating to acrimony. Items were rated “almost never” (1) through to “almost always” (5). Sample item “I have angry disagreements with my former spouse”. Items were worded in a counterbalanced format to control for response bias. Items were summed as a single acrimony score, the mean of all items, with higher scores indicating greater conflict and more co-parenting difficulties.

Parent mental well-being. The measure for parent mental well-being was the Distress Questionnaire 5 (Batterham et al., 2016). Five items relating to worry, hopelessness, social settings, focus, anxiety, and fear. Sample item “In the last 30 days I found social settings upsetting”. Items rated “never” (1) through to “always” (5). Items were summed with continuous scoring, with higher scores indicating greater psychological distress.

Measures for child survey

Demographics. Participants reported their current age, gender, age at parental separation, level of conflict between parents prior to separation, parent they lived with following separation, whether parents still alive, how care arrangements decided after separation, time with each parent, whether parents remarried, and relationship with each parent now.

Child self-efficacy. The measure of self-efficacy was the general Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). Ten items relating to a general sense of perceived self- efficacy. Sample item "I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events". Items rated "not at all true (1)" to "exactly true (5)". Items were summed with higher scores indicating that the child had more confidence in their abilities.

Child problem solving. The measure of child problem solving was the Independent- Interdependent Problem-Solving Scale (Rubin, Watt, & Ramelli, 2012). Ten items relating to independent problem solvers who prefer to work on their own when solving problems and interdependent problem solvers who prefer to consult with other people. Sample item "I prefer to make decisions on my own, rather than with other people". Items rated "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Items rated "strongly disagree (1)" to "strongly agree (5)". Items were summed with higher scores indicating that the child used more independent problem solving.

Child experience of parent-child relationships, inter-parental conflict, and general parenting. The measure of child experience of parent-child relationship, inter-parental conflict and general parenting was the Co-Parenting Behavior Questionnaire (Mullett & Stolberg, 1999). Eighty-six items relating to parental conflict, co-parental communication, triangulation, co-parental cooperation, and parenting skills for both the mother and the father being warmth, parent-child communication, monitoring, and discipline. Sample item "My dad asked me questions about my mother that I wished he would not ask". Items rated "almost never" (1) to "almost always" (5). Items were summed on each subscale with higher scores indicating more positive co-parenting and parenting practices.

Child emotional regulation. The measure for child emotional regulation was the Emotional Regulation Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (Gullone & Taffe, 2012). Ten items relating to cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression. Sample item "When I want to feel happier, I think about something different". Items rated "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). Items were summed continuous with higher scores on each scale indicating greater use of the corresponding emotional regulation strategy.

Child mental well-being. The measure for child mental wellbeing was the Distress Questionnaire 5

(Batterham et al., 2016). Five items relating to worry, hopelessness, social settings, focus, anxiety, and fear. Sample item “In the last 30 days I found social settings upsetting”. Items rated “never” (1) through to “always” (5). Items were summed with continuous scoring, with higher scores indicating greater psychological distress.

Child painful feelings about divorce. The measure for painful feelings about divorce was the Painful Feelings About Divorce Scale (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). Thirty-three items relating to loss and abandonment, paternal blame, maternal blame, seeing life through the filter of divorce and acceptance of the divorce. Sample item “I wish I had tried harder to keep my parents together”. Items rated “strongly disagree (1)” to “strongly agree (5)”. Items were summed and higher scores indicated that the child had more painful feelings about each aspect of their parents’ divorce.

Summary and Integration of Theories Applied to Study 1

Study 1 sought to understand entrenched co-parenting conflict through an integration of the theoretical framework of the 4HA (Gottman, 1994) and the conceptual CCPCM (Francia & Millear, 2015). The CCPCM provided a model in which to situate the psychological impact on children who are continually burdened with adult issues and situations they cannot control. The CCPCM proposed that co-parenting conflict was a moderator between the child and emotional security. Intertwined within the CCPCM were child-related matters that remain a source of conflict, including shared parenting, the parents’ viewpoint of each other, and money. Co-parenting conflict has the potential, as it may continue for years, to hold a child in a psychologically cyclic system of misery, resulting in a gradual wearing down of the value of the resources and efforts invested by the child (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). By placing the child’s observations into the broader context of the emotional environment following parental separation, the model laid a foundation for a more complete understanding of the impact of co-parenting conflict on a child’s development in the years following separation.

In summary, Study 1 comprised three overarching aims. Firstly, examination of the four conflict behaviours of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling within entrenched co-parenting conflict. Secondly, examination of children’s externalising difficulties, internalising difficulties, problem-solving, and emotional regulation within co-parenting conflict. Thirdly, examination of acrimony, hostility, and children’s painful feelings within co-parenting conflict. The next section of the chapter will set out the methodology and theoretical framework for Study 2.

Study 2 – Separated Parents’ Experiences of Entrenched Co-Parenting Conflict and the Australian Family Law System

Aims

Study 2 comprised five stages that built upon each other: (Stage 1) a systematic review of the qualitative studies of separated parents experiences of high conflict. Stages 2 to 5 comprising a qualitative exploration of separated parents' experiences of cognitive dissonance (Stage 2), hate (Stage 3), the Australian family law system (Stage 4), and the aftermath (Stage 5) within entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Methodology

Research suggests that a qualitative exploration contributes to better policy framing and administrative systems, in that it touches on the emotional aspects embedded within parents' experiences of separation (Brady, 2015). Brady (2015) argues for the importance of considering connections between social policy, care, and emotions, and states that, for example, mothers may make decisions following separation that are made in a context where they have a fear of taking action (i.e. in family violence), or where they are deeply socialised. Other literature speaks to the potential contribution of qualitative approaches in four contexts being, acquiring insider views of relational processes, examining families within contexts, giving voice to marginalised family members, and obtaining family members meanings about interactions and relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2014). It is not possible within qualitative research for a researcher to be a clean slate, nor to operate within a vacuum. As such, analysis and reporting are arguably intertwined. Here concepts from the literature may be useful in understanding observations. In this context three criteria are important, firstly transparency and repeatability of analysis, secondly significance of data within its social place, and thirdly sufficiency of data (Babor & Stenius, 2004).

ConQual

In Study 2 – In order to establish confidence in the evidence synthesised in the systematic review, and as a practical tool for research meeting the inclusion criteria the method of ConQual was applied (Munn, Porritt, Lockwood, Aromataris, & Pearson, 2014). Within ConQual the synthesis and aggregation of qualitative findings generated a set of categories that were then subject to a meta-synthesis, which produced a comprehensive set of synthesised findings, that may be used as a basis to inform future evidence-based research, practice, or policy (Hannes & Lockwood, 2011).

Thematic Analysis

In Study 2 – Stages 2 to 5 the overarching method applied was thematic analysis, with each stage identifying a separate theoretical framework to guide analysis. The use of this rigorous approach was supportive of the production of an insightful analysis that aimed to provide further

understandings of separated parents' experiences of entrenched co-parenting conflict (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thematic analysis provided a method by which data that was externally heterogenous, to be internally constructed as homogenous through coding, themes, and output. The justification and explanation for theoretical choices and sample size are provided.

Thematic analysis identifies and describes patterns across qualitative data. Thematic analysis additionally provides the flexibility to gain understandings within differing phenomenon. Arguably this presents a disadvantage in decision making as to what data to focus on. Therefore, a clear theoretical framework is vital and provides an anchor within which analytical claims might be made. Transparency is addressed through the disclosure and rigorous application of the theoretical position of each thematic analysis.

Constructionist Epistemology

Stage 2 of the current thesis was undertaken broadly within a constructionist epistemology, seeking themes across the entire data set that aimed to firstly, reflect the experiential reality of separated parents' experiences within the Australian family law system, and secondly, drill down below the surface into experiences of entrenched co-parenting conflict. Within this stance the current thesis sought to better understand how separated parents' social reality was created or experienced. This choice challenged the idea that there can be an objective form of knowledge in this complex area, and that separated parents may actively contribute to its construction (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). In addition, La Rossa (2005) underscored the importance of incorporating constructionism in grounded theory methods which recognised the dialectic between induction and deduction.

Dialectic Approach

Dey (1996) argued that within qualitative analysis purity should take a backstep to a dialectic approach that demonstrates a method of choice, suggesting that disclosure of the tools that are most appropriate for the task at hand be made providing a launching point to conduct a study. In the choice of multiple research topics being cognitive dissonance, hate, and the aftermath within a broader context of entrenched co-parenting conflict, a deductive approach was initially adopted (Nippert-Eng, 1996). Within qualitative research it is not possible to ever see the complete picture and it is suggested that a level of relational sampling exists. As such the analysis was not devoid of induction either. Arguably, out of necessity, because knowledge in this area is incomplete, Study 2 began as a deductive process, that later drew on induction.

Sampling

Within qualitative research it is not the purpose, nor is it often possible, to obtain representativeness of the population at large. Within qualitative research the aim is to explore depth of experience within a population, rather than representativeness of the population at large. Study 2 did not seek to know "how much" by "how many" but more so "what is it like". In this qualitative context theoretical sampling involved selecting participants whom had had certain experiences. For example, in relation to hate, sampling focused on whether participants had the experience of hate for the other parent or being hated by the other parent. As such, either consciously or unconsciously, the questions developed within the theoretical context shaped the direction of interviews (Schmuttermaier & Schmitt, 2001). Sample size in qualitative research is not quantifiable, and in the current thesis a discriminate form of sampling was adopted. These issues further highlighted the need for clear theoretical frameworks. Trustworthiness aimed to be enhanced in three contexts. Firstly, through coder triangulation, wherein each of the interviews were analysed separately and findings were compared and discussed until a consensus was reached. Secondly, by describing the sample, the method, and the results using parental quotes. Thirdly, in maintaining detailed transcripts and recordings.

Interviews

The choice of semi-structured interviewing had advantages and disadvantages. Advantages included the testing of concepts for relevance and understanding. Disadvantages included the potential restriction of new insights or issues. In order to explore a specific experience, it was necessary that there be a vague idea beforehand of what the experience might look like. This influenced the expected parameters of interview questions. A full list of interview questions is provided at Appendix C. The identification of which questions related to which stage of Study 2 are discussed in the relevant stage and numbered for the purposes of identification. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. NVivo software was also utilised in thematic analysis. Interviews generally lasted between one to two hours. Most interviews were conducted face to face at various locations around Australia in the states of Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria (n = 32). A smaller number of interviews were conducted using voice over internet programs in the states of Western Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and the Northern Territory (n = 8).

Participants

In Chapter 1 it was argued that high conflict, family violence, or hate may form part of parents' experiences of entrenched co-parental conflict. These highly emotional and potentially violent contexts place potential participants within a vulnerable and hard to reach population. Indeed,

the findings from the systematic review of Stage 1 evidenced this, with low numbers of participants reported in the existing literature. Therefore, the decision was made, rather than carry out separate recruitment for each of Stages 1 to 5, that the same sample of participants would comprise the whole of Study 2. To prevent repetition within the current thesis full participant details for Study 2 are provided here. Information in relation to potential participants forms part of a later discussion on low father participation. Where the total sample was not included, the rationale and methodological considerations are discussed in the related chapter for that stage.

The sample (N = 40) comprised English speaking female (n = 36) and male (n = 4) separated parents. Female separated parents were aged between 34 and 71 years. Male separated parents were aged between 38 and 50 years. Mean parent age was 46 years (M = 46). Mean number of children per parent was 2.07 (M = 2.07). Each parents' experience of separation involved entrenched co-parenting conflict that had continued past two years post separation. The sample included same-sex relationship (n = 1) and other-sex relationships (n = 39). Separated parents had a total of 84 children in their care.

Table 4. *Participants in Study 2 – Stages 2 to 5*

	Male	Female	Total
Participants	4	36	40

Within the sample, the length of relationship prior to separation varied from brief to long-standing, ranging from less than one year (n = 2), one to three years (n = 1), three to five years (n = 7), five to 10 years (n = 14), 10 to 15 years (n = 7), 15 to 25 years (n = 6), to over 25 years (n = 3). Participants reported a range of socio-economic demographics including employed professionals in government and non-government organisations, business owners, university students, stay at home parents, and retirees.

Within the sample, despite the existence of court or parenting orders, care of a child or children remained heterogeneous. For most participants care arrangements were complex and further complicated by entrenched co-parenting conflict. Interim, consent, or final court orders (or a combination of) were in place (n = 34). Participant had shared care (n = 26). Participant had sole parental custody (n = 3). Participant currently in the Family Court (n = 12). Within the sample (n = 1) had child refusing to have contact with them, (n = 5) had child refusing to have contact with other parent, (n = 1) had supervised contact only.

Recruitment

Prior to the collection of any data ethics approval was obtained from the University of the Sunshine Coast Human Ethics Committee being approval number S17/1124. Recruitment of participants took place at a local, state, and national level within Australia. On a local level, 10 law firms that specialised in family law were approached in writing. Three radio interviews were conducted at two local stations, and one city station. An editorial article was published in a local newspaper. Local community organisations that supported families post separation or families experiencing family violence were approached in writing and local libraries placed information flyers on public display.

On a state and national level 15 government and non-government organisations that supported women, families, and children were approached in writing. The exact number of organisations that distributed the research information to their networks is not known. During data collection, some participants shared that they had become aware of the research through referral from a friend or a post on social media. Overall participants came from the community at large across Australia, through diverse sources rather than one specific organisation. No incentives to participate were offered to participants.

Low Father Participation

Broadly, fathers are often overlooked in many areas of research, and the post separation context is no exception. In the literature much of what is known about father's experiences has come from either reporting by mothers or large population surveys (Smyth, 2004). As fathers and mothers might have very different experiences, mother reporting only yields a partial view of a much bigger, more complex, social picture. Through a qualitative approach, Study 2 sought to overcome a limitation in post separation research, being surveying which asks the same questions of both a mother and a father, by seeking out qualitative reporting of father's lived experiences.

Low participation rates by fathers has been a dearth in research in Australia for decades and recruitment within the current thesis met the same challenge. After casting a wide net through a variety of media outlets, cold-calling, and social media, 18 fathers and 48 mothers expressed interest in the research. From these potential participants only four fathers participated in Study 2 as opposed to 36 mothers. It is not known what effect, if any, the requirement to provide a full list of interview questions prior to making an interview appointment had on potential participant father's decision to participate. Smyth (2004) suggests that some challenges that present themselves within the father population include that nonresident fathers sometimes have tenuous living arrangements as boarders,

housemates, or as those not legally related to other people in a household. As recruitment in Study 2 was to the public at large it was not necessary that father's residential or personal details be known.

Another significant consideration is relationships with gatekeeper organisations. All major men's organisations in Australia were approached in writing or via email however it is not known if any passed on the research project information to their members. Building relationships with key organisations may enable there to be a level of trust or added credibility. Two father participants shared that they participated because either their mother or their current female partner had become aware of the research and encouraged them to participate. This again reflected a level of gatekeeping around father's participation in post separation research. With the added complexity of entrenched co-parenting conflict, father's experiences, although included, remained underrepresented in the current thesis.

Overall Limitations

Study 2 had limitations that spanned all stages. In order to avoid repetition, the primary limitations are set out in this section. Within these limitations, there were further methodological considerations that impacted specific stages, and these are discussed in the relevant chapter for that stage. Firstly, Study 2 was qualitative and as such, inferences and generalisations beyond the sample are cautioned against. Secondly, for some participants retrospective self-reporting of experiences of entrenched co-parenting conflict, may have been confounded in terms of accuracy of recall of what could have been highly emotional experiences. Thirdly, the high number of separated mothers (n = 36) in the sample is a limitation to the extent that separated fathers' experiences are not represented. Fourthly, there was no specific investigation of the experience of separated parents from specific cultural backgrounds. Fifthly, experiences of separated parents from same-sex relationships are limited and potential findings that speak to same-sex experiences are not possible.

Summary

In summary, within qualitative research there is no single reality, with reality based on perceptions which might change over time, and that are different for each individual. It was anticipated that Study 1 would provide a quantitative approach within which to partially ground part of the qualitative framework in Study 2. Within Study 2 the research aims, and broader theoretical frameworks discussed in the next four parts anchored and directed the method of analysis.

Stage 1 – Systematic Review

Aims

The guiding research aim within the systematic review was the exploration of the qualitative literature of separated parents' experiences of high conflict in their co-parenting relationship. Within the literature there are attempts to define high conflict, however definitional clarity remains elusive. Despite high conflict being a term used to describe a conflictual co-parenting relationship, other terminology, such as interparental conflict, interparental discord, interparental hatred, highly conflicted, enduring conflict, and enmeshed conflict are also used (Anderson et al., 2010; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Mandarino, Pruett, & Fieldstone, 2016; McIntosh, 2003; Smyth & Moloney, 2017). It is argued that it is important that decision makers within the family law system understand what type of relationship is at issue, in order to tailor orders and interventions that are orientated to protecting children. The systematic review within the current thesis aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge by synthesising the current qualitative literature on high conflict following separation.

Scope

The focus of the systematic review was on separated parents' high conflict co-parenting relationships. The research question guiding the systematic review was the exploration within the qualitative literature of separated parents' experiences of high conflict in their co-parenting relationship. In the qualitative systematic review, the PICo mnemonic was used to guide the structure of the research question (Lockwood, 2017). The population (P) was separated mothers and fathers who were involved in the care or custody of their child. The phenomena of interest (I) was separated mothers and fathers' experiences of high conflict within the co-parenting relationship. The context (Co) was conflict in the co-parenting relationship that had continued past two years post separation involving the care of a child.

Method

Within Stage 1 methodological quality was assessed using ConQual (Munn et al., 2014). Within ConQual the synthesis and aggregation of qualitative findings generated a set of categories that were then subject to a meta-synthesis, which produced a comprehensive set of synthesised findings (Hannes & Lockwood, 2011).

Summary

In summary, Stage 1 was a systematic review within the qualitative literature of separated parents' experiences of high conflict in the co-parenting relationship. The next part will discuss Stage 2 – Cognitive Dissonance.

Stage 2 – Cognitive Dissonance

Aims

The guiding research aim was separated parents' experiences, if any, of cognitive dissonance within entrenched co-parenting conflict. Following separation there are often difficult ongoing decisions that need to be made in relation to the upbringing, wellbeing, and continuing care of a child. Within a co-parenting relationship that comprises little to no effective communication there may be unforeseen consequences, or unexpected events arising which may precipitate cognitive dissonance. Stage 2 aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge by identifying if cognitive dissonance was presence within entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Scope

The scope of Stage 2 was separated parents' experiences, if any, of cognitive dissonance within entrenched co-parenting conflict that was primarily focused on difficulties involving the care of a child. Against a background of entrenched co-parenting conflict and judicial determination, cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and grounded theory (Ryan & Bernard, 2000) formed the theoretical framework for Stage 2.

Method

A qualitative research design was employed through semi-structured interviews. Within Stage 2 thematic coding was situated within the theoretical framework of grounded theory (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Misconceptions around grounded theory exist, including that researchers approach a topic without input, or any other knowledge. In order to explain findings that link to previous knowledge, Walsh et al. (2015) clarified that grounded theory may include the conceptualisation or production of theories which might then be integrated into extant formal theory. Here it is argued that grounded theory formed an important theoretical framework in Stage 2 that involved the integration of emerging theory in the specific context of cognitive dissonance.

Therefore, the development of the interview questions was both exploratory and confirmatory in order to allow separated parents' experiences of cognitive dissonance to unfold (Urquhart & Fernandez, 2013; Walsh et al., 2015). Cognitive dissonance is particularly relevant to problem-solving and decision making and has the potential to impact self-esteem and overall psychological functioning (Stone, 2003). Thematic analysis was undertaken on the data using a combination of the methods described by Glaser (1978) and Strauss and Corbin (1998).

Summary

In summary, Stage 2 comprised an exploration of cognitive dissonance, if any, within

entrenched co-parenting conflict. The theoretical frameworks of grounded theory and cognitive dissonance guided thematic analysis of the data. The next part will discuss Stage 3 – Hate.

Stage 3 - Hate

Aim

The guiding research aim was to explore and understand the phenomenon of hate within entrenched co-parenting conflict. There is little doubt that use of the word "hate" is uncomfortable and challenging. Although hate is seldom raised in the family law literature, Australian and international researchers have commented on the potential role and existence of hate in parenting disputes (Demby, 2017; Johnston, 2017; Smyth & Moloney, 2017). Following separation, the presence of hate is a concern, not only for parents' wellbeing, but importantly for children who require both parents to remain civil to each other and be a secure base which supports their continued emotional, psychological, and physical wellbeing and development (Francia & Millear, 2015). Stage 3 explored the function or manifestation, if any, of hate within entrenched co-parenting conflict and aimed to build on the disparate and limited hate research in a post separation context.

Scope

The scope of Stage 3 was to explore and understand the phenomenon of hate within entrenched co-parenting conflict. As in Stage 2, thematic coding was situated within the theoretical framework of grounded theory (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). In order to develop a theory of hate, separated parents were required to describe their lived experiences of hate or being hated.

Method

A qualitative research design was employed through semi-structured interviews. The primary aim of Stage 3 was an interpretative exploration of the phenomenon of hate within entrenched co-parenting conflict, rather than separated parents' experiences of hate. It was therefore necessary within analysis to make intentional shifts between separated parents' experiences and the presence of the phenomenon. Clearly, in order to ascertain who might have the experience relevant to Stage 3 it was necessary to start with a general sense of expected parameters beforehand of what the experience of hate may look like. As such two existing theoretical perspectives of hate formed the framework for an initial inquiry into hate, being Shand's (1920) hate work and Sternberg's (2003) triangular theory of the structure of hate.

Summary

In summary, Stage 3 aimed to explore the phenomenon of hate within entrenched co-

parenting conflict. The theoretical framework of grounded theory primarily guided thematic analysis of the data. The theoretical perspectives of Shand's (1920) hate work and Sternberg's (2003) triangular theory of the structure of hate informed the preliminary inquiry parameters of what the experience of hate may look like. The next part will discuss Stage 4 – Australian Family Law System.

Stage 4 – Australian Family Law System

Aim

The guiding research aim was to explore separated parents' experiences of entrenched co-parenting conflict within the Australian family law system. As a child grows there are often ongoing decisions that need to be made in relation to the upbringing, wellbeing, and continuing care of a child. Within a co-parenting relationship that comprises little to no effective communication, separated parents may find it necessary to involve statutory services in their decision making. Stage 4 aimed to contribute contemporary evidence in a post separation context through a qualitative exploration of separated mothers' lived experiences within the Australian family law system.

Scope

The scope of Stage 4 was separated parents' experiences of entrenched co-parenting conflict within the Australian family law system. As discussed in Chapter 1 entrenched co-parenting conflict included experiencing either/or high conflict or family violence. Entrenched co-parenting conflict had continued past two years post separation and was primarily focused on difficulties involving the care of a child.

Method

A qualitative research design was employed through semi-structured interviews. Within Stage 4 thematic coding was situated within the theoretical framework of social conflict theory (Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, & Buehler, 1993). Social conflict theory defines conflict as the disagreement about scarce resources, goals, and states. Within Stage 4 children and the property of separated parents remained at the centre of disagreement.

Summary

In summary, Stage 4 comprised an exploration of separated mothers' lived experiences of entrenched co-parenting conflict in the Australian family law system. The theoretical framework of social conflict theory guided thematic analysis of the data (Ihinger-Tallman et al., 1993). The next part will discuss Stage 5 – Systemic Erasure and the Aftermath.

Stage 5 – Systemic Erasure and the Aftermath

Aim

The guiding research aim was to explored separated parents' experiences in the aftermath of entrenched co-parenting conflict and the Australian family law system. The use of qualitative research within this nascent study enabled the experiences of separated parents to be explored in a manner that enhanced the understanding of knowledge of an issue of particular relevance in Australia, and arguably more broadly, being that the continued presence of entrenched co-parenting conflict compromises a parent's recovery from family violence. Findings broadly focused on parent's careers and finances, health, interpersonal relationships, and parenting. In giving voice to separated parents' experiences, the current study sought to explore a lack of system integration that arguably erased or contributed to the invisibility of violence in the years after physical separation from a relationship.

Scope

Stage 5 reported on separated parents' descriptions in relation to their experiences and impact on their careers and finances, health, interpersonal relationships, and parenting within the Australian family law system.

Method

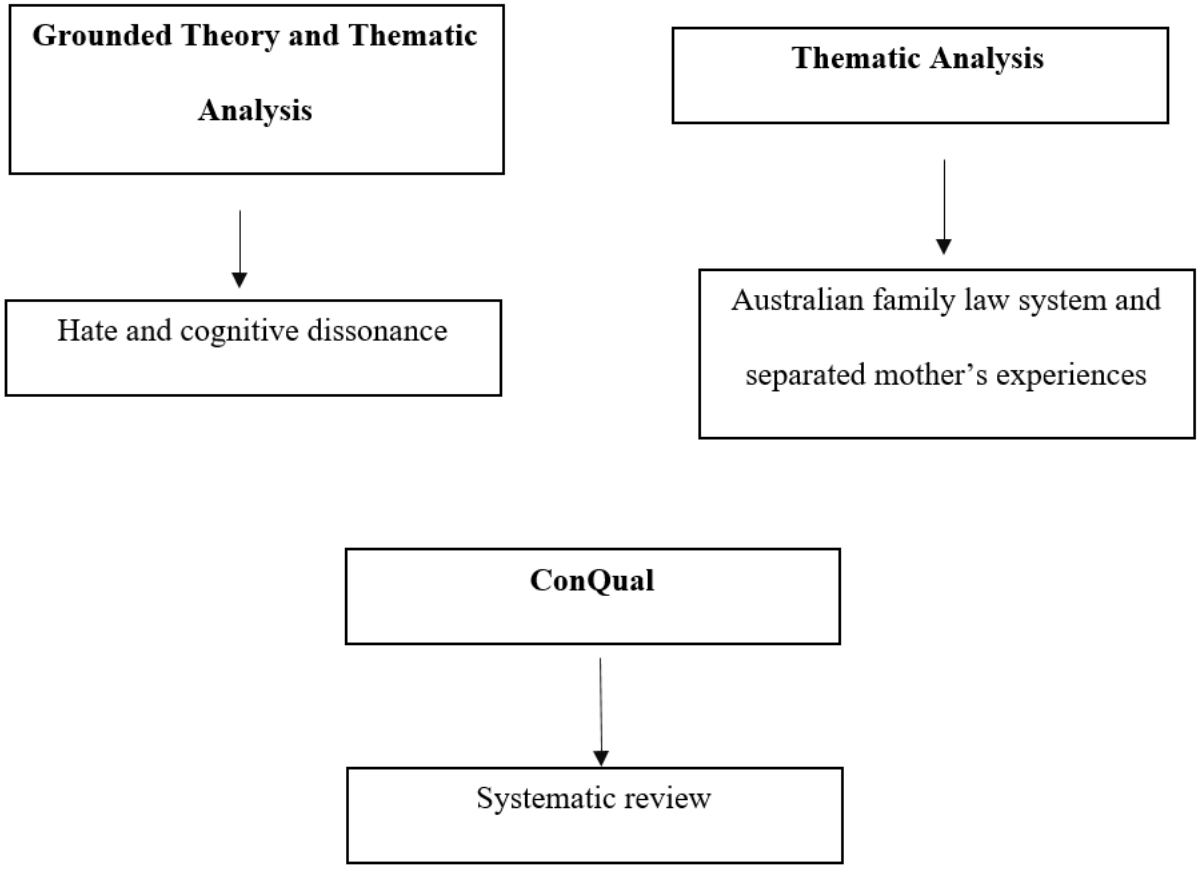
Within Australia legislative restraints prevent the public discussion or dissemination of information relating to separated parents or children's experiences of family court outcomes or proceedings (*Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) s.121 (Austl.). In this context qualitative research afforded separated parents, who might otherwise not be heard, the opportunity to share and explore their experiences of lives lived in the shadow of the Australian family law system. A qualitative research design was employed through semi-structured interviews. Within Stage 5 thematic coding was situated within the contextual framework of the three-planet model developed by Hester (2011). The three-planet model seeks to explain and understand the systemic problems that potentially undermine the effectiveness of different professionals in their practice.

Summary

In summary, Stage 5 comprised an exploration of separated parents' lived experiences in the aftermath of involvement in the Australian family law system. The theoretical framework of the three planet's model (Hester, 2011) guided thematic analysis of the data. The next part is a visual diagram of the primary methods applied to Study 2.

Primary Methods Applied in Study 2

Figure 2. Primary Methods Applied in Study 2



Chapter 4 outlined the methods that were used in the current thesis and the two separate studies, first of parent-child dyads and second, of the parents' who were living with entrenched co-parenting conflict. The following chapters will set out each study's findings. The next chapter, Chapter 5 will set out the findings for Study 1.

CHAPTER FIVE

Study 1 - Parent's Ability to Resolve Conflict Following Separation and its Impact on Mastery or Misery for Children

This chapter presents the findings from Study 1. Seated within the theoretical framework of Gottman's (1994) 4HA and Francia and Millear's (2015) CCPCM, the four conflict behaviours of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling were examined. A measure of acrimony and hostility was included as these had the potential to interfere with parents' ability to meaningfully engage either with each other or their child.

Acrimony and Hostility in Co-Parenting Conflict

Acrimony may comprise resentment, bitterness, or ill feeling. Maccoby, Depner and Mnookin (1990) describe acrimony as an attempt to undermine each parents' parenting. Other researchers have similarly reflected on how acrimonious parents often agree on very little, other than sharing the perception of the damage that the conflict caused to their child's wellbeing (McIntosh & Long, 2005). Acrimony and hostility evidence a lack of support and solidarity between separated parents, which potentially interferes with parents' ability to meaningfully engage, either with each other, or their child. Hostility can be accusatory, and characterised by defensive remarks and low empathy (Grych & Fincham, 1993). Hostility may comprise unkindness, spite, or hatred. Gottman (1993) developed five couple types, two of which he described as far less engaged as listeners, being hostile or hostile/detached couples. In summary, acrimony is more so psychologically held within conflict, and hostility is more so evident in behaviours within conflict.

Aims

Study 1 had three overarching aims. Firstly, to examine the four conflict behaviours of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling within co-parenting conflict. Secondly, to examine children's externalising difficulties, internalising difficulties, problem-solving, and emotional regulation within co-parenting conflict. Thirdly, to examine acrimony, hostility, and children's painful feelings within co-parenting conflict.

Method

Dyadic Analysis

The method of dyadic analysis was chosen to examine parent/child reporting of conflict and child adjustment. The richness of dyadic data and dyadic analysis complimented the research questions that involved variables that spanned two individuals – the parent and their child (Gonzalez

& Griffin, 2012).

Participant Dyads

Participants were parent-child dyads, comprising male and female divorced or separated parents, and their older adolescent or adult child. The dyads were part of a larger sample that comprised parent participants (N = 105) being mothers (n = 69) and fathers (n = 36) and child participants (N = 84) being daughters (n = 77) and sons (n = 7). Within the total participant pool, 14 parent-child dyads were identified. Within the dyads the mean age of participant parents at date of separation was 23 years (M = 23.5) range = 21 to 49 years, 64.3% (n = 9) were mothers, and 35.7% (n = 5) were fathers. Within the dyads the mean age of child participants was 18 years (M = 18.1) range = 15 to 40 years, 78.6% (n = 11) were females, and 21.4% (n = 3) were males. Mean child age at separation was eight years seven months (M = 8.7) range = one to 11 years.

Methodological Considerations

In the context of dyadic analysis, the sample size (N = 14) provided insufficient data to validate any results or make meaningful conclusions. In the context of the separate parent and child sample sizes, these were similarly inadequate and underpowered. Any statistical analysis on the separate parent or child samples was likely to fail to reach significance and limit generalisability to a broader population. Although recruitment was carried out for a period exceeding one-year an adequate sample was not available and a future study should ensure that data collection focuses on strategies to recruit a larger sample.

In these circumstances, limitations of Study 1 include the inability to analyse the two samples as dyads, and an inability to carry out meaningful analysis on the separate parent or child samples. Another limitation within the context of dyadic analysis was that both parent and child needed to have some level of relationship or communication with each other in order to create their linking code. The researchers were contacted directly by one participant who advised that their parent had put in a different code and provided the two separate codes in order that they might be paired. It is unknown how many other participants may have experienced the same anomaly. Furthermore, if the other parent did not have any contact or a relationship with their child, the opportunity to capture the richness of data from their experiences would not be available within the analysis.

Participant Parents

Participants initially comprised of 105 parents. After removing missing data, the final sample comprised 101 separated parents (65% females). The mean age of participant parents at date of separation was 35 years (M = 35.20) range = 19 to 53 years (SD = 8.03). Parents' mean number of

children at separation was 2.05 (*SD* = 1.16). The mean age of children at separation was 6.07 years (*SD* = 20.48). Gender of children at separation males (*n* = 32), females (n = 31), both males and females (*n* = 40). Care of children were decided by court orders (*n* = 28), consent orders (*n* = 11), parenting plans (*n* = 14), verbal agreement (*n* = 35), and other (*n* = 15). Level of education was high school (*n* = 15), TAFE (*n* = 27), undergraduate (*n* = 35), and postgraduate (*n* = 26).

An independent samples *t* test was used to compare the conflict behaviours of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling between "male" (*n* = 35) and "female" (*n* = 66). Levene's test was non-significant, thus equal variances can be assumed. The *t* test for defensiveness was statistically significant, with the "male" (*M* = 11.65, *SD* = 1.57) reporting less defensiveness, 95% CI [-1.88, 0.50] than the "female" (*M* = 12.84, *SD* = 1.71), *t*(-3.422), p<.001, two-tailed, *d* = 0.72.

Participant Parents and 4HA

Despite an inadequate sample size, descriptive indicators suggest that father and mother experiences of the four conflict behaviours might differ, with mother's reporting greater defensiveness and contempt, than fathers (see Table 5).

Table 5. *Father and Mother Experiences of Four Conflict Behaviours*

Father and Mother Experiences of Four Conflict Behaviours

	Fathers (*n* = 36)		Mothers (*n* = 69)		
	M	SD	M	SD	t
4 Horsemen Total	35.71	4.14	38.45	4.44	-3.01*
4 Horsemen Stonewalling	9.28	1.60	9.87	1.71	-1.69†
4 Horsemen Contempt	10.60	1.49	11.39	1.53	-2.49*
4 Horsemen Defensiveness	11.65	1.57	12.84	1.71	-3.42*
4 Horsemen Criticism	10.40	1.47	11.00	1.63	-1.81†

† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Participant Parents, 4HA, and Acrimony

Despite an inadequate sample size, descriptive indicators, in the form of bivariate Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients (*r*) calculations, suggest there may be no association between criticism and acrimony (see Table 6).

Table 6. *Mean, Standard Deviation and Correlation Matrix Comparing Acrimony and Four Conflict Behaviours*

Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlation Matrix Comparing Acrimony and Four Conflict Behaviours

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
4 Horsemen Total	37.50	4.51	(.775)	.752**	.785**	.751**	.850**	.420**
Stonewalling – 4HA	9.67	1.69		1	.408**	.336**	.558**	.494**
Contempt – 4HA	11.11	1.56			1	.485**	.638**	.367**
Criticism – 4HA	10.79	1.60				1	.617**	.105
Defensiveness – 4HA	12.43	1.75					1	.332*
Acrimony	64.12	12.89						(.868)

Note. 4HA = Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

Acrimony and Criticism

Gottman (1994) reported within an intimate relationship these four conflict behaviours are predictive of each other, meaning that each conflict behaviour lays down a path for the next conflict behaviour to follow. Gottman (1994) theorised the order as being, firstly criticism, followed by contempt, then defensiveness, and lastly stonewalling. Although Gottman (1994) theorised that criticism was the first horseman to lay down a corrosive path within relationship, these descriptive indicators lend no support for a tentative association between criticism and acrimony. Perhaps the very nature of the acrimonious co-parental relationship, is that co-parents who rarely, or effectively, communicate face to face, have less opportunity to criticise. Or possibly, following separation, criticism might take on a new form of carriage, such as the involvement of extended family, statutory services or related family law organisations. This remains unknown. Contempt is now briefly discussed.

Acrimony and Contempt

The descriptive indicators in relation to contempt were consistent with Gottman's (1993) earlier reporting of contempt's presence in the intact hostile/detached relationship. Gottman identified both hostile/detached husbands and wives, as showing more verbal contempt. Creasey, Kershaw and Boston (1999) reported an association between avoidance, and a reduced ability to regulate negative emotions. Creasy, et al. (1999) suggested that individuals, with what these researchers described as avoidant orientations, were more apt to lash out with criticism or contempt at a partner, or to react to a partner's criticism defensively. As noted above contempt often leads to defensiveness and is next discussed.

Acrimony and Defensiveness

The descriptive indicators in relation to defensiveness were consistent with literature that similarly reports conflictual co-parents who endeavour to portray themselves in a favourable light. Mandarino, et al. (2016) suggested that these individuals might actually be experiencing threats to their own self-worth, and manage their own vulnerability by being defensive. Mandarino, et al. (2016) suggested that the splitting off of an intolerable feeling and projection through defensiveness, enabled an individual to experience a level of self-protection. Consistent with Gottman's (1993) reporting, Mandarino et al. (2016) further reported that when an individual is feeling vulnerable or abandoned (defensive), a safe response might be to appear aloof or self-involved (stonewalling). Stonewalling is now discussed.

Acrimony and Stonewalling

Lastly, descriptive indicators suggest a tentative association between acrimony and stonewalling in the co-parenting relationship. Katz and Woodin (2002) identified a similar combination which they described as hostility and withdrawal, noting these as the most destructive forms of conflict in an intact relationship. This combination was observed in Katz and Woodin's (2002) sample, not only in couple interactions, but pertinent to this research, when couples attempted to co-parent their children. In the parent-child relationship, Katz and Woodin (2002) reported that there was an undercurrent of anger and frustration, as well as distance, when these parents interacted with their child, with parents less likely to collaborate together in effectively engaging their child in activities. Other studies have similarly reported that stonewalling might be linked to efforts to evade conflict (Pistole & Arricale, 2003; Shi, 2003). The presence of contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling may reduce the opportunities for trust to develop in the post separation co-parental relationship (Dalton, Carbon & Olesen, 2003).

In summary, the primary aim of Study 1 was to examine the presence of Gottman's (1994) four conflict behaviours of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling within entrenched co-parental relationship. Without an adequate sample size, it remains unknown whether these four conflict behaviours are present within entrenched co-parenting conflict. The presence, if any, of these corrosive behaviours however would suggest that co-parenting conflict might not be readily resolved, or transformed. It is also unknown whether gender differences may exist between fathers and mothers. Overall, the descriptive indicators are informative at best, of a level of acrimony within entrenched co-parenting conflict, with efforts to communicate being met with contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling, making change even harder.

Participant Children

Participants initially comprised 85 children. After removing missing data (n = 1), the final sample comprised 84 children (*n* = 7) male and (*n* = 77) female whose parents had separated. The mean current age of participant children was 22 years (*M* = 22.20) range = 14 to 46 (*SD* = 7.2). The mean age at separation was 4 years (*M* = 4.94). Within participant children (*n* = 8) lived with their father most of the time and (*n* = 76) lived with their mother most of the time. Before separation child participants reported parents argued always (*n* = 32), sometimes (*n* = 43), never (*n* = 9). Description of relationship with mother now being, never see mother (n = 4), see mother occasionally (*n* = 21), see mother often (*n* = 9), see mother often and can talk to her about my life (*n* = 50). Description of relationship with father now being, never see father (*n* = 18), see father occasionally (*n* = 26), see father often (*n* = 14), see father often and can talk to him about my life (*n* = 26).

An independent samples *t* test was used to compare the between "male" (*n* = 7) and "female" (*n* = 72) for hostility in the co-parenting relationship and painful feelings about divorce. Levene's test was non-significant, thus equal variances can be assumed. All *t* tests were non-significant.

Future Directions

In conclusion, Study 1 had the potential to contribute to the post-separation literature through an examination of the four conflict behaviours and any implications on children's wellbeing and outcomes. Despite the limited sample, descriptive indicators tentatively suggest mothers reported experiencing more defensiveness and contempt in their post-separation interactions than fathers. Although it is well established in the literature that co-parenting conflict and hostility negatively impact child outcomes, limited research had explored these four conflict behaviours within entrenched co-parenting conflict. This study demonstrated that this area of research may provide useful avenues for focused research in larger samples, as there are antidotes available for each behaviour within intact couple relationships. A gentle start-up (criticism), building a culture of appreciation (contempt), taking responsibility (defensiveness), and physiological self-soothing (stonewalling) can de-escalate conflict behaviours and reduce negative emotions between married partners (Gottman, n.d.).

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided the outcomes of Study 1. It was anticipated that the findings from Study 1 would partly inform a framework for Study 2. This was not possible due to the small number of dyads, and limited numbers of parents and children. However, differences in the use of defensiveness and contempt were noted, with these being more common amongst mothers than

fathers. This chapter has identified a gap in the literature and some of the challenges that a future research project might consider. The post separation co-parenting relationship is unique and enduring. It is relationship that does not end due to the existence of a child, and support that is focused on specific conflict behaviours might benefit the long-term quality of both the co-parenting and parent-child relationship. The next chapter will discuss Study 2 - Stage 1 and discuss the findings from a systematic review of the qualitative literature on high conflict.

CHAPTER SIX

Stage 1 – Systematic Review

This chapter presents a systematic review of the qualitative high conflict literature. Considering the limitations of findings from Study 1, and in order to further clarify and understand entrenched co-parenting conflict, it was anticipated that the synthesis within a systematic review of the qualitative high conflict literature might further identify potential characteristics present within entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Mothers and Fathers' Experiences of High Conflict Past Two Years Post Separation: A Systematic Review of the Qualitative Literature

Abstract

Within a post separation context, the available qualitative research on post separation, high conflict, co-parenting relationships was systematically reviewed. The review identified (N = 8) studies that comprised (N = 186) participants. Of the studies (n = 5) included information about the number of children (n = 190). To establish confidence in the evidence synthesised in the systematic review methodological quality was assessed using ConQual. Separated parents' experiences of high conflict were reportedly embedded in pervasive mistrust and disdain, and underpinned by concerns over differing parenting styles, or the other parents' ability to adequately care for the child. What potentially maintained conflict were parental concerns as to the child's safety and well-being when in the care of the other parent. What potentially escalated conflict was disdain directed at the other parents' concerns. The qualitative literature was small, yielding only eight studies, all of which were published within the last seven years. The main methodological limitation was failure to provide a reflexive account of the researchers' influence, and the lack of sample size justification, with the majority being convenience samples from a mandatory or court ordered context.

Introduction

Following separation, high conflict potentially impacts, not only the co-parenting relationship, but often bleeds into family law services, police, child protection, schools, and extended families (Anderson et al., 2010; Kelly & Emery, 2003). For parents who struggle to effectively communicate following separation, mediation and family court processes may be a necessary avenue for decisions to be made in relation to property and the continued care of children. It is arguable though, that for a minority of separated parents, the triangulation of family courts and other family law services may be a means with which one, or both parents might seek to punish, control, publicly

disgrace, or condemn the other parent (Coates, Deutsch, Starnes, Sullivan, & Sydlik, 2004; Fitch & Easteal, 2017; Smyth et al., 2016; Smyth & Moloney, 2017).

In the United States family courts and related professionals report that 90% of their time and resources are consumed by 10% to 15% of the separating population (Anderson et al., 2010). For these parents, conflict, which is often played out in the shadow of an adversarial court system, dominates not only their lives, but often the majority of their children's growing up years (Treloar, 2018). Where an application proceeds to final orders, each proceeding reportedly costs the Australian government $17,000.00 (AUD) (Price Waterhouse Cooper, 2018). Parents labelled high conflict might be viewed as being a drain on societal resources. To give some context, in Australia in 2017/2018 there were 2,427 applications before the Family Court for final orders (Family Court of Australia, 2018). However, the Federal Circuit Court of Australia deals with 80% of family law matters (Federal Circuit Court, n.d.). Therefore, the issue is even larger.

The nature of these separated parents' conflict does not fit into a discrete category. The term high conflict is vague and used broadly, and it is difficult to find a single account that provides a succinct and up to date empirical definition within a post separation context. Commentaries on high conflict have offered definitions derived from theoretical frameworks, reviews of previous literature, observations of court personnel, or an author's personally derived clinical experiences (Anderson et al., 2010; Donner, 2006; Smyth & Moloney, 2017). Some researchers, in arguing that the term high conflict ought to be differentiated from family violence, acknowledge that family violence may be masked as high conflict and poor communication (Archer-Kuhn, 2018).

This post separation context is complex, lacks definitional clarity, and contains limited literature on separated parents' experiences within high conflict co-parenting relationships. Policy discussion, research, and post separation interventions focused on high conflict relationships are often based on outsider understandings, wherein separated parents are spoken about, debated on, or spoken for. In this context separated parents' voices and lived experiences may be obscured (Friedman, 2004; Treloar, 2018).

Why Consider High Conflict?

Prior to undertaking the review two factors in relation to the term high conflict were evident. Firstly, disparity within research findings, and secondly, inconsistency in the use of terminology. Disparity was evident in some findings reported in the literature. For example, Ehrenberg, Hunter, and Elterman (1996) reported high conflict parents as being more narcissistic, less able to see another's perspective, more self-orientated, and more self-important than their ex-partners. In

contrast, Mandarino et al. (2016) found in their sample that high conflict parents were low in narcissism and high in empathy. It is important that specific characteristics within high conflict relationships be identified, in order that interventions supporting separated parents address their specific needs.

Inconsistency was evident in the use of terminology (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010). Despite high conflict being a term used to describe a conflictual post separation co-parenting relationship, other terminology, such as interparental conflict, interparental discord, interparental hatred, highly conflicted, enduring conflict, enmeshed conflict, and entrenched conflict are used in the literature (Anderson et al., 2010; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Mandarino et al., 2016; McIntosh, 2003; Smyth & Moloney, 2017). It is important that decision makers within the family law system understand what type of relationship is at issue, in order to tailor orders and interventions that are orientated to protecting children from the risks associated with either high conflict or family violence. The focus of the systematic review was on separated parents' high conflict co-parenting relationships.

High Conflict Co-Parenting Relationships

In the current review high conflict co-parenting relationships are set within the context of parenting disputes that had continued past two years post separation. These disputes are generally characterised by hostility, ongoing litigation or threats of litigation, access sabotage, acrimony, denigration, involvement of child protection or other related family law services, withholding of financial resources, or other difficulties arising from the post separation care of children.

Impact

Concerns around outcomes for child adjustment, child well-being, and parent-child relationships have been raised in the post separation literature for decades (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Baxter, Weston, & Qu, 2011; Buchanan et al., 1996; Davies, Winter & Cicchetti, 2006; McIntosh, 2003; Smyth et al., 2010). Where children are caught in the middle of co-parenting conflict their coping may be hindered, with child observation of parental hostility heightening a child's stress (Barrios, Bufferd, Klein, & Dougherty, 2017; DuPlooy & Van Rensburg, 2015). When separated parents compete to negatively engage with their child and undermine each other, developmental tasks such as trust, regulation of affect, establishment of peer relationships, development of attachment, or internalized beliefs of self, remain vulnerable (Crockenberg & Langrock, 2001; Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004). Parenting disputes can incur substantial societal costs and impact children, and the current review sought to assemble and synthesise qualitative findings that might contribute to the generation of evidence-based research and recommendations for consideration

within parenting disputes.

Purpose of Qualitative Systematic Review

Within a child custody context, the purpose of this meta-aggregative systematic review was to critically appraise and synthesise the best available qualitative evidence in order to firstly, better understand separated parents' experiences of high conflict, and secondly, identify issues that maintain or escalate conflict within a co-parenting relationship. The current review aimed to provide a succinct and integrative review of qualitative research on separated parents' experiences of high conflict (Aromataris & Pearson, 2014). An extensive and systematic literature search was undertaken that involved the identification and analysis of research findings from qualitative studies to further clarify and synthesise current knowledge in this area (Munn et al., 2014).

Method

The PICO mnemonic is generally used in a quantitative systematic review. However, in a qualitative systematic review the PICo mnemonic is used to guide the structure of the research question (Lockwood, 2017). In quantitative research the PICO mnemonic stands for patient or population (P), intervention (I), control, comparison or comparator (C), and outcome (O). In qualitative research the PICo mnemonic stands for population (P), phenomena of interest (I), and context (Co).

In the current review the population (P) was separated mothers and fathers who were involved in the care or custody of their child post separation. The phenomena of interest (I) was separated mothers and fathers' experiences of high conflict within the co-parenting relationship. The context (Co) was conflict in the co-parenting relationship that had continued past two years post separation involving the care or custody of a child. The research question guiding the review was the exploration within the qualitative literature of separated parents' experiences of high conflict in their co-parenting relationship.

Qualitative articles from peer-reviewed journals published in English during the period 1998 to 2018 were included. Journal articles not published in English were excluded as none of the researchers were proficient in a second language and it is acknowledged that the language bias of English impacted this review, in that research published in other languages were excluded. As the focus of the review was peer reviewed qualitative research, secondary sources such as books, and grey literature such as conference papers, were not included in the review. Inclusion criteria comprised separated mothers and fathers from previous, other-sex or same-sex relationships, whose experiences of conflict in the co-parenting relationship had continued past two years post separation.

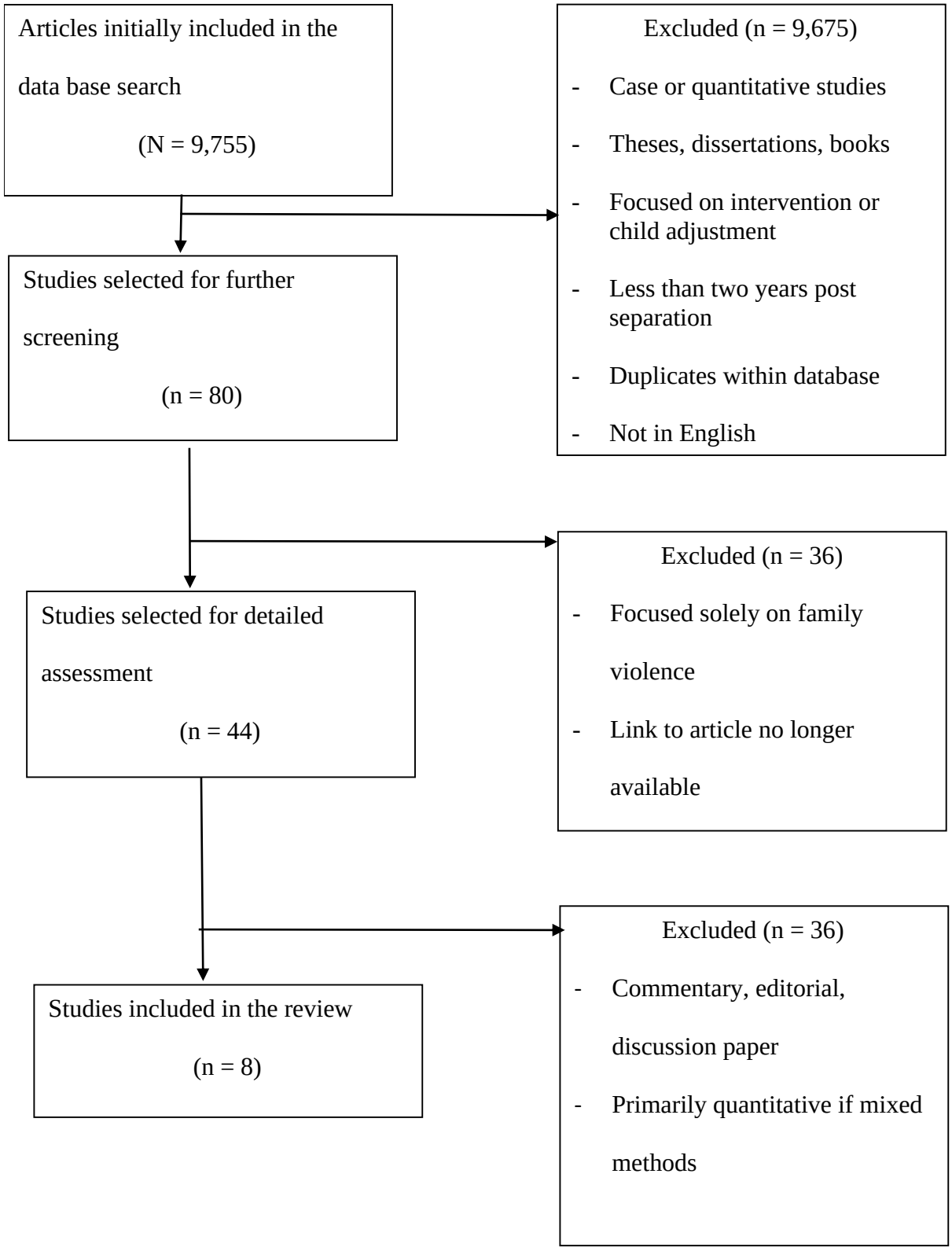
Studies that comprised primarily qualitative data, extracted from interviews or text, were included.

In order to maintain the focus of the review on peer reviewed qualitative research outcomes, journal articles were excluded if they contained primarily quantitative data, were focused on marital high conflict, did not specify a time period since separation, or were focused primarily on interventions for high conflict, the impacts of high conflict on children, or solely on family violence. Case studies were excluded given the high possibility of selection bias, and it is acknowledged that including qualitative research with small sample sizes did not erase the potential for selection bias either.

In order to establish confidence in the evidence synthesised in the systematic review, and as a practical tool for research meeting the inclusion criteria, methodological quality was assessed using ConQual (Munn et al., 2014). Within ConQual the synthesis and aggregation of qualitative findings generated a set of categories that were then subjected to a meta-synthesis, which produced a comprehensive set of synthesised findings, that may be used as a basis to inform future evidence-based research, practice, or policy (Hannes & Lockwood, 2011).

A systematic search was undertaken within five search platforms being PsychNet, Google Scholar, Web of Science, EBSCO, and Science Direct. To identify appropriate studies, search terms included “high conflict separation” and “high conflict divorce”. Alternative terms included “entrenched” and “hate”. Key terms were run through the PsychInfo thesaurus. The reference list of each selected article was systematically reviewed to identify studies that may not have been listed in the electronic databases.

Figure 3 – Flowchart of the Selection Process of Qualitative Studies



(*Figure 3* reprinted by permission of the publisher Taylor & Francis Ltd, http://www.tandfonline.com, article Francia, L., Millear, P., & Sharman, R. (2019). Mothers and fathers' experiences of high conflict past two years post separation – A systematic review of the qualitative literature. *Journal of*

Child Custody, 16(2), 170-196 (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15379418.2019.1617821**)**

Through a literature search 9,755 sources were retrieved, scanned, and reviewed. The search located 24 non-research articles that were informative in providing a background to, and broader knowledge base around, high conflict. The 24 non-research articles included eight reviews of the literature and 16 commentaries. All 24 non-research articles, although mentioned here, do not form part of the systematic review. Despite comprising valuable information, they generally comprise a theoretical basis or suggestions, and it is for this reason they are not included in the systematic review. The 24 non-research articles are summarised in Table 7.

Table 7. *Summary of Non-Research Articles*

Author/Year	Title	Type
Whiteside, M.F. (1998)	The parental alliance following divorce: An overview	Literature review
Elrod, L.D. (2001)	Reforming the system to protect children in high conflict custody cases	Commentary
Dalton, C., Carbon, Judge S., & Olesen, N. (2003)	High conflict divorce, violence and abuse: Implications for custody and visitation decisions	Commentary
Kelly, J.B. (2003)	Parents with enduring child disputes: Multiple pathways to enduring disputes	Commentary
McIntosh, J. (2003)	Enduring conflict in parental separation: Pathways of	Commentary

Author/Year	Title	Type
	impact on child development	
Friedman, M. (2004)	The so-called high conflict couple: A closer look	Commentary
Goodman, M., Bonds, D., Sandler, I. & Braver, S. (2004)	Parental psychoeducational programs and reducing the negative effects of interparental conflict following divorce	Literature review
Donner, M.B. (2006)	Tearing the child apart: The contribution of narcissism, envy, and perverse modes of thought to child custody wars	Commentary
Johnston, J.R. (2006)	Child-centered approach to high-conflict and domestic violence families: Differential assessment and interventions	Commentary
Sarrazin, J., & Cyr, F. (2007)	Parental conflicts and their damaging effects on children	Literature review
Demby, S. (2009)	Interparent hatred and its impact on parenting: Assessment in forensic custody evaluations	Commentary

Author/Year	Title	Type
Yeager, E.O. (2009)	High conflict couple interaction and the role of relative power	Literature review
Birnbaum, R., & Bala, N. (2010)	Toward the differentiation of high-conflict families: An analysis of social science and Canadian case law	Literature review
Anderson, S.R., Anderson, S.A., Palmer, K.L., Mutchler, M.S., & Baker, L.K. (2011)	Defining high conflict	Literature review
Cohen, O., & Levite, Z. (2012)	High-conflict divorced couples: Combining systemic and psychodynamic perspectives	Commentary
Levite, Z., & Cohen, O. (2012)	The tango of loving hate: Couple dynamics in high conflict divorce	Commentary
Haddad, L., Phillips, K.D., & Bone, M. (2016)	High-conflict divorce: A review of the literature	Literature review
Joyce, A.N. (2016)	High-conflict divorce: A form of child neglect	Commentary

Author/Year	Title	Type
Demby, S. (2017)	Commentary on entrenched postseparation parenting disputes: The role of interparental hatred	Commentary
Johnston, J.R. (2017)	Commentary on entrenched postseparation parenting disputes: The role of interparental hatred	Commentary
Nielsen, L. (2017)	Re-examining the research on parental conflict, co-parenting, and custody arrangements	Literature review
Mutchler, M.S. (2017)	Family counseling with high conflict separated parents: Challenges and strategies	Commentary
Shaw, M. (2017)	Commentary regarding parenting coordination in cases of high conflict disputes	Commentary
Smyth, B.M., & Moloney, L.J. (2017)	Entrenched postseparation parenting disputes: The role of interparental hatred?	Commentary

(Table 7 reprinted by permission of the publisher Taylor & Francis Ltd, http://www.tandfonline.com, article Francia, L., Millear, P., & Sharman, R. (2019). Mothers and fathers' experiences of high conflict past two years post separation – A systematic review of the qualitative literature. *Journal of Child Custody,* 16(2), 170-196 (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15379418.2019.1617821**)**

The review identified eight studies that comprised 186 participants who met the inclusion criteria. Of the eight studies, five included information about the number of children in contact with participant parents, being a total of 190 children. Three studies did not specify how many children were in contact with participant parents (Archer-Kuhn, 2018; Gulbrandsen, Haavind, & Tjersland, 2018; Treloar, 2018). The eight studies are summarised in Table 8. The review was conducted section by section with each journal article closely read and the main findings, strengths, and limitations summarised. Critical appraisal was conducted by the second and third researchers independently, who conferred where necessary to decide on eligibility and study quality.

Table 8. *Summary of Findings*

Author/Setting	Aim	Design	Recruitment/Data Collection	Analysis	Main Findings
Cashmore & Parkinson (2011) Australia	Explored the dynamics of disputes that bought high conflict families to contact orders program and their experience of the court system	Mixed methods - qualitative face-to-face interviews and quantitative survey responses	Twenty parent participants (12 fathers and eight mothers) who had completed "Keeping Contact" program. Average time since separation five years	Qualitative analyses of patterns of dispute and underlying issues	Concerns about parenting capacity and child's safety Difference in parenting style Child abuse and neglect allegations Parents report children do not want more contact Parents report children want more contact New partners Families generally had small children
Markham & Coleman (2012) USA	Exploration of divorced or separated mother's experiences of sharing physical custody of children	Qualitative face-to-face interviews	Twenty mother participants recruited from court-ordered parenting education program through flyers posted in public locations and snowball sampling. Time since separation up to 12 years (M = 3.01 years)	Qualitative analysis and grounded theory	Identification of three patterns of co-parenting being "continuously contentious", "always amicable", and "bad to better" Continuously contentious relationships characterised by concerns over other parents' ability to keep child safe; financial concerns; differences in parenting styles; control or abuse by other parent; an inability of other parent to separate marital issues from co-parenting relationship; parent not wanting to share custody
Bergman & Rejmer (2017) Sweden	Explored the characteristics of the conflict behind the parental disputes	Qualitative – textual data from High Conflict Families of Divorce study from six district courts in Stockholm during a period of three months in 2013	Thirty-three mother and father cases from High Conflict Families of Divorce study. Time since separation "a few years"	Qualitative and quantitative textual analysis of court documents including summons applications, statements of defense, rapid information inquiries and custody	Majority of conflict was conflict of values stemming from concern about the other parents' ability to care for younger children. They included lack of childcare ability, co-operation difficulties, abuse, addiction, child's wishes, mental or physical illness, access sabotage, threats to take child abroad More mothers request sole custody than fathers Families generally had small children

Author/Setting	Aim	Design	Recruitment/Data Collection	Analysis	Main Findings
				investigations. Categorisation of conflict based on conflict of interest and conflict of values. Analysis from life-trajectory and gendered perspectives	
Jevne & Andenaes (2017) Norway	Exploration of parents engaged in custodial conflicts and experiences of dealing with co-parenting across households	Qualitative face-to-face interviews	Fifteen parent participants (eight fathers and seven mothers) who were in high conflict about child's residence and contact, and with whom child protection services had been involved. Participants recruited through child protection workers, a parental advocacy group, researchers own professional networks, and snowballing techniques. Average time since separation six years	Thematic analysis - social constructionist paradigm	Dominant issue was one parents' concern about the child's situation when in care of the other parent Parents concerned about other parents' inadequate parenting aimed to take continuous responsibility involving monitoring and evaluation of child's care and wellbeing; or through efforts to influence the quality of care in the other household Families generally had small children The accused parent defined the other parents' involvement as undue and negotiated distance in co-parenting
Target, Hertzmann, Midgley, Casey & Lassri (2017) London	Exploration of parents' experiences of difficulties in contact arrangements post separation and prior to therapeutic intervention	Qualitative – face-to-face interviews	Thirty parent pairs (14 other-sex and one same-sex relationship) recruited through Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, lawyers, mediators, family court judges, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, contact centres and self-referral. Average time since separation four years	Thematic analysis informed by researcher's own conceptual framework of psychoanalytic couple therapy	Dealing with contact evoked extreme states of mind for parents. Sub-themes - a matter of life and death or winning and losing When speaking of contact the child is everywhere and nowhere in the parents' mind. Sub-themes – preoccupation, child made to manage conflict The hardest thing about contact is dealing with ex-partner. Sub-themes - contact dependent on the climate between parents and difficulty in ordinary parenting

Author/Setting	Aim	Design	Recruitment/Data Collection	Analysis	Main Findings
Archer-Kuhn (2018) Canada	Explored how parents perceive and experience their ability to make child custody decisions together	Qualitative – face-to-face interviews	Five mothers recruited from Ontario Mandatory Information Program. Time since separation three to 11 years	Thematic analysis from a feminist perspective	In high conflict families, safety planning was not the focus of custody arrangements Highlighted the importance of hearing parents' voice and significance of differentiating parent experience in child custody decision amongst high conflict parents, with poor communication and conflict potentially masking violence and control
Gulbrandsen, Haavind & Tjersland (2018) Norway	Identify characteristics of conflict dynamics that hamper dialogue and reduce one or both parties' capacity to see needs of child and contribute to feasible solutions	Qualitative – audio recordings of mediation sessions and follow up 18 months later	Thirty-eight parents from FORM-Project required to attend mandatory mediation because they were considering bringing their case before the courts. Several years since separation	Analysis informed by social constructionist perspective - grounded theory	Patterns present - chaos, fundamental lack of trust, communication characterised by attack and defense
Treloar (2018) Canada	Explored how parents experience high conflict disputes and how they fare in the longer term	Qualitative - face-to-face interviews	Twenty-five parents (seven fathers and 18 mothers) recruited through professional contacts, community agencies, newspaper advertisements, and chain referral. Four to 23 years since separation	Analysis from critical feminist approach grounded in relational autonomy and social constructionist epistemology	Interrelationship between financial and child-related issues The construction of expert knowledge and implications for justice and voice Positive personal change occurred over time when supported with resources that addressed a parents' particular needs and challenges Families generally had small children

(Table 8 reprinted by permission of the publisher Taylor & Francis Ltd, http://www.tandfonline.com, article Francia, L., Millear, P., & Sharman, R. (2019). Mothers and fathers' experiences of high conflict past two years post separation – A systematic review of the qualitative literature. *Journal of Child Custody,* 16(2), 170-196 (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15379418.2019.1617821**)**

Results

Overall, the eight qualitative studies explored separated parents' experiences within a high conflict co-parenting relationship. Although the review was not focused on results from a specific region, all studies were from Western countries being Australia, Canada, England, Norway, Sweden, and United States of America. These had limited sample sizes ranging from five separated parents (Archer-Kuhn, 2018) to 38 separated parents (Gulbrandsen et al., 2018). Two studies involved analysis of textual data (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Gulbrandsen et al., 2018) with the balance of studies involving analysis of face to face interviews. For five studies participants were recruited, or textual data obtained, from mandatory or court ordered participation in an intervention program (Archer-Kuhn, 2018; Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011; Gulbrandsen et al., 2018; Markham & Coleman, 2012). The remaining three studies reported a broader recruitment strategy that included referral or snowballing techniques (Jevne & Andenaes, 2017; Target, Hertzmann, Midgley, Casey, & Lassri, 2017; Treloar, 2018).

Four of the studies identified a theoretical framework that supported the study (Gulbrandsen et al., 2018; Jevne & Andenaes, 2017; Markham & Coleman, 2012; Treloar, 2018) with thematic analysis and grounded theory being the primary methods of analysis (Archer- Kuhn, 2018; Treloar, 2018). The findings in the current review synthesised high conflict into three dimensions being, firstly, pervasive mistrust, secondly, parental concerns that the child was not safe or adequately cared for by the other parent, and thirdly, disdain.

To establish confidence in the output of the research synthesis the ConQual approach was utilised to identify dependability and credibility within each study (Munn et al., 2014). A set of critical appraisal questions were considered to establish dependability. A goodness of fit ranking was considered to establish credibility. Through this process an overall ConQual ranking was assigned to rate confidence in the synthesised findings. Results are set in Table 9.

Table 9. *Synthesised Summary of Findings*

Systematic Review Title: Mothers and Fathers' Experiences of High Conflict Past Two Years Post Separation - A Systematic Review of the Qualitative Literature
Population: Separated mothers and fathers
Phenomena of Interest: High conflict in child custody disputes
Context: Separated mothers and fathers who experienced high conflict in their co-parenting relationship past two years post separation

Synthesised Findings	Type of Research	Dependability	Credibility	ConQual Score	Comments
Pervasive Mistrust Struggle to maintain a co-parental state of mind; communication comprising state of alertness as to other parent's motive, defensiveness, chaos, attack, or sense of threat; lack of communication; grievances and circumstances surrounding separation impact communication around child; parent more protective of child	Qualitative	High to Moderate *	Moderate **	Moderate	* Downgrade 1 level due to lack of statement locating researcher culturally or theoretically (CT) or not addressing the influence of the research on the researcher or vice-versa (IR) 4 (CT) + (IR) + 4 ** Downgrade 1 level due to mix of unequivocal (U) and equivocal (E) findings. Downgrade 3 levels due to mix of plausible and unsupported (PU) findings 2 (UE) + 1 (E) + 2 (PU) + 3
Concerns Child not Safe or Adequately Cared for by the Other Parent Concerns over other parent's parenting style or capacity to care for or keep child safe; lack of communication, lack of influence in the other household, or lack of information sharing; behavior focused on taking continuous responsibility for child across households; ordinary parenting more difficult particularly when parent deprived of time with child	Qualitative	Moderate *	High **	High to Moderate	* Downgrade 1 level due to lack of statement locating researcher culturally or theoretically (CT) or not addressing the influence of the research on the researcher or vice-versa (IR) 3 (CT) + (IR) + 3 ** Downgrade 1 level due to mix of unequivocal (U) and equivocal (E) findings 1 (UE) + 5
Disdain Financial concerns and interrelated child issues being treated as illegitimate; other parent viewed as oversensitive; a lack of communication or information sharing; boundary setting to involvement of other parent or negotiation of distancing in the co-parenting relationship	Qualitative	High *	Moderate **	High to Moderate	* Downgrade 1 level due to lack of statement locating researcher culturally or theoretically (CT) or not addressing the influence of the research on the researcher or vice-versa (IR) 1 (CT) + (IR) + 5 ** Downgrade 1 level due to mix of unequivocal (U) and equivocal (E) findings. Downgrade 3 levels due to mix of plausible and unsupported (PU) findings 2 (UE) + 1 (PU) + 3

CT = Cultural or Theoretical Statement; IR = Influence of Researcher; UE = Unequivocal; E = Equivocal; PU = Plausible/Unsupported

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As both a detailed explanation and example, the first synthesised finding in Table 7, being pervasive mistrust, is discussed. Pervasive mistrust included all eight studies. Initially each study started out with a "high" score for dependability, with the ranking dropping where there were two to three "no" answers to the critical appraisal questions (Munn et al., 2014). In the first synthesised finding four of the studies did not contain a statement locating the researcher culturally or theoretically (CT) or did not address the influence of the research on the researcher or vice-versa (IR). Here four studies were downgraded one level to "moderate". Four of the studies did contain statements locating the researcher culturally or theoretically and remained at "high". Overall the dependability score for pervasive mistrust was assessed at "high to moderate".

The same process was followed for credibility with each of the eight studies starting out with a "high" score for credibility, with the ranking dropping where studies did not solely contain unequivocal findings. Two of the studies contained a mix of unequivocal and equivocal findings (UE) and one of the studies contained equivocal findings (E). These three studies were downgraded one level. Two of the studies contained plausible or unsupported findings (PU) and were downgraded three levels. Three of the studies contained unequivocal findings and remained at "high". Overall, the credibility score for pervasive mistrust was assessed at "moderate". Therefore, for the theme of pervasive mistrust the final ConQual score was "moderate". The same process was followed for the second and third themes. Each synthesised finding is now discussed in detail.

Pervasive Mistrust

Overall, the review evidenced separated parents' experiences of high conflict as comprising pervasive mistrust. Pervasive mistrust is ubiquitous, with either one or both parents having no confidence in, or being suspicious of, the other. As Gulbrandsen et al. (2018) described "… one or both parents were in a constant state of alertness to the potential hidden motives of the other …" (p. 339). Pervasive mistrust was evident in communication and information sharing that comprised defence, chaos, or attack. Conversely, pervasive mistrust was evident in the absence of communication and information sharing (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Gulbrandsen et al., 2018; Target et al., 2017). Within pervasive mistrust separated parents struggled to find within themselves a "… more co-parental state of mind" (Target et al., 2017, p. 231).

Four studies suggested that pervasive mistrust may originate from addiction, mental illness, or family violence (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011; Jevne & Andenaes, 2017; Markham & Coleman, 2012). In this review, within high conflict, it appeared that, although at times present, these complex issues did not comprise the primary themes or characteristics in

separated parents' experiences. Bergman and Rejmer (2017) reported violence and abuse as the third most common theme evident in high conflict, preceded by firstly, concerns over a lack of ability to care for the child (referring to basic needs such as sleep, hygiene, and routines), and secondly, co-operation difficulties. In relation to addiction or mental health issues, Bergman and Rejmer (2017) and Jevne and Andenaes (2017) both discussed varying stages within family trajectories, with the "majority" in their sample describing a violent or substance abusing co-parent prior to separation (Jevne & Andenaes, 2017, p. 299). Markham and Coleman's (2012) sample similarly reported the existence of abuse and addiction prior to separation. Therefore, it appeared that although more complex issues may have formed a foundation for mistrust, they did not predominantly appear to maintain conflict post separation.

Cashmore and Parkinson (2011) similarly reported on mental health issues, situating such issues, not as a core issue in high conflict, but as an issue likely to heighten parents' concerns around the safety and well-being of the child. In Cashmore and Parkinson's (2011) study second to reporting allegations of abuse or violence to authorities, was the reporting to authorities of inappropriate parenting. Cashmore and Parkinson (2011) were clear that "… while child protection concerns were a reason for the conflict, they were not necessarily associated with a denial of contact" (p. 194). This aligns with the distinction made by Archer-Kuhn (2018) that safety planning was not the priority in high conflict. From these studies it appeared that where parents experienced complex issues, a parents' trust in the other parent's ability to care for a child was already fragile either prior to, or at separation.

Following separation concerns raised in the studies were associated with a variety of interpersonal and intrapersonal issues. For example, a parents' inability to cope with the separation, concerns as to whether the child was theirs, or where there was no history of care prior to separation (Jevne & Andenaes, 2017). Target et al. (2017) described extreme states of mind experienced by some parents as being of "… life or death significance…" (p. 229). In Target et al. (2017) the majority of their 30 participants, rather than seeking psychological support for extreme states of mind, instead actively pursued changes in residency or contact.

Whether related to concerns that may have existed prior to separation, or concerns that emerged after separation, pervasive mistrust was evident within high conflict co-parenting relationships in these studies. Here, the attention focused on circumstances and grievances surrounding or originating from separation that continued to negatively impact parents' ability to discuss current topics involving the care of a child. Alongside pervasive mistrust, a second theme emerged, being parents' concerns for a child's well-being or safety when in the care of the other

parent.

Concerns Child not Safe or Adequately Cared for by the Other Parent

Within this theme the dominant concern appeared to be issues related to the other parents' parenting style or concerns for a child's well-being when in the care of the other parent. Although, as discussed earlier, more complex issues were present in high conflict relationships, within the review, the common thread was concerns as to the other parents' ability to meet the child's basic needs whilst in their care (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017).

In Cashmore and Parkinson's (2011) study, nearly as many fathers as mothers in their sample of 20, indicated they had concerns over the parenting style or parenting capacity of the other parent. Concerns included "… she prefers to be a friend of the child as opposed to a parent …", "… anger management problems …", "… dangerous abusive driving …", or "… being allowed to stay up late." (p. 191). All 20 mothers in Markham and Coleman's (2012) study reported differences in parenting styles and concerns over how the other parent was raising the child. "She comes back and she's a filthy mess and obviously hasn't had a bath all weekend." (p. 590). One parent of a four-year-old shared "It's very stressful because his dad drinks and I'm concerned about him when he's at his house." (Markham & Coleman, 2012, p. 591). In Jevne and Andenaes (2017) parents described these concerns as potentially leading to either continuous monitoring and evaluation of their child's situation or taking continuous responsibility even when the child was not physically in their care.

Heightened concerns around a child's well-being impacted the co-parenting relationship in a pernicious manner, potentially related to the changeable or ambiguous climate within the co-parenting relationship. Changeableness and ambiguity appeared to be influenced by the constant sense of threat within the conflict, for example, access sabotage, or by events such as an upcoming court date, letters from lawyers, or arguments with the other parent. In Target et al. (2017) some parents were certain that the other parent would continue to actively sabotage access or child arrangements. This certainty about the existence of uncertainty, was reported as impacting parenting quality and parenting effectiveness, making normal parenting difficult.

Within this context, for some parents the focus became on having fun with the child. If they wished to parent in a normal way, for example by putting in place boundaries, parents feared losing already limited time with their child. Other times parents struggled with being able to focus on where their child was at emotionally, some reporting that their child was nowhere in mind (Jevne & Andenaes, 2017; Target et al., 2017). Ongoing issues relating to contact, residency, access sabotage, and child custody, appeared to further undermine parents' capacity to effectively meet their child's

needs. How a parent reacted to concerns raised emerged within the third theme, disdain.

Disdain

Disdain is the holding of an opinion that another is unworthy of one's consideration or respect. Parents in these studies described receiving little respect from the other parent, either having their concerns dismissed, or perceiving the other parent as overly involved in their care of the child. In the review disdain was associated with mistrust arising from issues to do with parents' inability to care for a child, separation grievances, or financial issues (Gulbrandsen et al., 2018; Markham & Coleman, 2012). Within the co-parenting relationship, disdain was evident in two contexts, firstly, in relation to financial concerns and financial concerns' interrelationship with child issues, and secondly, the inability to separate marital issues from the co-parenting relationship (Markham & Coleman, 2012). Defensiveness further undermined communication or potential information sharing, as concerns about financial issues were dismissed, and parents' concerns over the care of a child were regarded as illegitimate (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Gulbrandsen et al., 2018; Jevne & Andenaes, 2017; Treloar, 2018).

In contrast, the other parents' perceived overinvolvement was experienced as disrespectful, harassing, or hostile (Jevne & Andenaes, 2017). Interestingly, although initially no concerns were raised about the child's well-being when in the care of an overinvolved parent, conflict escalated when, over time, concerns were raised around the overinvolved parents' manipulation or involvement of the child in the conflict (Jevne & Andenaes, 2017). As one parent stated the concerns raised were to "… harass him …" and "… take the children away from him …" and "… the mother manipulated them to lie about violence and abuse or to take the mother's side in the conflict." (Jevne & Andenaes, 2017, p. 302). Within the review three themes emerged within the high conflict co-parenting relationship. Firstly, pervasive mistrust, secondly, concerns as to the ability of the other parent to meet the child's needs, and thirdly, disdain.

Next the review sought to explore issues that potentially maintained conflict, and issues that potentially escalated conflict in the co-parenting relationship. It is important to begin to differentiate and identify what issues maintained or potentially caused the conflict to continue, and what issues escalated or potentially caused the conflict to intensify. This is so that practitioners and professionals involved with these separated parents might be able to identify areas where they need the most support, and where their communication might be most vulnerable. Next, the review examined what may enable the conflict to continue at the same rate.

Issues Potentially Maintaining Conflict

Within the studies, issues that reportedly maintained conflict included differing parenting styles and concerns about the other parents' ability to care for the child (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011; Gulbrandsen et al., 2018; Jevne & Andenaes, 2017; Markham & Coleman, 2012). Three further suggested issues related to the history of care (Gulbrandsen et al., 2018; Markham & Coleman, 2012), children who had little or no relationship with other parent (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011), and the presence of a new partner (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011). These last three issues are broadly associated with heightening concerns as to the other parent's ability to care for a child. It is noteworthy that these issues are not unique to separations involving high conflict and can be present in separations where there is no ongoing conflict. Disagreements about child rearing are a normal part of parenting. Parents at times struggle in their relationships with their children. It is not uncommon for parents to form new intimate relationships in the years following separation.

In summary, what appeared to maintain conflict was differing parenting styles, and concerns about the ability of the other parent to care for the child, with the history of care, children who had little relationship with the other parent, and the presence of a new partner potentially contributing to maintenance of the conflict. Next the review examined what enabled the conflict to escalate or become more intense or serious.

Issues Potentially Escalating Conflict

The review revealed some important insights that were primarily located within the theme of disdain. Broadly, issues that reportedly escalated conflict comprised three areas. Firstly, disdain, involving a lack of information sharing, or dismissal of parental concerns (Jevne & Andenaes, 2017) either in relation to the care of the child, or in relation to financial concerns (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011; Markham & Coleman, 2012). Secondly, where addiction, mental illness, or violence were present (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011; Bergman & Rejmer, 2017). Thirdly, where the conflict was influenced by external voices, such as those of legal professionals (Gulbrandsen et al., 2018; Treloar, 2018).

An absence of communication or lack of information sharing, and the subsequent dismissal of concerns, served to escalate parents' concerns, and elicit mistrust. Not all studies discussed these differentiations, and further exploration between what issues maintain or escalate conflict in the co-parenting relationship is recommended. In one study, within the legal system, parents reflected that in addition to their concerns being dismissed by the other parent, their concerns were further

disregarded, not respected, or treated as illegitimate, within the family law system (Treloar, 2018). Within the family law system whose voices were heard, was considerably influenced by the distribution of power. Even after gaining an understanding of family law processes, parents struggled with complex rules, and felt they had little authority. There were dominant narratives within the system for which parents developed counter narratives (Treloar, 2018). Rather than moving communication forward, the opposite reportedly occurred in the family law system, as differing experts provided advice on how parents were to act, and what they were to say.

Here systemic, not personal, factors potentially reinforced or escalated conflict. Although not responsible for separated parents' conflict, the fact that these parents' conflict remained embedded in an adversarial system needs to be considered. In summary, in the review what appeared to escalate parental conflict was disdain, complex issues such as mental illness or family violence, and external voices.

Conclusion

The parental focus in high conflict relationships appeared to be on making changes to child custody, contact, or residency. The primary reason emerging from these studies appeared to be concerns as to the child's safety and well-being when in the care of the other parent. It is unsurprising that these concerns reportedly maintained conflict, as early literature reports that questions about the other parents' competence is most strongly related to parents who exchange less information, have higher levels of dysfunction in their relationship, and hold more discrepant views of the other (Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Whiteside, 1998). In all studies participant parents had a child or children who potentially experienced or observed one or both of their parents as undermining or refusing to communicate with one another, taking unilateral actions, or communicating in a defensive or chaotic manner within their growing up years.

The first important answer to the statement of how separated parents experience high conflict from the qualitative studies in the review is, as a co-parenting relationship that is embedded in pervasive mistrust. This pervasive mistrust is underpinned by a parents' concerns over differing parenting styles, or the other parents' ability to adequately care for the child, and disdain for such concerns. The second important answer to what might maintain conflict from the qualitative studies in the review, appeared to be concerns as to the child's safety and well-being when in the care of the other parent. These concerns potentially had origins in the pre-separation relationship, or in circumstances at separation, and impacted any potential positive exchanges these parents might have. The third important answer to what might escalate conflict from the qualitative studies in this review,

was disdain, which appeared to be fueled by an absence of communication, lack of information sharing, or a communication manner that is defensive, attacking, or chaotic. An adversarial family law system similarly impacted the moving forward of communication. The review suggested that high conflict can exist without a pattern of family violence, however, could not definitively state that high conflict might not, at times, include family violence.

Limitations

Perhaps reflective of the broad use of the term high conflict, the qualitative literature is surprisingly small, yielding only eight studies, all of which were published in the last seven years. The overall quality of the qualitative process was considered good as the studies met most of the criteria. The main methodological limitation was failure to provide a reflexive account of researcher influence, and the lack of sample size justification, with the majority being convenience samples from a mandatory or court ordered context. The actual contact that these separated parents had with each other was not clear in the studies. This information would be useful as those who had more frequent contact may have more opportunities to engage in conflict, than perhaps those who did not.

Two of the studies explored data from pairs of parents (Gulbrandsen et al., 2018; Target et al., 2017) and one contained two pairs of parents (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011). Within these studies there did not appear to be a direct linking or analysis of the data from the mother and father dyads, or mother and mother dyad. It is unknown if this was carried out, and it is not a limitation if it was not, however data that directly analyses gendered differences in co-parenting responses can provide a deeper level of analysis in relation to separated parents' experiences.

The findings suggest that high conflict may be characterised by pervasive mistrust. However, what is not known is whether the pervasive mistrust is legitimate. For example, some parents may maladaptively channel their genuine emotional reactions ("I am worried about my child's safety because they are left home alone" -v- "I am furious because the other parent is out dating again"). It is also arguable that the reportedly low levels of investigation or inquiry on the part of child protection and court services post separation, further complicates the issue of legitimacy of parental reporting of safety concerns. Here substantiation/non-substantiation of concerns by investigative third parties would be of value.

Although the group of studies provides useful information into separated parents' experiences of high conflict, any conclusions must be drawn with caution. These studies are too few, have not examined cultural or gender differences, and do not provide enough evidence to confirm or refute theoretical frameworks. The paucity of research continues to hamper the development of effective

screening tools, policy, and needs orientated support for separated parents experiencing high conflict. These families need to be approached differently, and it is important that research continue into the identification of their needs.

Practical Implications and Implications for Social Policy

This review highlighted several key evidence gaps. Over 20 years ago Johnston (1994), and more recently Haddad et al. (2016) identified a paucity of research in relation to cultural or gendered differences in high conflict co-parenting relationships. These issues remain under researched. Additionally, parents' voices have only been present in the qualitative literature for the last seven years. There is an obvious need for more phenomenological research, and it is necessary to study these relationships longitudinally. Financial issues were reportedly interrelated with child issues, and continued research into the impact of property and financial support arrangements, or the consequences of withholding financial support, in these co- parenting relationships is warranted (Easteal et al., 2018; Whiteside, 1998).

Half of the studies reported that most children were five years and younger when separation took place, and continued research into this cohort is recommended (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011; Jevne & Andenaes, 2017; Treloar, 2018). This is vital given one theme within the review was concerns as to the other parents' ability to care for the children. It is unknown whether this is linked to children's age at the time of interview. Lastly, it is suggested that there might be a redirection away from the dysfunction within these co-parenting relationships, to an exploration of what strengths exist, and what might be possible for these separated parents.

Separated parents are generally embedded in a social context that encourages both parents to be actively involved in their child's life, and at the same time imposes an obligation on each to protect their child against inadequate care, neglect, or abuse. The Australian's Attitudes to Children Benchmark Survey (Valuing Children Initiative, 2016) reported that 79% of Australians believe that parents are responsible for protecting their children. Here it is suggested that an array of specialised services is needed. Where conflict continues, a parent, or both parents, may need to be referred to programs that support the development of quality parenting, intrapersonal communication skills, or interventions tailored to the resources and unique characteristics of each family. In putting in place effective needs orientated support or interventions, a parent may be able to better dis-engage from the conflict. Such support may also be useful in scaffolding long-term effective communication in the co-parenting relationship.

Not of least importance is that third party organisations or professionals adequately

investigate concerns raised in relation to the neglect or abuse of children. This area has its own complexities. For example, in Australia the post separation jurisdictional landscape finds matters involving separation, divorce, and related issues being primarily dealt with by a federal system. Matters involving child protection and family violence, are primarily dealt with by state and territory systems. Although the legislative ability exists to cross-refer, this uneven approach can create further barriers to adequate investigation, disclosure, and communication. Not the least, there can be an assumption that problems are being dealt with, or should be dealt with elsewhere, when they might not be (Rodgers, Smyth & Robinson, 2004).

Within the review, the history of care originating in the pre-separation relationship appeared to potentially influence the present relationship. Treloar (2018) reported on the positive personal change that had occurred where participants were supported with resources that addressed each parents' specific needs and challenges. There may be therapeutic implications in this context for separated parents who struggle to transition to new parenting roles. Separation may reactivate earlier unresolved trauma or neglect for some parents, whilst others might find themselves challenged by feelings of loss resulting from losing close relationships, social connections, or a sense of home. Dangers of misidentification or oversimplification exist, and it is essential that assessments and distinctions are made by adequately trained professionals.

For most parents their focus remained on changing residency, care arrangements, or contact. Being unable to share care was clearly visible within high conflict, however the potential loss of care to which a child might be vulnerable, either through loss of time with a parent, or a lowered quality of parenting capacity, remained in the foreground. Here a shift may be necessary from focusing on time sharing, to focusing on both the tasks required for child-rearing, and the risk/benefits of contact arrangements.

Given the lack of clarity in the literature, limited early screening tools such as DOORS and CRAF, and concerns over children's safety and well-being, courts and related family law services might be cautioned against hasty categorisation and decision making for these families (Iruka, Curenton, & Eke, 2014; McIntosh, 2011). These separated parents appear to need both time and long-term intervention, for example time and support to adjust to new roles, or time and support to rebuild parenting capacity. Equally, decision makers within the family law system may need time. Time to carry out adequate investigations in order to identify risk factors, or time to investigate the ability of parents to meet the tasks required for healthy child-rearing. Investigations need to involve adequately trained third party professionals. It is suggested that no service can work in isolation to adequately respond to the complex needs within these co-parenting relationships, and collaborative

and meaningful information sharing and management across family law services may further support early intervention and scaffolding.

Overall, the review points to a need for a stronger focus on the implications of high conflict for parenting in policy and program development, with the expansion of approaches to support the restoration of quality parent-child relationships, and recovery of parenting capacity following separation. The complex needs of these separated parents tended to be interrelated, although not always. It was clear in these studies that the issue of child custody and contact remained both, front and centre of separated parents' minds, and front and centre of their conflict.

Conclusion

These separated parents need help in finding ways to manage their conflict constructively, help in increasing positive collaboration in their relationship, and help in defining the psychological or physical degree where they may maintain self-control. Part of this may be supporting them to have the courage to talk about their most painful issues if they are going to be able to move towards parenting and co-parenting in a meaningful and child-centered manner.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a systematic review of the available qualitative literature on post separation, high conflict, co-parenting relationships. From the reviewed literature separated parents' experiences of high conflict were reportedly embedded in pervasive mistrust and disdain, and underpinned by concerns over differing parenting styles, or the other parent's ability to adequately care for the child. What potentially maintained conflict were parental concerns as to the child's safety and well-being when in the care of the other parent. What potentially escalated conflict was disdain directed at the concerns of the other parent. The qualitative literature was small, yielding only eight studies, all of which were published within the last seven years.

Reflecting Study 1 there was reporting within the review of defensiveness and stonewalling. Within disdain, defensiveness was reported as further undermining communication or potential information sharing when concerns about financial issues were dismissed, or parents' concerns over the care of a child were regarded as illegitimate (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Gulbrandsen et al.; Jevne & Andenaes, 2017; Treloar, 2018). More broadly, defensiveness and stonewalling were reported as arguably contributing to the escalation of conflict. This primarily was evident in the lack of information sharing, or dismissal of parental concerns, either in relation to the care of the child, or in relation to financial concerns (Jevne & Andenaes, 2017). The published article from the current study can be retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15379418.2019.1617821.

The next chapter will address Stage 2 - Cognitive Dissonance.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Stage 2 – Cognitive Dissonance

This chapter presents the findings from a qualitative exploration of cognitive dissonance within entrenched co-parenting conflict. The outcomes of the systematic review revealed separated parents' experiences of high conflict as embedded in pervasive mistrust and disdain, and underpinned by concerns over differing parenting styles, or the parents' ability to adequately care for the child. Within these states, and in order to build on these findings, Stage 2 sought to further explore cognitive dissonance within entrenched co-parenting conflict. A full list of the questions that were developed in relation to cognitive dissonance are set out at Questions (9) to (13) in Appendix C.

Methodological Considerations

As set out in Chapter 2, in addition to the broader limitations initially identified in Study 2, a primary methodological consideration was the inclusion of the theoretical framework of grounded theory in order to potentially generate a theory that might be situated within existing extant literature. As Stage 2 was primarily focused on cognitive dissonance both father and mother data were included in the analysis.

Separated Parents' Adaptive Responses and States Within Entrenched Co-Parenting Conflict

"But it was sort of like it was too painful. I couldn't, I couldn't directly think about it at that stage" (Mother, 44 years)

Abstract

With numerous stressors arising from separation the initial psychological strain might develop into cognitive dissonance. The current qualitative study explored cognitive dissonance within entrenched co-parenting conflict by drawing on interviews from English speaking separated parents (N = 40) being (n = 36) mothers and (n = 4) fathers who had experienced entrenched co-parenting conflict that had continued past two years post separation. Separated parents' experiences were primarily in the context of the Australia family law system. Utilising the method of thematic analysis and the theoretical frameworks of grounded theory and cognitive dissonance, the mature defense mechanisms of altruism, suppression, anticipation, and humor were identified as potential adaptive responses to dissonance within entrenched co-parenting conflict. The mature defense mechanism of sublimation was not identified as a potential adaptive response to dissonance within entrenched co-parenting conflict. Anxiety was the predominant affective state reported within entrenched co-parenting conflict. Within grounded theory the current study theorised that mature defense

mechanisms might partially support the reduction of recurring dissonant and affective states within entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Introduction

Due to the complexity and longevity of entrenched co-parenting conflict, separated parents over time, may find themselves isolated or having little access to psychological and social resources (Hetherington, 2003). These separated parents may be subject to stereotyping, misconception, and bias within their community and society, due to others perhaps not understanding how or why rationale and reason appears overruled by negative affect and contradictory behaviors.

Why Consider Dissonance Within Entrenched Co-Parenting Conflict?

Prior to separation, a parent might have imagined that their future would follow a normative path that included their partner remaining in the relationship with them, bringing up their child in one home, and growing old together. Following separation, parents' experiences become non-normative, and in the context of entrenched co-parenting conflict, may be magnified, irreconcilable, or at times, intolerable. If what was agreed, mediated, or court ordered does not work out as planned, dissonance or negative affect might arise around values and one's lived experiences. Following separation there is a need for parents to engage in ongoing decision-making and where effective communication may not exist, statutory or other services within the family law system may need to be engaged. However, the very nature of an adversarial family law system, arguably, may contribute to cognitive dissonance. Whether or not entered by choice, within the Australian family law system parents are generally no longer referred to as a "mother" or "father". Parents are now labelled the "applicant" and "respondent" with judicial dictum and legislation now likely to regulate their lives, and the lives of their children, from that point on.

Cognitive Dissonance

Having to hold contradictory beliefs or values often creates psychological distress or discomfort, known as cognitive dissonance. The theory of cognitive dissonance is arguably one of the most influential and enduring theories in social psychology (Festinger, 1957). Cognitive dissonance is defined as information and behavioural actions that contradict an individual's belief that they are a competent, moral, or reasonable person. (Festinger, 1957; Reeve, 2015). Cognitive consistency is defined as information and behavioural actions that confirm an individual's belief that they are a competent, moral, or reasonable person. Nicholson and Lutz (2017) reported that cognitive dissonance is an important factor that impacts individuals experiencing conflictual or violent relationships. Cooper and Fazio (1984) suggest that an adverse event resulting from an individual's

behaviour is a key component in dissonance arousal.

Affect

Despite a cognitive label, dissonance can also be described in the vernacular of affect. Within a marketing context Oliver (1997) referred to cognitive dissonance as comprising regret, anger, disgust, annoyance, embarrassment, and shame. Similarly, Sweeny, Hausknecht, and Soutar (2000) developed a scale of cognitive dissonance that included affective components. Randles, Proulx and Heine (2011) reported that even a simple inconsistency that did not involve any action may be enough to evoke negative affect.

Cognitive dissonance has the potential to impact self-esteem and overall psychological functioning (Hardyck & Kardush, 1968; Stone, 2003). Carver and Scheier (2008) argue for the importance of understanding what specific affective states are aroused, as certain negative affects appear to be associated with increases or decreases in efforts to change. For example, sadness and hopelessness may be associated with decreased effort to change, whereas frustration and anger may be associated with increased effort to change. In the current study affective dissonance is defined as the psychological states that involve an evaluation of a "good-about- me/bad-about-me" judgment. These states may comprise either transient, full blown, or diffuse emotional states (Inzlicht, Bartholow, & Hirsch, 2015).

Method

Participants

The sample (N = 40) comprised English speaking male (n = 4) and female (n = 36) separated parents. Male separated parents were aged between 38 and 50 years. Female separated parents were aged between 34 and 71 years. Mean separated parent age was 46 years (M = 46). Each parents' experience of separation involved conflict that had continued past two years post separation that was primarily focused on difficulties involving the care of a child or children. The sample included (n = 1) same-sex relationship, and (n = 39) other-sex relationships.

Procedure

As set out in Chapter 2 a combination of the methods described by Glaser (1978), Strauss and Corbin (1998), and grounded theory were used. Initial open coding aimed to generate concepts and involved breaking down the raw data from the interview transcripts into qualitative conceptualisations of separated parents' experiences. Throughout later interviews the same procedure was followed going between interview transcripts and codes. As themes were identified,

axial coding enabled the placement of codes into categories. Here experiences began to emerge and repeat themselves. Through a constant comparison of codes and interview transcripts, selective coding eventually identified key themes within cognitive dissonance that became centrally relevant.

Results

Key Themes

Separated parents reported experiencing a range of affective states. In addition to actively coping with their situation, separated parents' responses evidenced that they used strategies indicative of unconscious and adaptive mature defense mechanisms to minimise subjective distress. In response to affective dissonance, four of the five mature defense mechanisms, being altruism, suppression, anticipation, and humor were reported. Anxiety was the predominant affect reported, followed by frustration, feeling scared, and anger. For these separated parents, mature defense mechanisms were identified as potentially adaptive responses within entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Affective Dissonance

Within affect the emotions reported were frustration (*n* = 39), feeling scared (*n* = 38), anger (*n* = 38), despair (*n* = 37), annoyed (*n* = 37), uneasy (*n* = 37), depressed (*n* = 36), resentfulness (*n* = 35), in pain (*n* = 34), disappointed with self (*n* = 33), feeling sick (*n* = 33), feeling in agony (*n* = 33), shame (*n* = 32), hollowness (*n* = 28), having let oneself down (*n* = 28), and feeling furious with oneself (*n* = 23). Although a small number of parents shared that they experienced clinical depression, the majority reported that their depressed feelings were short term and situational, for example, when their child was with the other parent for the weekend. Within their experiences, separated parents in the sample reported experiencing negative affect that was painful, distressing, and at times, overwhelming.

Anxiety

Anxiety was reported by all separated parents in the sample. Within reporting of anxiety two contexts emerged that were associated with either anxieties origin, or anxieties maintenance. The first context was the conflictual nature of the co-parenting relationship. Due to the conflictual nature of the co-parenting relationship one mother shared "Oh, he causes me constant anxiety, like I have panic attacks" (Mother, 41 years). The continuous care of a child or children, wherein separated parents were required to consult with each other, or be in the regular presence of each other appeared to heighten anxiety "… it is not clinical anxiety, but I have anxiety due to the process" (Mother, 40 years).

Within anxiety, a second context emerged when child related issues remained unresolved, requiring recurring involvement by, or engagement with, Australian family law services. One mother described her involvement with family law services as keeping her "… in a heightened state of anxiety … high state of stress and anxiety for months" (Mother, 36 years). Within the current sample anxiety could be either situational, such as when having to attend court, or recurring, due to the stress of entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Altruism

Altruism is an adaptive psychological state wherein an individual's response to dissonance is to selflessly help another. In the current study, altruism appeared transformative to separated parents' adverse experiences. "I think it just helped me to support other people that are going through it and show them a bit of understanding and empathy, and also a bit of guidance as to the tips" (Mother, 51 years). Another mother shared her desire to become a counsellor later in life. "And when I am older and have more time, I'd like to be a DV counsellor, because I would like to give that back" (Mother, 53 years).

For some parents it was important to help others, in either a practical or emotionally supportive manner. Practically, for example, by helping them learn new skills as a single parent:

> We call it single mother 101. She taught me to how to change the tyre of the car, she taught me how to cook a BBQ, she was just amazing. And you know what, I always try to pass that on, even if there is someone I know, that is not a close friend that is going through that sort of thing, you pass it on (Mother, 42 years).

Or emotional support, for example, in providing guidance and advice. "I know so many women and I have supported so many women through the same thing ..." (Mother, 36 years). "I actually wrote a help book for mothers … it is a booklet that explains what happens because you don't have any idea when you first get into it" (Mother, 53 years).

For other parents' altruism was expressed through advocacy or participation in research. "So, it's like, these sorts of things are really good … something I have had to say might help another kid in the future" (Mother, 41 years). For fathers in the current study it was important that their voice be included in research. "I think that for me it would be nice to hear a lot more stories of guys getting the opportunity to do what I have been able to do" (Father, 38 years). "I wanted to participate so there was a bit more male perspective in your research and all that sort of stuff" (Father, 50 years). More specifically participation was reported by some parents as an opportunity to contribute to change. "And that's why I wanted to do this research because you know any research or education

that people can give back" (Mother, 38 years). "Even if you have a voice you want to feel you are contributing or possibly making a change for someone else maybe" (Mother, 39 years).

Altruism potentially supported dissonance reduction and may have given meaning to parents' own adverse experiences. Altruism may arguably contain a social dimension that stretched past helping another individual, to contributing to change within legal and social policy or process.

Suppression

Suppression involves holding an awareness of affect or conflict, and at the same time being able to focus on a level of decision making. Suppression is not avoidance, but rather an acknowledgement that potentially minimised dissonance. As conflict was entrenched, most separated parents did not have the opportunity to properly process their experiences. In these circumstances, suppression potentially served as an adaptive mechanism. Suppression was primarily reported in two contexts within separated parents' experiences within the family law system. Firstly, in a physical context:

> Don't cry in court because even though all this is happening, if you cry as a protective mum, you are going to lose your child… so Rule 101, don't cry in court … you know the trick was to hold your head back and it cuts the tear ducts back and you can't cry (Mother, 42 years).

Secondly, in an emotional context:

> And the way that I have reconciled it is I have, I don't have a split personality, but I am two people currently. I am the person that I have always been … the person I am with (*child's name*) and the person I am with my friends … but I have a person that I am when I am dealing with (*father's name*), or the lawyer, or the family court … there is a conscious decision when that happens … I cannot afford to have the two mixing because that is what got me into so much strife in the beginning. My emotions were just taking over. (Mother, 43 years).

For these separated parents, involvement with the family law system was challenging and difficult. Not only were these parents present in an adversarial setting that comprised family law professionals, judges, or other court personnel, but were in the presence of the other parent. Within the family law system, when attending court, suppression potentially served as an adaptive response wherein negative affect could be acknowledged, managed, and processed later.

Anticipation

Within entrenched co-parenting conflict, there may not be an end to the conflict in sight. In

this context anticipation potentially provided a capacity for parents to respond to the prospect of an intolerable future, whilst keeping affect in mind. For some the future seemed unbearable:

> I had a full bottle of Valium tablets and I was looking into the future and seeing that nothing was ever going to change. So, I had an option to either take the tablets or do something about it … so I decided to get my act together and I had been out of the workforce so long. I had no self-confidence and even less self-esteem, so I found a little open lecture program (Mother, 65 years).

For other parents the future remained uncertain:

> I kinda live in the here and now and sort of deal with the now because I know he is capable of anything … I know when the jab to the rib comes, and it is massive. It is absolutely exhausting … it's just a process, its fine, just go through the process and something kicks in in me, an inner strength (Mother, 43 years).

For one mother, the reality of her experience was too painful:

> I've accepted everything. I have no choice … and I will just get a thought, OMG I lost my children, and OMG I can't believe that happened. But it was sort of like it was too painful. I couldn't, I couldn't directly think about it at that stage (Mother, 44 years).

Anticipation potentially allowed separated parents to respond to dissonance in an adaptive way. In the three examples above, the first parent chose not to end her life and instead get an education, the second parent developed strategies to support her experiences within ongoing litigation, and the third parent supported herself through long-term counselling.

Humour

Humour is a state of mind in which the expression of intolerable affect and dissonance can be expressed without individual discomfort or an unpleasant impact on others. Within entrenched co-parenting conflict the adaptive response of humour enabled separated parents to develop a different perspective:

> You have just got this warped sense of humour and that is what is carrying you through because you can sit back and look at it. I mean it is stranger than fiction. This whole thing it is so bizarre (Mother, 58 years).

> I have laughed the hardest. You got to see. I think it is good to see the ridiculous side of it because it can help you feel better in yourself and stronger and go, well that is just stupid. What on earth was the family court thinking or what on earth was (*other parent's name*)

> doing … it is sort of like watching a dark comedy. I used to hate dark comedies, now I like them. I appreciate that those bizarre things can happen and there is something about laughing, you can cope. It's just bizarre (Mother, 50 years).

For these mothers and fathers humour was essential. "And a sense of humour is the only thing that got me through, definitely" (Mother, 65 years). "There is no point doing anything else" (Father, 49 years). In the current study humour potentially provided a different perspective on separated parents' experiences, provided breathing space, and a moment of relief wherein parents had the opportunity to regain control of their emotional responses.

In summary, it is tentatively suggested that within entrenched co-parenting conflict separated parents' adaptation to affective dissonant states was potentially supported by the mature defense mechanisms of altruism, anticipation, suppression, and humour.

Discussion

In the current study mature defense mechanisms potentially enabled separated parents to regulate heightened affective states and manage dissonance and conflict. Interestingly, evidence of the use of a fifth mature defense mechanism, sublimation, was absent in reporting in the current sample. Followed closely by frustration, feeling scared, and angry, anxiety was the predominant affective state reportedly experienced by separated parents within entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Anxiety

Anxiety at varying levels was reported by all parents in the sample. Separated parents associated long-term involvement with the family law system, and the conflictual nature of the co-parenting relationship, with the predominance of anxiety. Separated parents were frequently required to be in each other's presence, many issues remained unresolved, litigation was either threatened or ongoing, and just living day to day not knowing what was going to happen next, all reportedly influenced, contributed to, or heightened parents' anxiety.

The current study reflected the findings of both Carver and Scheier (2008) and Petraglia, Bhatia, and Drapeau (2017) who reported anxiety as the predominant arousal state in conflict response. Jonas et al. (2014) similarly reported that any discrepant experience arouses anxious vigilance and motivates efforts to reduce arousal. Frustration and anger were also identified by Carver and Scheier (2008) as being involved in motivated action. In summary, recurring or heightened levels of anxiety appear crucial to the instigation of dissonance response and motivated action and were reported by separated parents in the current study.

Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms are responses to dissonance that keep affect within bearable limits during life changes. By alerting an individual to a threat to one's psychological coherence, defense mechanisms "… allow better modulation of distress while maintaining engagement with reality" (Malone, Cohen, Liu, Vaillant, & Waldinger, 2013, p. 85). Mature defense mechanisms, such as humour or altruism are adaptive, leading to better relationships or subjective well-being. Immature defense mechanisms, such as denial or projection, are problematic, leading to work problems or difficulties in relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Malone et al., 2014; Vaillant, 2001). Defense mechanisms occur outside of awareness and often when change in an individual's life happens faster than they can accommodate. Mature defense mechanisms are adaptive in that they provide a period of psychological respite within which an individual may master changes in self, or mitigate unresolved conflicts with other people (Vaillant, 1993; Vaillant, 2001).

Despite subtle overlaps, defense mechanisms are distinct from coping responses. Whereas coping entails conscious processes concerned with attaining realistic goals, defense mechanisms operate unconsciously and are imperative to reducing subjective distress (Hentschel, Smith, Draguns, & Ehlers, 2004). Generally, coping is relevant when addressing short-term changes, defense mechanisms are relevant when addressing long-term change (Kramer, 2010). Although still distorting awareness and affective response, it was theorised that mature defense mechanisms potentially are adaptive responses within entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Altruism. The first mature defense mechanism identified was altruism. Altruism is a psychological state in which an individual's selfless goal is to help another (Batson, 2010; Staub & Vollhardt, 2008). In the current study separated parents' experiences of entrenched co- parenting conflict appeared to shape their altruistic responses toward other separated parents. Separated parents were motivated to support others, even if they were not known, or close to them. This finding reflected Taylor and Hanna's (2018) reporting in their study of 186 participants in Northern Ireland, wherein participants' own personal experiences of adversity and suffering resulted in a motivation to help others, including outgroup members.

Suppression. The second mature defense mechanism identified was suppression. Suppression involves a semi-conscious postponement of the focus on conflict, thus allowing conflict to remain in awareness without complete rejection (Vaillant, 2000). Leippe and Eisenstadt (1999) conceptualised a variety of dissonance reduction modes similar to suppression. These ranged from passive forgetting through to cognitive restructuring. McGrath (2017) further suggested that for unimportant

cognitions, passive forgetting becomes likely, and for highly important cognitions, active suppression is required. Within entrenched co-parenting conflict, separated parents might not have the benefit of time to process, or passively forget, either conflicting cognitions, negative affect, or new information. In this context, suppression potentially served as an adaptive response within entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Anticipation. The third mature defense mechanism identified was anticipation. Anticipation is the capacity to keep affective responses to an unbearable future in mind, whilst managing conflict in small steps (Vaillant, 2000). Separated parents shared their experiences within entrenched co-parenting conflict as comprising not knowing what would come next, not knowing what an outcome would be, not knowing how the other parent might react, not knowing what the impact of the conflict would be on their children, or if they might lose their children altogether either through court orders or behaviours undertaken by the other parent. Here recurring unpredictability was experienced. Contemporary research has found, within anticipation, that unpredictability enhances attentional engagement either to an actual threat or less intense threats (Nelson & Hajcak, 2017). Within the adaptive response of anticipation separated parents reportedly were able, by taking small steps, to manage dissonance within entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Humour. The fourth mature defense mechanism identified was humour. Humour involves the ability to express an emotion without individual discomfort or unpleasant effects on others (Vaillant, 2000). Humour reportedly allowed separated parents to maintain a detached perspective in the face of recurring adversity (Jose, Faisal, & Mathai, 2017).

The current study supported earlier longitudinal research by Vaillant (2000) who found the use of defense mechanisms as being independent of social class, education, and predominantly evident within the middle to old age groups. Separated parents in the current study comprised a wide range of demographics, with educational levels ranging from high school level to parents who held postgraduate degrees. The age demographics of separated parents in the current study similarly comprised the middle to older age groups (Diehl et al., 2014; Valliant, 1993). In summary, within grounded theory it is tentatively theorised that the four mature defense mechanisms of altruism, suppression, anticipation, and humour might support the psychological wellbeing and management of affective dissonant states for separated parents entrenched in co-parenting conflict (Vaillant, 2011).

Sublimation. Absent from separated parents' reporting was experiences identifying the defence mechanism of sublimation. Sublimation allows for indirect resolution of negative affect wherein

neither loss of pleasure nor adverse consequences are experienced (Vaillant, 2000). As an example, an individual who experiences heightened levels of sadness might write poetry about love and loss. Within the sample, separated parents expressed resentfulness and anger, not only at the behaviours of the other parent, but also towards the family law system. Their experiences of post separation relationships in both contexts reportedly created barriers to, or impeded parents moving forward financially, within relationships, or their careers. Negative impacts on their parenting capacity were also reported. Within entrenched co-parenting conflict, it is tentatively suggest that these life stagnations, or day to day uncertainties, perhaps did not afford separated parents the opportunity to find other pursuits in which they could further manage negative affect or dissonance, with priority unconsciously given to managing dissonance and affective states on a day by day, moment to moment basis.

Practical Implications

As important as it is that the nature or characteristics of entrenched co-parenting conflict be understood in order that effective support be available for separated parents, similarly, if not equally important, is support for what works in their conflictual relationship. It is suggested that professionals in clinical practice may find it useful to explore defense mechanisms, and the clues they provide, in further understanding, supporting, and conceptualising behaviours and responses from separated parents experiencing entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Strengths of the Study and Limitations

To the candidate's knowledge there are no studies of cognitive dissonance and affective states within a post separation context of entrenched co-parenting conflict in Australia. Although inferences beyond the current study are limited, the tentative findings provide important insights into potential strengths and mechanisms available to separated parents within entrenched co-parenting conflict. As such, this nuanced study reflected a strength in its tentative identification of specific adaptive defense mechanisms. Limitations are set out in Chapter 2. Given the qualitative nature of the current study future directions might consider the use of measures that quantify the use of defence mechanisms within this population.

Conclusion

Negative perceptions of separated parents' behaviours within entrenched co-parenting conflict often act as an impediment to outsiders observing, identifying, or supporting the adaptive, strength-based, or positive mechanisms that separated parents might access. The current study investigated separated parents' experiences of co-parenting relationships, dissonance, and how they

are parsed within entrenched co-parenting conflict. In order to bring observed commonalities together in the specific context of entrenched co-parenting conflict, and as a tentative preliminary step in understanding adaptive responses and states in a post separation context, it is theorised that mature defence mechanisms might be utilised as adaptive responses to the vicissitudes of these separated parents' lives.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a qualitative exploration of cognitive dissonance and separated parents' adaptive mechanisms within entrenched co-parenting conflict. Utilising the method of thematic analysis and the theoretical frameworks of grounded theory and cognitive dissonance, the current study identified the mature defense mechanisms of altruism, suppression, anticipation, and humor as potentially adaptive responses to dissonance within entrenched co-parenting conflict. The mature defense mechanism of sublimation was not identified as a potential adaptive response to dissonance within entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Within the current study anxiety was the predominant affective state reported within entrenched co-parenting conflict. In linking back to Stage 1, in addition to better understanding what is not working within a post separation co-parenting relationship, it is argued that as important is research that enables a better understanding of what may be working. Although the literature is abundant with the impact of entrenched co-parenting conflict on children, there is less literature available on the impact on separated parents. The findings reported in Chapter 6 evidenced pervasive mistrust, disdain, and concerns over the welfare and care of children, coupled with a lack of information sharing, or dismissal of parental concerns within high conflict. In addition to the findings in the current study, it is suggested that the factors identified in Chapter 6 may contribute to the predominant affective state identified in the current study of anxiety. The published article from the current study can be retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10502556.2019.1586229. The next chapter will address - Stage 3 – Hate.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Stage 3 – Hate

This chapter presents the findings from a qualitative exploration of the complex phenomenon of hate with entrenched co-parenting conflict. Over the decades, researchers examining hate have struggled with sparse literature that often does not validate proposed theories, nor clearly specify mechanisms through which hate manifests itself (Royzman et al., 2005). Hate has seldom been raised in the post separation literature.

Methodological Considerations

Grounded theory has been used in research for over 40 years and has advantages in relation to relevance, being closeness to data, and rigor, being clearly prescribed analytical procedures. In order to explain findings that link to previous knowledge, Walsh et al. (2015) clarified that grounded theory includes conceptualising and producing theories which might then be integrated into extant formal theory. As grounded theory can involve the integration of either a substantive study, or emerging theory in a specific context with existing theories, the development of interview questions within Stage 3 were designed to be both exploratory and confirmatory (Urquhart & Fernandez, 2013; Walsh et al., 2015). Such an approach enabled the uniqueness of this nuanced post separation context to be captured, without ignoring the development of theory which was applicable to the phenomenon of hate in other contexts such as Sternberg (2003) and Shand (1920).

A full list of the questions that were developed in relation to hate are set out at (5) to (8) and (14) to (17) in Appendix C. The interview questions were in two parts. The first being the exploration of hate in a post separation context, and the second being confirmatory exploration of responses. The exploratory questions focused on the phenomenon of hate and were designed to be descriptive. Herein lay the flexibility for further inquiry into the lived experience as either a recipient of hate or perpetrator of hate. If a participant responded that hate did not form part of their lived experience, then further inquiry was made into “if not hate, …” in the context of either recipient, perpetrator, or both.

If Love Is Blind, Then Hate Cannot See – Hate Within Entrenched Co-Parenting Conflict

"We are on a conveyor belt to hell" (Mother, 53 years)

Abstract

Researchers exploring hate have struggled with sparse literature and unclear mechanisms through which hate manifests itself. This Australian qualitative study explored the phenomenon of hate within entrenched co- parenting conflict by drawing on interviews with separated parents (N = 40) being female (n = 36) and male (n = 4). The findings suggest that hate may be present within entrenched co- parenting conflict. Thematic analysis was undertaken and guided by the theoretical framework of grounded theory. Preliminary inquiry was based on the theoretical perspectives of Shand's (1920) hate work and Sternberg's (2003) triangular theory of the structure of hate. Three themes that potentially contribute to understanding hate's genesis, growth, and stability post separation were identified. Firstly, an inability or unwillingness to self-reflect, secondly, inverse caring, and thirdly, relentlessness. Within grounded theory a conceptualisation of hate, being the circular theory of hate in co-parenting conflict was developed. This conceptual model tentatively theorised that hate may functionally serve as a self-protective mechanism that enabled a parent to avoid experiencing their own emotions, avoid confronting or taking responsibility for their own behaviour, or avoid facing their own lived experiences following separation. A primary limitation of the current study was that themes were generated through participant responses that primarily described a third person's behaviour, rather than self.

Introduction

By exploring the functionality and manifestations, if any, of hate within entrenched co-parenting conflict, the current study aimed to build on the disparate and limited hate research in a post separation context. Although hate is seldom raised in the family law literature, Australian and international researchers have provided commentary on the potential role of hate in entrenched co-parenting conflict (Demby, 2017; Johnston, 2017; Smyth & Moloney, 2017). In the literature questions remain as to how conflict between separated parents is maintained or escalates (Visser et al., 2017). Birnbaum and Bala (2010) suggest that refined and explicit analytic concepts are needed that better identify dynamics in high conflict families post separation.

Why Consider Hate Within Entrenched Co-Parenting Conflict?

Hate is a complex phenomenon. Use of the word hate is broad. It can range from the mundane, for example a child who hates eating broccoli, through to the insidious, for example

Hitler's hatred of Jews. However, demonising hate and seeing it only as a form of destruction limits opportunities to understand hates' potentially more nuanced functions or manifestations (Aumer & Bahn, 2016). In this complex research area Smyth and Moloney (2017) note that "… new ideas have the potential to generate new leads and courses of action" (p. 413). Therefore, in a post separation context, if such a family dynamic can be recognised, it may be able to be turned around, lessened, or support provided to those effected.

Demby (2009) discussed post separation hate narratives wherein a parent casts themselves as the innocent victim and the other parent as the villain. Such polarised, irreconcilable narratives reportedly expose children to a strained reality, a reality in which children's development and sense of self are sacrificed. Donner (2006) further reported that hate enabled a parent to negate their role in conflict, thus enabling the parent to disavow the harm the conflict is causing the child. There remains more that needs to be understood within hate in a post separation context.

In the current study entrenched co-parenting conflict is defined as long standing and intense disputes that are focused on difficulties involving the care of a child that require considerable community and court resources (Shaw, 2017). Hate on the other hand is notoriously difficult to define. As a starting point only, hate is conceptualised as a sentiment comprising cognitive components and emotional reactions that impact behaviour associated with diminishing a parents' well-being (Garaigordobil, 2014; Rempel & Burris, 2005). At times hate has been linked with anger. This misinterpretation often occurs because the conditions that give rise to anger, are similar to those that support hate (Wolf, 2013). It is here argued that anger is an emotion that is experienced in the short term, whereas hate is more complex and sustained, evolving from the cultivation of anger (Gaylin, 2003).

Two theoretical perspectives formed a preliminary framework for the current study. Firstly, Shand's (1920) hate work, and secondly, Sternberg's (2003) triangular theory of the structure of hate. The primary aim of the current study was on yielding information on the phenomenon of hate and hate's functionality or manifestations, if any, in entrenched co-parenting conflict. The literature review will briefly discuss hate as a motivation, goal, emotion, cognition, self-protective mechanism, and from a biological perspective.

Characteristics of Hate

Hate can be directed at an individual or hate can be socially shared (Garaigordobil, 2014). Hate can be one way or hate can be mutual (Sternberg, 2005). Hate is a consumer of resources. On a large-scale hate consumes people's lives, their work, community organisations, and societal

institutions. On a small-scale, hate consumes attention, time, and energy that could be used more constructively. In psychology, the literature evidences three primary traditions where hate is identified, being psychoanalysis (Allport, 1950), social psychology (Blum, 1997), and emotions research (Fitness, 2000). Although Rempel and Burris (2005) have argued that the empirical evidence of hate's stability is nearly non-existent, one common theme is that hate is a relatively stable experiential state (Allport, 1950; Izard 1977). A second theme is that hate comprises motivational implications associated with a desire to harm or destroy the other (Allport, 1950; Rempel & Burris, 2005). A third theme is that hate is an emotion, although little consensus exists on where on the emotional palette hate lies (Garaigordobil, 2014; Rempel & Burris, 2005; Rempel & Sutherland, 2016; Sternberg, 2003; Wolf, 2013).

Goals Within Hate

Hate may constitute goals. Rempel and Burris (2005) give examples of subtypes of hate that are distinguishable by their goal. These include elevation of self by bringing the other down (denigration) or restoring order or justice (redress) in order to support an assertion of hate having either an instrumental goal. Hate is commonly understood to be an emotion (Ausburger, 2004). Psychodynamic theory puts forward hate as a natural emotional experience which must be mastered during childhood (Blum, 1997; Kernberg, 1998).

Cognitions Within Hate

Intertwined with goals, some suggest that cognitive appraisals may form part of hate. These appraisals potentially provide personal relevance in formulating approach or avoidance goals (Moors, Ellsworth, Scherer, & Frijda, 2013). Scherer (2013) proposed four levels of cognitive processing in hate being sensorimotor, schematic, association, and conceptual. Ausburger (2004) reported that although no two hates were alike, all hate was formed on a spectrum of negative behaviours and sentiments. Hate may constitute an element of justice that is dependent on moral judgments. Without this element of justice, hate may wane (Elster, 1999; Staub, 2005).

Hate as a Self-Protective Mechanism

Some researchers argue that hate may comprise protective factors that support an individual's continued navigation of their psychological world (Aumer & Bahn, 2016). Kelly (1955) reported that when faced with two alternatives, individuals make a choice that makes the most sense to them, a term coined "elaborative choice". Therefore, what appears to others to be self-defeating, in fact leads to a psychological world within which an individual can function.

Hate Within Biology

Neurological research evidences a unique pattern of activity for hate in the brain. Zeki and Romaya (2008) carried out research on hate directed from one individual towards another individual and reported that the hate pathway in the brain excluded the area of the amygdala normally activated for fear, aggression, danger, and anger. Zeki and Romaya (2008) further reported that only small parts of the cerebral cortex, that are involved in evaluating others, planning, voluntary movements and organisational skills, become deactivated during hate.

In summary, this brief review serves to highlight hate as enigmatic. Hate may have goals that are directed by motives, with cognitive appraisals providing personal relevance. There is no universal construct of hate as an emotion. From a biological perspective hate appears to have a distinctive pathway of activity within the brain that involves a level of planning and preparation. Next follows a discussion of the theoretical frameworks within the current study.

Theoretical Framework

Sitting between Rempel and Burris (2005) and Faithi, Rempel and Burris' (2010) argument that hate is a motivation, and Aumer, Bahn, and Harris (2015) argument that hate is an emotion, lay Shand's (1920) theoretical concept of hate as a sentiment that comprises a group of disinterested emotions that have motivational implications that adapt to a determinative end. Within Shand's (1920) hate work, as an example, joy might be experienced by a perpetrator of hate when a hated other experiences misfortune, such as the loss of a job. Shand (1920) further described hate as being the perfect antinomy of love. Love involves a positive alignment between the emotions of the lover, and the fortunes of the one loved. In love, there was caring for the other. Whereas hate involves a negative alignment between the emotions of the hater, and the misfortune of the one hated. In hate, there was inverse caring for the other. Although nearly 100 years old, Shand's (1920) theoretical proposition has been noted in contemporary hate research as a "… much neglected treatment of hate" (Sternberg, 2005, p. 5). The next theoretical framework in the current study is Sternberg's (2003) triangular theory of the structure of hate.

From a psychological perspective, Sternberg's (2003) triangular theory of the structure of hate suggests that hate comprises three components being negation of intimacy (through disgust and distancing), passion (through anger or fear), and decision-commitment (devaluation and diminution through contempt). Although Sternberg's (2003) theory has its origins in the development of hate in the contexts of terrorism, massacres and genocide, it does suggest that hate comprises cognitive, motivational, and emotional components.

In summary, the disparate literature reveals hate as potentially having motivational, emotional, or cognitive components. Distinctive pathways of activity for hate have been identified within the brain. Little is known about hates functionality or manifestations, if any, in entrenched co-parenting conflict. As a preliminary step, in a post separation context, an inductive approach utilising grounded theory was selected to explore the phenomenon of hate (Urquhart & Fernandez, 2013; Walsh et al., 2015).

Method

Participants

The sample (N = 40) comprised English speaking male (n = 4) and female (n = 36) separated parents. Male separated parents were aged between 38 and 50 years. Female separated parents were aged between 34 and 71 years. Mean separated parent age was 46 years (M = 46). Each parents' experience of separation involved conflict that had continued past two years post separation that was primarily focused on difficulties involving the care of a child or children. The sample included (n = 1) same-sex relationship, and (n = 39) other-sex relationships.

Procedure

Throughout the data collection phase, it became evident that separated parents who participated in the study, primarily reported being recipients of hate, as opposed to being perpetrators of hate. Given the low number of participant fathers, the findings are primarily derived from separated mother's second-hand reporting of their lived experience as a recipient of hate. Within this context, Smyth and Moloney (2017) make an important point, that is that the target of hate might also provide clues as to the other individual's hate. Given the limited and disparate research in this area, the low number of father participants, and the exploratory nature of the study, it is argued that these separated parents' experiences remain meaningful despite the absence of an awareness of "the other's" experience in the data.

Results

Key Themes

The themes observed and reported were generated from separated parent's responses that mainly described and characterised the behaviour of the other parent, rather than self. Three key themes relating to hate were observed being, a steadfast inability or unwillingness to self-reflect, inverse caring, and relentlessness. The first theme, a steadfast unwillingness or inability to self-reflect, appeared to tie together the remaining two themes.

The first theme comprised a functional sub-theme, being self-protection from having to confront one's own emotions or behaviour, or ones lived experiences. The second theme, inverse caring, comprised two sub-themes being firstly, the sorrow and joy of hate, and secondly, the absence of sympathy and presence of antipathy. The third theme comprised relentlessness.

Steadfast Inability or Unwillingness to Self-Reflect

Participants clearly described the other parents' steadfast inability, or unwillingness to self-reflect. "Oh, he has never had a problem in his opinion" (Mother, 71 years). "… he is old enough to self-reflect … he refuses to. He would rather just destroy his children to destroy me … you're 45 years old mate, come on" (Mother, 41 years). "There is no way that he could ever see that something is his fault … he has no insight or capacity to understand anyone else's feelings on anything" (Mother, 34 years).

Some participants stated that the other parents' inability or unwillingness to self-reflect was enabled further by others, or by the family law system. "… his family have decided that I am the root cause of every problem under the sun … he has got so much support from his family" (Mother, 53 years). "So, he has got all these people around him that reinforce him, and that it is ok that he is the victim" (Mother, 38 years). "We have been through hell … and the person who dragged us through hell … is now getting everything and being rewarded in court" (Mother, 41 years). Within an inability to self-reflect a potential function was reported in separated parent's descriptions, that of self-protection.

Self-Protection

A potential sub-theme within an inability to self-reflect was that of self-protection. The self-protection was observed in protection from either firstly, one's own emotions and behaviours, or secondly, from one's lived experiences. Some participants were adamant that the other parent would never self-reflect, and that instead of confronting or reflecting, the other parent would instead shift the blame and "… find someone else to blame for his problems" (Mother, 41 years). For some it was suggested that the reality would be too confronting. "I think he would have to confront something that is too much for him … I don't think he has the capacity" (Mother, 46 years) or that confrontation "… would send him into one of those psychotic states of absolute chaos" (Mother, 46 years).

Within participant's descriptions, where they considered a point in time where the other parent would self-reflect, three potential functions of self-protection emerged. Firstly, avoidance from experiencing one's own emotions. "She has put that on because she feels a whole lot of guilt, to protect admitting the wrongdoing" (Mother, 38 years). "He is not very well held together at all"

(Mother, 46 years). “I think he stopped growing emotionally at nine” (Mother, 57 years). Protecting oneself from experiencing one’s emotions potentially supported hate’s perpetuation.

Secondly, avoidance of taking responsibility for one’s own behaviour. “He would have to address the fact … that he is so highly manipulative, and everything is done to benefit himself and he has absolutely no conscience at all” (Mother, 43 years). “Face up to what he did. Face up to his responsibilities … not providing financially, not providing clothing, food, anything like that” (Mother, 41 years). “He would have to realise that a lot of what has happened in his life is a result of how he has behaved” (Mother, 42 years). As with avoiding emotions, avoiding responsibility for one’s own actions potentially supported hate’s continuation.

Thirdly, hate potentially protected a parent from confronting their own lived experiences, most often reported within participant’s descriptions as involving an abusive childhood. “He had a pretty hard childhood, he has been abused, really bad family situations” (Mother, 35 years). “A lot starting with his very abusive childhood. There is a horribly abusive, physically abusive, and emotionally abusive father … really horrible … horribly abusive childhood” (Mother, 36 years). “I think he was sexually abused himself … he used to sleep with a knife under his pillow … so there is a lot of family dysfunction that he doesn’t want to deal with … yeah he is running from his own abuse” (Mother, 44 years). “… that he had a very screwed up childhood. He was molested as a choir boy” (Mother, 57 years). Observations from the descriptions of the other parent suggests that a lack of self-reflection may be protective from the past, but potentially destructive in the present and future.

Inverse Caring

Lack of self-reflection appeared to underpin an observation of inverse caring. Inverse caring comprised two antithetical themes. Firstly, the sorrow and joy of hate was observed in the emotional tracking reported by separated mothers. Secondly, there was a reported absence of sympathy and presence of antipathy, with mothers vividly describing their experiences as a recipient of the deep-seated aversion held by the other parent.

The sorrow of hate. Most participants recalled that when they had a measure of success in their life that this only heightened the other parents’ negative emotions. “When I got my unit, and then my house he was furious, furious, like how dare I” (Mother, 42 years). “I did notice when I got remarried, he was visibly more aggressive” (Mother, 46 years). “You see I inherited a bit of money from not a relative but a neighbor … he hates it” (Mother, 47 years). Even when a mother developed a level of personal growth “… he probably does hate me because I think that over time, as time has

progressed, I have become a stronger person and he probably hates it. So, I think my life does trigger him, but I don't think his life triggers me" (Mother, 39 years). These statements suggest that a parents' progress potentially inflamed the other parents' ill-will.

The joy of hate. Inversely, when participants encountered challenges or difficult times, this appeared to bring the other parent joy. However, this was less reported than the response elicited from a participant's success. "Like if he heard that I was on the streets with nothing he would be satisfied" (Mother, 50 years). "Like I was in a car accident recently, but there was no sympathy" (Mother, 45 years). "I was very sick and had lots of bleeding and stuff like that and he … didn't give a shit" (Mother, 34 years). In contrast to damning success, these statements illustrate the potential delight shown for misfortune. It is tentatively suggested that a lack of self-reflection does not allow for separation of interests.

Absence of sympathy. Participants, although sharing that they struggled with, and at times hated the other parent's behavior, stated that their own feelings of hate were situational, rather than stable. "Yeah a moment of hatred and then I have times when I actually feel really sorry for him" (Mother, 50 years). Overall participants expressed feelings of pity or sorrow for the other parent. "… I will always sort of feel sorry for him, because he is just a disaster, he is just a walking disaster" (Mother, 45 years). "I guess I care about the person I married … but it is hard to be sympathetic now when he is daily making things really tough on me" (Mother, 35 years). "So, I have always felt sorry for him in that way, but I can't ever cross over into hate" (Mother, 41 years). "But that deep-down feeling when you hate someone – thank god I have never felt it and I refuse, because then he wins, he wins" (Mother, 43 years).

Conversely, participants reported an absence of sympathy from the other parent. "He has no sympathy towards me whatsoever" (Mother, 43 years). "… just cannot believe how he didn't care or have empathy" (Mother, 35 years). The reported sympathy for the other, and reported lack of sympathy shown to them, suggest how distancing and devaluing may potentially enable antipathy.

Presence of antipathy. One participant described the other parent's aversion to them as "We are on a conveyor belt to hell" (Mother, 53 years). Another participant recalled feeling "… it was soul destroying" (Mother, 50 years).

> Every time we go into (name of grocery store) he will be sitting at the cashier and going 'oh my fucking ex-wife, she's on the fucking drugs', and to anyone that would listen he would say '… how after four kids your vagina is like throwing a sausage up a (name of grocery store) aisle'. This is the stuff he is saying (Mother, 41 years).

"So, he would have names on his mobile phone for me and his previous partner. I think we were tarts and sluts" (Mother, 51 years). "And being pushed down and made into the person that I wasn't. A non-person. I was made into a non-description … it is slow, and clever, so yeah, you become a non-person" (Mother, 40 years). Reported behaviours such as these were experienced within the sample as an active expression of hate, giving voice to inverse caring, amplifying the sorrow of hate, and lack of sympathy for the hated parent.

Relentlessness

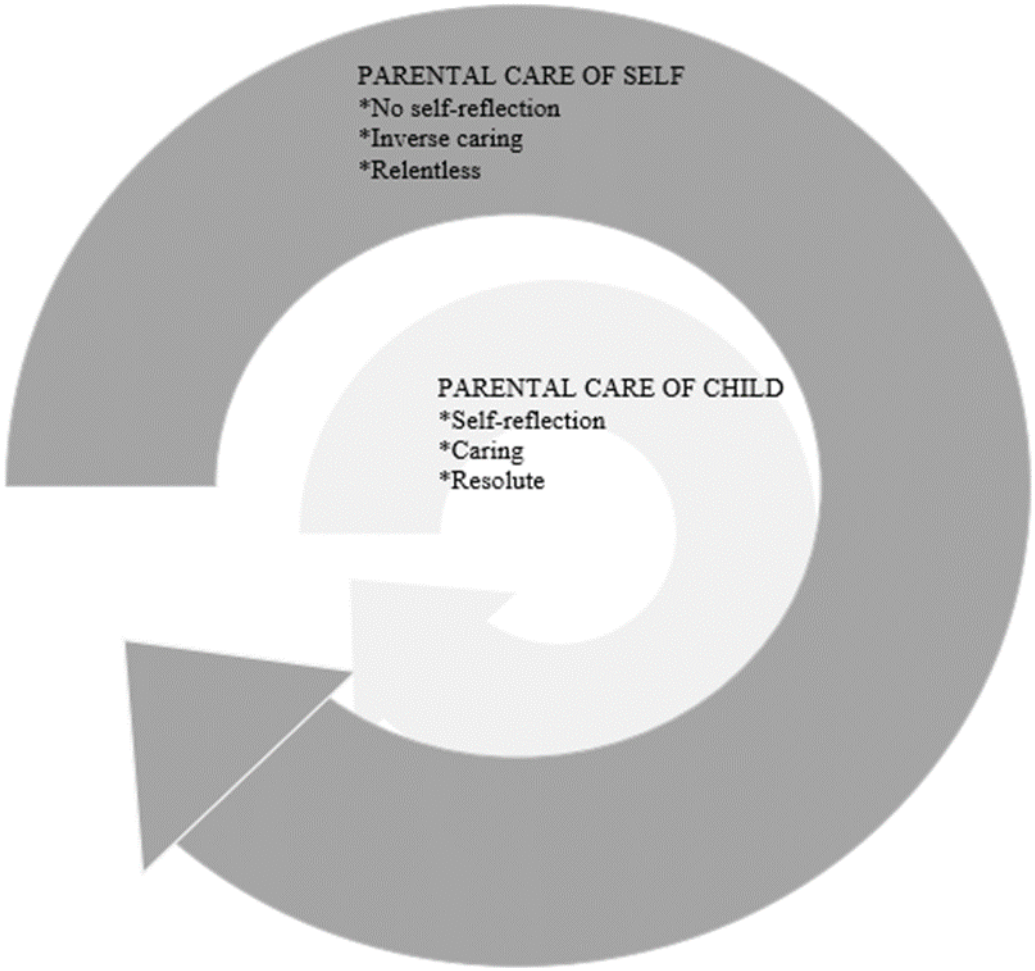
A trend was observed in a loss of hope for resolution of conflict over time. Initially, participants who were two to three years post separation, expressed hope of the conflict ending. These parents reported that they still walked on eggshells daily with the other parent, and none had final or formal arrangements in place. As the years' passed, separated parents became less hopeful and were adamant that the conflict was going to continue. "He would never be able to stop, honestly I call him the terminator in my mind" (Mother, 41 years). Even well past children turning eighteen they reported hate would continue. "He will spend until his dying day destroying me, or attempting to … the kids will be eighteen, married, have their own children, he will still be going with his grandchildren trying to turn them against me" (Mother, 41 years). "Whether he is ever going to give up this battle at any age, I suspect not" (Mother, 43 years).

> I have hope, I always have hope because if I didn't I would not be here, but you know in 2012 I thought I can't do anymore and it is now 2018 and I just keep praying every year that this is going to be the year that it is over … he is a nightmare (Mother, 34 years).

"He has hunted me for this long … he will keep going" (Mother, 47 years). "Basically, it got to the point where I think it is going to go on forever" (Mother, 45 years). "He will spend until his dying day destroying me, or attempting to" (Mother, 41 years). Most alarming were participant's reports of concerns for both their own, or their children's safety and wellbeing. "So, the only thing that might change all of this is if I was dead … he will make me suffer for the rest of my life" (Mother, 46 years). "I know that I am on borrowed time with him … it is only a matter of time before he gets so in a corner before he breaks … I have told the police that, I have told everyone that will listen that we will be putting me in a body bag … because it will come eventually, it will just become too much for him" (Mother, 43 years). Participants shared fears that they would be the next statistic or turn on the news on television one night to find their children had been thrown off a bridge. The relentlessness of hate as actions and emotions, underpinned by an inability to self-reflect and transition within changed circumstances, potentially led to an unhappy life for the recipient of

hate, and genuine fears for their children's future safety.

Figure 4. Circular Theory of Hate in Co-Parenting Conflict



(Figure 4 reprinted by permission of the publisher Taylor & Francis Ltd, http://www.tandfonline.com, article Francia, L., Millear, P., & Sharman, R. (2019). If love is blind, then hate cannot see – Hate within enduring parenting disputes. (2019). *Journal of Child Custody, 16(3),* 248-267 (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15379418.2019.1568947)

The results are discussed for *Figure 4*. The smaller arrow in the background represents the relationship between parents established upon parenting a child. Here the parental relationship is directed toward the care of their child. The larger arrow in the foreground represents the co-parenting relationship following parental separation. In hate, the focus of a parent potentially shifts from the care and protection of the child, to the care and protection of self. Each arrow comprises three antithetical aspects. In parental care of child there exists self-reflection, caring, and resolution within the parental relationship. In parental care of self, there exists little self-reflection, inverse caring, and relentlessness within the co-parenting relationship. This conceptualisation of hate is set out in a

circular language that is representative of a hate that remains unresolved, self-perpetuating, and circuitous. Over time the focus of the pre-separation parenting relationship may be subsumed and overtaken by hate. Here the needs of the child diminish and may eventually no longer be seen by a parent who is unable or unwilling to self-reflect.

Although interviews did not specifically question the existence of a shift in parental focus away from the child, participant comments suggested this possibility. “And he was using (*daughter’s name*) as a conduit all the time” (Mother, 51 years). “And my nine-year-old which is now the fourteen-year-old came up to me and said, ‘Do you know what dad said to me?’ and I said, ‘No what did dad say?’ ‘Because dad used to be in a bikie gang, you know he can make you disappear anytime he wants.’ He was using the kids, oh god he was using the kids, absolutely” (Mother, 41 years). “He had the kids one night and said he had nothing left and that he was going to burn the house down with them in it” (Mother, 38 years). “He tried to, all the way through he would hurt the children” (Mother, 44 years). It is suggested that a parent in hate might not be aware of the potential harm that these actions cause their child and may either consciously or unconsciously draw their child into the dynamics of hate with the other parent.

Discussion

It is important to note that the themes observed in the current study regarding hate were generated through primarily separated mother participant’s second-hand reporting of the other parents’ behaviour, rather than self. The current study’s exploration tentatively proposes that hate may exist in enduring co-parenting conflict, with an inability or unwillingness to self- reflect potentially maintaining hate, and inverse caring potentially contributing to escalation. Through identified themes a conceptual model that theorised that hate within entrenched co-parenting conflict may serve as a self-protective mechanism was developed. In the current study support was observed for aspects of Smyth and Moloney’s (2017) description of entrenched hatred, however subtle differences were observed. Aspects of Shand’s (1920) theory of hate were observed being, the sorrow and joy of hate, and sympathy and antipathy. Manifestations of hate, described in Sternberg’s (2003) theory involving distancing and devaluation, were also observed.

Broadly, aspects of Smyth and Moloney’s (2017) description of entrenched hatred, were observed, however subtle distinctions emerged. The most prominent involved a global assessment of the other parent as deserving of no respect, feeling discredited, unimportant, that they had little or no rights, as opposed to seeing the other parent as evil. In the context of such a devaluing assessment, a perpetrator of hate potentially created distance. Rempel and Burris (2005) similarly suggested that

hate comprises motivations based on devaluing the other that are associated with diminishing or destroying the other's well-being. Aumer et al. (2015) further suggest that there might not need to be a sense of fear of the hated other for the actions of devaluation to exist. Here it is tentatively suggested that post separation a perception or fear of one as evil may not be necessary, just a belief that the other parent no longer mattered.

The current study expanded Smyth and Moloney's (2017) description of hate's manifestation as a steadfast inability to self-reflect. The current study similarly reflected Beck's (1999) comments on a cognitive commitment in hate, and single mindedness that reinforced that I am good, and you are bad. Smyth and Moloney (2017) described a willingness to incur harm to oneself or one's children and this was partially observed in the current study. Participants had much to say about the emotional and psychological aftermath for their children. Support was observed for Shand's (1920) hate work. Shand (1920) suggested that there was not only a lack of sympathy, but antipathy in hate. Sympathy counteracted what hate strived for, which was the suffering or destruction of the other. Again, devaluation, through antipathy was observed, potentially enabling a parent to create distance and perpetuate hate. Within Sternberg's (2003) triangular theory, the devaluation component that enabled distancing, was observed in the current study.

In order to bring observed commonalities together in the specific context of entrenched co-parenting conflict, and as a tentative preliminary step in understanding hate in a post separation context, a circular theory of co-parenting hate was conceptualised comprising three fundamental themes. Firstly, that hate is potentially manifested as an inability or unwillingness to self-reflect that serves the functionality of a self-protective mechanism. Secondly, that hate may potentially manifest as inverse caring. Thirdly, that hate's manifestation may potentially be relentless and self-perpetuating.

Steadfast Inability or Unwillingness to Self-Reflect

The key theme observed, being a steadfast inability or unwillingness to self-reflect, appeared to tie remaining sub-themes together. Merrick (2017) reported that hate may be experienced when a person feels a violation of self that they wished to avoid. In a co-parenting context, where parents are unable to avoid some form of relationship with each other, an inability or unwillingness to self-reflect might on the face of it appear functional, however, becomes self-defeating and destructive over time. An inability to self-reflect may potentially contribute to why some separated parents hate and some separated parents do not hate post separation. Without further research, this suggestion remains an observation in this study.

Self-Protection

Two findings from the literature support the sub-theme of hate as a self-protective mechanism. Firstly, a suggestion that the purpose of hate is to make an individual vigilant as to probable dangers within their social environment (Aumer & Bahn, 2016). And secondly, a suggestion that hate is a reaction to people we have loved and invested ourselves in, that manifests itself when an agreement that was vital to maintenance of the relationship is broken (Aumer-Ryan & Hatfield, 2007; Haidt, 2003). Johnson, Makinen, and Millikin (2001) suggest that attachment injuries may result from betrayals within a relationship that have the potential to continually bleed and perpetuate alienation between individuals. It may be, that for some separated parents perceived or real betrayals originating in parental separation, may trigger an emotional and psychological self-protective response.

As a self-protective mechanism, another potential trigger of hate was discussed by Demby (2009) who postulated that trauma arising from growing up with parents who are chronically mis-attuned and unresponsive to a child's needs, might leave an individual with chronic personality vulnerabilities. When adverse experiences arise for such an individual as an adult, earlier feelings might potentially be reactivated causing an individual to "… fight back aggressively and ruthlessly" (p. 420). In this study some mothers reported the other parent as experiencing childhoods that were devoid of secure attachments, or warm or close parent-child relationships. Without further research it is unknown whether vulnerabilities discussed by Demby (2009) and reported by participants in this study, might be triggered at separation and form a basis for hate. This line of inquiry is worthy of future consideration in order to better understand why some parents hate and others do not.

Inverse Caring

Emotional tracking was reported within the sample. In McCauley's (2001) hate research, McCauley described individuals as either positively, or negatively identifying with other individuals in the context of feelings about the well-being and outcomes of others as their own. This was echoed in the current study through the description of the sorrow and joy of hate. Parents now lived separate lives with all the ups and downs, successes, and challenges. However, emotions and feelings at times were reported as reversed from the pre-separation context. Post separation, co-parents remain, at some level, in the life of each other, and some level of knowledge of their lives after separation is generally known, either through changeovers or other court ordered requirements, such as providing residential addresses. When separated parents were doing well, emotions such as anger and being

furious were reported. Conversely, when separated parents were not doing well, this reportedly bought a level of joy or satisfaction to a parent in hate.

Relentlessness

Smyth and Moloney (2017) referred to "… a relentless and unforgiving negativity" (p. 408). For participants, hate was relentlessness, continuing in some cases past a child turning 18 years of age. The relentlessness was exhausting and debilitative, and where societal constraints existed, a lack of resolution reportedly increased the likelihood that hate persisted (Rempel & Sutherland, 2016). Social and legal restraints, such as court orders and processes, mediation agreements, and legislation, although primarily aimed at providing frameworks to support separating families, at the same time appeared to be inflammatory to hate within the sample.

Practical Implications

Currently for practitioners working with hate the sparse literature and limited screening tools make hate's identification difficult (McIntosh, 2011; Sternberg & Sternberg, 2008). In this context, for practitioners working with hate, or expressions of hate, they may make enquiries through direct questions around hate in the parental relationship. A parent may deny hating their ex-partner, but their actions may indicate otherwise. Questions that prompt self-reflection, or consideration of consequences, or the impact on children may help a parent to alter their behaviours, put their children's interests first, or simply be more tolerant of differences with their ex-partner. Indeed, as was observed in the current study and suggested by Smyth and Moloney (2017), if a parent is able to respond to questions "… in a manner that focuses on the children's welfare, the chances are that the hatred expressed can be contained for the children's sake." (p. 411).

Within the literature one type of conflict that consistently relates to negative outcomes for children involves the triangulation of children within co-parenting conflict (Buchanan et al., 1996). In identifying what maintains or escalates co-parenting conflict post separation practitioners might firstly, be more informed as to the exact nature of the conflict, and secondly, be more informed as to whether hate is able to be turned around for a parent or parents. Conversely, where hate might not be able to be turned around for a parent then other family members may benefit from needs orientated support. Where such a dynamic can be identified and support given, even if for one parent, then children will benefit from quality parent-child relationships (Smyth & Moloney, 2017).

Strengths of the Study

In hate, their remains more unknown that is known in a post separation context. The substantive theory conceptualised in the current study is neither predictive, nor generalisable.

However, a strength lay in its suggestion of an insight into a nuanced dynamic that might otherwise be missed.

Limitations and Future Research

As themes were generated through primarily separated mother responses the current study remains incomplete without dyadic analysis into the lived experience and awareness of the other parent. Clearly, dyadic analysis in a larger sample is also necessary before formal theories in the post separation can be developed. Another question that remains unanswered in the current sample is how many participants may have lacked self-reflection when it came to their part in fueling entrenched co-parenting conflict. Even though questioning revolved around being hated or being a perpetrator of hate reporting was primarily descriptive of the experience of being hated. This has implications within hate research in that self-report may be limited.

Conclusion

The current study had the value of demonstrating that feeling hated by the other parent maybe a part of the experience of separation for these mothers and fathers. Apart from the aim of the current study, it is anticipated that these findings might further the conversation, albeit a difficult one, around hate in a post separation context. Given the complexity and fluidity of post separation family relationships and dynamics, the tentative conceptualisation of hate and proposed substantive theory in the current study cannot account for all aspects of hate. In the current study it was observed that hate may potentially serve as a psychologically protective function for a parent post separation. Although these observations are exclusive to the sample, it is hoped that this nascent work may provide a preliminary substantive theory that may, through further investigation and examination, be integrated into extant hate theories.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a qualitative exploration of the complex phenomenon of hate within entrenched co-parenting conflict. Utilising the method of thematic analysis and the theoretical frameworks of grounded theory, Shand's (1920) hate work, and Sternberg's (2003) triangular theory of the structure of hate, the current study identified three themes that potentially contribute to understanding hate's genesis, growth, and stability. Firstly, an inability or unwillingness to self-reflect, secondly, inverse caring, and thirdly, relentlessness. Within grounded theory a conceptualisation of hate, being the circular theory of hate in co-parenting conflict was developed. This conceptual model theorised that hate may functionally serve as a self-protective mechanism that enables a parent to avoid experiencing their own emotions, avoid confronting or taking responsibility

for their own behaviour, or avoid facing their own lived experiences following separation. Reflective of Stage 2, disdain was evident within hate, when parents reported feeling they were unworthy or did not matter. The published article that originated from the current study can be retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15379418.2019.1568947. The next chapter will address Stage 4 - Australian Family Law System.

CHAPTER NINE

Stage 4 – Australian Family Law System

This chapter presents the findings of separated mother's experiences of entrenched co-parenting conflict and the Australian family law system. In Australia, the prevalence of family violence claims in post separation parenting matters has led to family violence to being described as the core business of the family court (Easteal et al., 2018). The 2015/2016 Family Violence Data Set reported that 76.12% of cases before the Federal Circuit Court of Australia involved allegations of family violence (Harmon, 2017). As these figures do not include cases before the Family Court, which comprises a Magellan List which is a pathway where more serious allegations of physical and sexual child abuse are determined, it is suggested that the problem might even be greater. Often separation is considered an individual problem, however the societal, legal, and political context in which families are formed and families are dissolved continues to significantly influence parental experiences. It is suggested that an overemphasis on the individual dimension of change, without appropriate attention being given to the social context, fails to adequately address issues that might exist.

Methodological Considerations

Thematic analysis is a method that is flexible in either reflecting reality or in digging deeper below the surface of reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, in Stage 4 it was anticipated that both fathers and mother's rich descriptions would enable a more detailed analysis of their experiences within the Australian family law system. Despite the overall constructionist paradigm for the current thesis, the low rate of father participation did not allow for a deeper analysis, and hence analysis remained at a semantic level. Therefore, Stage 4 instead sought to theorise as to separated mother's lived experiences within the structural conditions of the Australian family law system. The relevant questions and their theoretical basis are numbered (1) to (4), (10) to (12), and (18) to (22) in Appendix C.

Addressing Entrenched Co-Parenting Conflict Post Separation – Mother's Experiences from Australia

"Because the freight train never stops, it just gets railroaded from day one. You get a knife held to your throat one day, and the next day you have to hand your children to them" (Mother, 43 years)

Abstract

Ongoing tension with family law in Australia suggests that courts may be reluctant to prioritise the safety of children over a child's meaningful relationship with both parents following separation. The current Australian qualitative study explored separated mothers' (N = 36) lived experiences of the Australian family law system and entrenched co-parenting conflict. A thematic analysis that was guided by the theoretical framework of social conflict theory was conducted on the interviews of separated mothers. Results revealed that the experience of engaging with the Australian family law system caused considerable anxiety and distress for these separated mothers. Principal themes related to a gendered narrative, mother's concerns not been taken seriously, perceived inadequacies in knowledge or competence of experts and decision makers in relation to family violence, and coercion from some professionals within the family law system. The primary limitation of the current study was the absence of father's lived experiences.

Introduction

The primary focus of the study was on entrenched co-parenting conflict and separated mothers' experiences within the Australian family law system. Contemporary research suggests that where the dynamic of family violence is overlooked, separated mothers and their children might experience further trauma (Bancroft et al., 2012; Chessler, 2011; Ferguson, Wright, Death, Burgess & Malouf, 2018; Roberts, Chamberlain & Delfabbro, 2015). A definition and brief discussion of family violence within the current thesis was provided in Chapter 1.

Ongoing Tension Within the Australian Family Law System

As discussed in Chapter 2, within Australia there exists ongoing tension between the prioritisation of parental involvement, over concerns that children might be exposed to further abuse or violence. (Keogh et al., 2018; Smyth et al., 2018). Alexander (2015) reported that although family violence is front and centre of the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) (Austl.) courts at times remained reluctant to prioritise the safety of children over a child's meaningful relationship with both parents. Alexander (2015) highlighted underlying inconsistencies in judicial approaches when family violence was present and suggested that the effects of family violence were not yet fully understood within the judiciary.

In their review of 60 judgments Easteal and Grey (2013) found that judicial officers minimised children's exposure to family violence. Meir and Dickson (2017) noted the mismatch between the complexity of cases proceeding through formal court processes and the Australian Governments' policy emphasis on shared parenting in Australia. Ongoing tensions are not unique to

Australia. Similar tensions are evident in Canadian child custody legislation and public policy statements encouraging meaningful contact with both parents (Archer-Kuhn, 2018). It is suggested that ongoing policy and legislative tension may contribute to the minimisation of family violence, placing already vulnerable mothers and children at heightened risk.

Jurisdictional Landscape Within the Australian Family Law System

Within the Australian family law system matters dealing with separation, divorce, and related issues primarily lay with the Federal system. Matters dealing with child protection and family violence primarily lay with the state and territory systems. As an example, within the State of Queensland the interface procedure between Queensland's state system and the Federal system provides that:

> The department has the statutory authority to investigate allegations that a child has been harmed or is at risk of harm, assess a child's need for protection or take other actions considered appropriate. The family courts do not have the expertise, role or resources to perform this function. Whether or not there are proceedings in a family court, the department has the lead responsibility to ensure the child's safety and need for protection. A child of separated parents has the same right to protection and to receive services from the department as any other child (Department of Child Safety, Youth, & Women, 2018, n.p.).

Historically in Australia this division of power has been of concern. Higgins and Kaspiew (2008) recommended that reconsideration of the gap be referred to the Australian Law Reform Commission. In 2010 the release of the Australian Law Reform Commission's Family Violence: A National Legal Response revolved around this jurisdictional gap and strategies to address victims of family violence falling into gaps between the systems. In 2017 the House of Representative's report, A Better Family Law System to Support and Protect those Affected by Family Violence stated at Recommendation 10 there be collaboration between family law and state and territory courts. In 2019 the Australian Law Reform Commission final report into the family law system, Family Law for the Future, stated at Recommendation 4 there be a closing of the jurisdictional gap. In Australia following separation, multiple jurisdictional gaps, duplications, or divisions of power potentially place already vulnerable mothers and children at further risk.

Other Potential Gaps Within the Australian Family Law System

Despite progress being made in Australian family law policy and legislation, gaps have emerged within contemporary research. Some gaps are associated with understanding and dealing with family violence in the context of family report writers, independent children's lawyers, and

vexatious litigants.

Family Report Writers

As is the case internationally, within Australia social workers and psychologists are increasingly called upon to provide family reports in child custody disputes (Patel & Choate, 2014). The information in family reports are often foundational to court orders that shape the lives of families. There are a high number of complaints (39% of cases) made against psychologists who practice in this area in Australia. This figure mirrors trends internationally. (Ackerman & Pritzl, 2011; Grenyer & Lewis, 2012). O'Neill, Bussey, Lennings, and Seidler (2018) in their survey of legal professionals and their overall satisfaction with family reports, found discrepancies between what legal professionals considered important and the information provided in family reports. O'Neill et al. (2018) suggested that due to deficits in knowledge and expertise where there were allegations of family violence or child sexual abuse "… psychologists are not delivering the reports that lawyers want, judges need, and families deserve …" (p. 75).

Independent Children's Lawyers

An integral part of the Australian family law system are independent children's lawyers who are appointed to represent the best interests of the young person or child. Kaspiew et al. (2014) found that some aspects of these professionals' practice did not meet the expectations of judicial officers, parents, young people, or children. Decisions about young people and children were found to be generally carried out with little or no direct contact with parents, young people, or children. This lack of communication emerged "… as giving rise to unmet expectations, disappointment, and distress" (p. 46). Kaspiew et al. (2014) identified shortcomings in training, continuing professional development, and accreditation, particularly when working with families characterised by concerns relating to child abuse or family violence.

Vexatious Litigation

One of the high-risk factors set out in the Australian National Risk Assessment Principles for Domestic and Family Violence was court orders or parenting proceedings, which perpetrators of family violence use as a way of exercising control over the other parent (ANROWS, 2018). Some litigants abuse their right to seek redress though the court system by repeatedly bringing vexatious litigation against the same person. The family court has the highest rate of vexatious litigation compared to all other Australian jurisdictions combined. Fitch and Easteal (2017) explored behaviours within vexatious litigation and found these behaviours to be like behaviours in family violence. In summary, within the literature specialised family violence expertise, ongoing

professional development, and communication are areas within Australian family law where a need for improvement has been flagged.

Method

Participants

The sample (N = 36) comprised English speaking female separated parents. Female separated parents were aged between 34 and 71 years (M = 46.22, SD = 8.25). Participants had a total of 77 children between them, all of whom were aged under 18 years at the time of separation. The sample included same-sex (n = 1) and other-sex (n = 35) relationships.

Procedure

Throughout the data collection phase, it became evident from separated parents who participated in the study, that there would be a low number of participant fathers. Hence the findings are primarily derived from separated mother's lived experiences. Given the low number of father participants, and the exploratory nature of Study 2 it is argued that the separated mother's experiences remain meaningful despite the absence of father reporting.

Results

In the current study separated mothers experienced the Australian family law system as unsupportive and inadequate when dealing with family violence and conflict. These inadequacies reportedly gave rise to trauma which remained unacknowledged within the family law system. In the aftermath mothers were left feeling isolated, traumatised, and disenfranchised. The next part outlines five themes which were identified in mother's reporting with further explication of the central meaning of each.

A Gendered Narrative

The dominant discourse described by mothers accommodated a gendered narrative experienced as subjugating consideration of family violence on a case by case basis. The gendered narrative experienced was described by mothers who were referred to as "alienating" or "vindictive bitches". "Your kind of just get pigeonholed into, look she is trying to alienate the parent. Yeah, not an individual case. They should not just go 'oh same again, blah blah blah, write it off'" (Mother, 41 years). "The legal men were pigeonholing me and relying on these categories to play the system" (Mother, 46 years).

> I can't tell you how many times I have been called a vindictive bitch … I have been called that by police, by child protection, by magistrates, by people in the public. They seem to have

> this point of view, and it is fixed, and they can't actually take each case on as an individual case (Mother, 44 years).

Within these narratives the concerns of mothers remained largely unheard and mothers felt misunderstood. However, gendered narratives were not the only barrier described within mother's experiences.

Grounded in Disbelief

Most mothers experienced a family law system within which their concerns, primarily around family violence, were not taken seriously. "Absolutely, they tell us 'get out of domestic violence relationships, get your kids out.' Then they give the kids back to the abuser" (Mother, 41 years). "Well everyone says leave, you have to get out, we will help you, leave, you have to get out we will help you, and then there is nothing, you know, silence ..." (Mother, 44 years). "Because the freight train never stops, it just gets railroaded from day one. You get a knife held to your throat one day, and the next day you have to hand your children to them" (Mother, 43 years).

> So, from the initial complaint to children's services, they didn't even interview her until it was more than a year. If it had of being a stranger, or a guy at the garage my child would have been looked at straight away. Yep it wouldn't have been a problem, and he would've been charged. He has got away with it (Mother, 42 years).

In this focus separated mothers described the disconnect between Federal and state jurisdictions. Because they were now separated, mothers were challenged in finding a pathway within which they could seek or continue to seek support. "And that big conflict between state and Federal, and you get Federal orders and the state says you are on your own" (Mother, 44 years).

> And once you have the Federal orders, as I know now, you've got nothing, you've got no state services, no police, no child protection, nothing because the Federal overrides the state. Once that is in place you are stuffed. It is so tragic, it is so bad (Mother, 44 years).

"'Oh, it is in family court – we don't intervene in family court'. That is the story you get every single time, even if it is their job" (Mother, 53 years). Here mothers experienced insensitive treatment within the family law system. They felt powerless, isolated, and believed their children were at risk of falling through jurisdictional gaps. Where mothers did report concerns for their own or their children's safety, they were either, not believed, or experienced lip service of their concerns without appropriate investigation. "Police … said it was such a nasty family law case, he was such a nice bloke, he would never have done anything like that" (Mother, 57 years). "I documented this for years, so I had such detailed notes, and no one cares. There is no authority that actually gives a hoot

about family violence and I have got it so well documented" (Mother, 44 years). "I went to (*name of child protection service*) as soon as I was in the refuge. As soon as I said he has filed with Family Court, they dropped us, they dropped us. It's disgusting" (Mother, 44 years).

> And I have found with the intervention orders, I have had the police call and say just ignore that and just give him what he wants … I think no one, from how I felt, no one wants to call these people out for what they are or make a stance (Mother, 39 years).

"Every time I tried to help myself and my children there was a brick wall, every single time" (Mother, 44 years). Vulnerable mothers felt helpless, potentially until a time as their worst fears might be realised. Furthermore, the messages mothers received from some organisations were contradictory, leaving them incapable of either acting, or seeking support to act:

> Because children's services said if I allowed, if I had knowledge of him doing something inappropriate and then I allow him to see her then they would remove her from me because I am not being a protective parent. But then they said, "don't break the court orders" (Mother, 42 years).

An additional layer of complexity existed when the other parent was or had been employed within the family law system. Some mothers believed that, due to the position held by the other parent within the family law system, there was a reluctance or unwillingness to investigate one of their own. For one mother whose ex-partner was in the police force:

> He is untouchable and because he is in a position of power where do I sit? I am right down here low so there is no-where to go … you just wouldn't do it because you have no-where to go and no one believes anything you say (Mother, 46 years).

Concerns as to the Expertise of Professionals or Decision-Makers

Strikingly consistent across cases, mother's experiences with professionals such as child protection workers, family report writers, judges, police, and independent children's lawyers were disappointing, concerning, and predominantly focused on a lack of knowledge around family violence. "They have to do something about that, or not have court with family separation. It's not right. Something about the court I wish was more supportive and caring and more could see the complexities" (Mother, 50 years). "I am frustrated at the bloody system … I am frustrated and annoyed that a single expert who is earning thousands of dollars, but no basic understanding about domestic violence" (Mother, 43 years).

> Why doesn't the family court judge have somebody with an understanding of how we get to

> the point where you don't want to be in the same room as somebody, you don't want to talk to them, you don't want to email, you don't want to text, you literally just want to evaporate (Mother, 43 years).

> You can't tell anything about the makeup of a complex family situation from one afternoon or one day, absolutely none. Both report writers were very adversarial. Both were really ferocious, and I wondered about what the hell kind of people are these (Mother, 46 years).

> Family Court, it perpetuates it, it perpetuates it because they are not trained. Particularly child protection, they are not even tertiary qualified people who meet with you and make appalling accusations to your face and they are not even qualified to make these opinions (Mother, 47 years).

Bordering their experiences and creating further tension was perceived incompetence from some professionals:

> The level of incompetence I have experienced at every turn has been unbelievable. From the police, to the (*name of child protection agency*), to the independent children's lawyer, to the independent expert witness. Everybody, absolutely everyone that has come across my child's file has gone, 'another one exactly the same, don't even bother to read, don't even bother to discuss things'. There is no communication. It is just appalling (Mother, 41 years).

"They are very careless about domestic violence or about this kind of abuse, and they minimise the impact that it has on your life or your children's life, and they think there is no impact, but there is" (Mother, 44 years). By ignoring family violence, the family law system appeared to condone this behavior. By taking no action, it could continue. At times, countenance towards family violence created dissonance and disappointment within mothers' experiences as their attempts to raise concerns were dismissed. "I think that they pay a lot of lip service to understanding domestic violence. You go in naively thinking that professionals are trained … but it just couldn't be further from the truth in my opinion" (Mother, 36 years). "The legal system does not accept psychological abuse yet" (Mother, 46 years). "I now call the family court system the family court of abuse …at the grassroots level I can sit here today and say nothing has changed. It's all talk, everybody talks the talk, nobody walks the walk. They don't get family violence" (Mother, 45 years). "I had a false belief that once I told them what was happening that they would protect us. Not true" (Mother, 43 years).

Coercion from Professionals Within the Family Law System

Mothers, often under considerable time pressure, were threatened or warned, that if they did

raise concerns about the other parent, that they would lose care of their child. “Now it is, don’t raise child abuse or you will lose your kids” (Mother, 44 years). “But (*lawyer*) would not put any of the abuse before the courts. She told me if I did, I would lose the kids. So, none of it was ever heard. I was railroaded into consent orders” (Mother, 44 years).

> Quite happy to say “… great a high conflict has consented out.” It’s what they force you to do. They force you to do it saying you will lose your kids if you don’t sign here. So, they didn’t give you any choices and no one looked at what was happening here (Mother, 44 years).

> … (*the lawyer*) said don’t tell anyone (*about sexual abuse of child*), you will ruin your case, I’m telling you now you will ruin your case. Just let the kids keep going to him and don’t say anything at all … if you say anything you haven’t got a case anymore … she’s 11 she’ll handle it, an 11 year old girl can handle that kind of thing, don’t worry about it (Mother, 57 years).

Some family law professionals were reportedly coercive towards mothers in order to gain compliance. In these critical moments of decision, the family law system was experienced as threatening and sinister. Experiencing heightened anxiety and fear, mothers struggled to process what was happening, with the family law system’s procedural focus on achieving an outcome, perceived as taking priority over the time and expertise necessary to investigate family violence on a case by case basis.

Discussion

There were four themes identified in the current study each of which will be discussed in turn. First, there was a gendered background to mothers’ experiences. Second, mothers reported not being believed when they raised concerns around family violence. Third, there were deep concerns around the expertise of professionals. Fourth, coercion by legal professionals appeared common. The tentative findings of the current study illuminate the significance of family violence in parenting disputes at an institutional level in Australia. Social conflict theory speaks to the family law systems’ potential role in the countenance and continuation of family violence (Ihinger-Tallman et al., 1993). In the sample family violence was reportedly condoned by the family law system where mothers were burdened by inequalities that originated from the relationship breakdown including power, finances, and limited access to resources or support.

A Gendered Narrative

A gendered narrative was evident in the current study with mothers being referred to as

"alienating" or "vindictive". Such stereotyping is not a new issue (Rhoades, 2002). In contemporary literature Easteal et al. (2018) found that entrenched views on gender roles, mistaken beliefs around family violence, and personal prejudice, continued to impact post separation judicial decision-making. In the current study mother's experiences appeared to run parallel to some public discourse and commentaries. In using convenient stereotypes, family violence may therefore have been obscured. Although a gendered narrative may pave the way to an easy outcome, it is unlikely to assist in addressing the complex needs of these mothers and their children.

Grounded in Disbelief

Kaspiew et al. (2015) found that mothers reported greater proportions of emotional abuse than fathers before, during, and after separation. A similar proportion of parents reported their children hearing or seeing family violence. Mirroring Treloar's (2018) findings, mothers did not feel their voices were heard within the family law system. Following on from a stereotypical narrative, what further negated and overrode separated mother's access to and support from key family law services appeared to be a focus on them being separated mothers entrenched in conflict. In this context, their motives for raising concerns became the focal point, rather than the potential risk of continuing harm to themselves or their children. Mothers in the current study spoke of their need to be heard through their own language by decision-makers who had the expertise to investigate or act. Research suggests that traumatised victims often speak with indirect, self-effacing, hesitant language which can be problematic when reporting or speaking out about family violence (Easteal, 2010; Easteal et al., 2018). Without professional training on how traumatised victims speak out, a victim of family violence's manner of communication may at times be misconstrued. It is unclear to what extent, if any, this might have impacted the lack of response from family law services in the current study.

In not believing mothers experiencing family violence, victims are further silenced. Not only silenced, but as reported by Laing (2017) they may potentially experience secondary victimisation, wherein additional harm is experienced as the responses received from formal or informal supports are inappropriate. Of the 22 female participants in Laing's (2017) study, 63% experienced secondary victimisation within the Australian family law system. They described struggling to be heard about the abuse they had experienced, feeling dismissed, disbelieved, or blamed. Roberts et al. (2015) reported similar responses which they labelled as "invalidation" wherein mother's reporting in the courts were not taken seriously.

Taken from another perspective, the available research on the extent of false allegations post

separation is limited. An Australian study by Brown (2003) explored allegations of family violence within 100 families and found 52% of serious allegations were substantiated. Johnston, Lee, Olesen, and Walters (2005) in their study of 120 divorced families similarly concluded that one half of all concerns about family violence, child abuse, and child neglect were substantiated.

Multiple Jurisdictions

Complex issues were compounded by the potential gaps and duplications within multiple jurisdictions. Although it is unrealistic to expect legislation to be an instrument of social transformation, laws that lacked effective action compounded issues for these mothers. An uneven approach to post separation family violence, and an apparent disconnect between federal and state systems created further obstacles for parents. Despite there being legislation in place for sharing and reporting on family violence, there appeared to be either an absence of, or limited investigation into allegations. Mothers in the current study shared concerns that echo findings from fifteen years ago:

> Often when a child protection authority is aware that matters are proceeding in the Family Court they will decide not to investigate, leaving the question to that court to decide on the issues. However, the Family Court is not resourced to investigate such matters. The children involved then fall through the jurisdictional gaps (Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, 2003, p. 71).

An important point was made by Rodgers et al. (2004). Although the point was made in the context of parents' mental health and the Australian family law system, it is pertinent. "It is not safe to assume that such problems will necessarily be dealt with elsewhere in the system. They may not." (p. 61). Mothers in the current study reported how state services, such as child protection, would no longer support them once they were or had been in the Family Court. For these mothers, jurisdictional gaps and dismissal of their concerns left them feeling powerless, potentially placing already vulnerable children at further risk.

Concerns as to Expertise of Professionals and Decision-Makers

The *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth), s. 67ZBB (Austl.) requires the court to take prompt action in relation to allegations of child abuse or family violence. Regardless of whether a mother had custody or care of their child or not, separated mothers were deeply concerned as to the low level of expertise that professionals and decision- makers had around family violence. The literature review in the current study provided evidence of deficits in family violence expertise within the Australian family law system and similar deficits were described in the current study (Alexander, 2015; O'Neill et al., 2018; Kaspiew et al., 2014). Laing (2017) noted a source of distress in her sample as being an

apparent ignorance about the effects of family violence within family law professionals. James and Ross (2016) surveyed 119 lawyers and conducted subsequent interviews with 32 lawyers. The lawyers believed that more formal training in risk assessment for family violence would be helpful, with some lawyers indicating that they needed a better understanding of best practice in family violence. A minority of the lawyers in James and Ross (2016) study believed that women make false allegations as a playing card in child custody disputes, and that family violence received too much attention.

Roberts et al. (2015) similarly reported on mothers' experiences with lawyers and magistrates who expressed surprise that a mother could be reluctant to be in the other parents' presence, or that the mother could be fearful of the other parent. Mothers considered this low level of understanding to be evidence of these professionals' lack of expertise in the area of family violence. Where parents relied on lawyers and courts for making parenting arrangements against a background of family violence or safety concerns, they were, on average, just as likely to indicate they did not consider that responses to their concerns were adequate, especially in relation to safety concerns, after the reforms. (Kaspiew et al. 2015). Such reporting points to a need in the broader professional family law community for ongoing professional development focused on family violence.

Coercion from Professionals Within the Australian Family Law System

Overall, mother's experiences in the current study mirrored Meir and Dickson (2017) reporting that family courts were hostile venues for mothers who raised concerns. The current study echoed Kaspiew et al. (2015) in their evaluation of the 2012 family violence amendments to the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) (Austl.) who reported parents "… were on average, just as likely to indicate they did not consider the professional responses to their concerns were adequate, especially in relation to safety concerns, after the reform." (p. xx). Archer-Kuhn (2018) described coercive control as being enacted by professionals who demanded compliance from a parent, framed as necessary for the best interests of the child. Laing's (2017) female participants reported receiving warnings from several sources, including lawyers, not to raise allegations of family violence. Similarly, warnings, intertwined with both threats that they would be perceived as an alienating parent, and fear that they might lose care of their child, caused heightened anxiety for mothers.

Practical Implications

It is vital that family violence is not relegated to secondary importance within family law reform in Australia. As with any individuals who experience difficult times, or who are challenged by complex social issues, these separated mothers reported needing understanding and long-term

support. A continuum of long-term service responses that addressed safety, accountability, early intervention, and healing are critical. An adversarial state of mind is very different to a therapeutic state of mind, and rather than being injuncted or otherwise prevented by statutory services and orders, consideration needs to be given to these mothers being supported in accessing needs-orientated and effective therapeutic interventions.

Strengths of the Study

The voices of these separated mothers support the existing recommendations for collaborative, quality, and independently derived information in post separation situations involving family violence, and the importance that assessments and frameworks continue to be developed that are founded on evidence-based risk factors.

Limitations and Future Research

Due to their experiences separated mothers in the current study held strong views about the Australian family law system. Participation did provide these mothers with an opportunity to share their experiences in a manner which was validating, empowering, and accepting of truthfulness. Mothers shared that change was needed and that they hoped their experiences might contribute to change. It is acknowledged that there was no independent corroboration of their situations, nor input from other decision makers in their cases. Clearly the low participation rate of fathers was a limitation. Given the longevity of entrenched co-parenting conflict it is suggested that longitudinal research is needed that includes the experiences of fathers, family law professionals, and decision-makers in order to add understanding to the similarities and differences of experiences between separated parents, decision-makers, and experts.

Conclusion

Some may find these mothers' experiences confronting. Insofar as that may be the case, it is hoped that their voices, rather than verifying earlier conclusions, will widen the lens on societal issues that shape their lives and behaviours post separation. In situating mothers' voices within broader social tensions, the current study sought to illuminate the complexity of their experiences and encourage a more considered discourse around family violence and entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided the findings from a qualitative exploration of separated mothers' experiences within the Australian family law system. Utilising the method of thematic analysis and

the theory of social conflict (Ihinger-Tallman et al., 1993) results revealed that the experience of engaging with the Australian family law system caused considerable anxiety and distress for these separated mothers. Principal themes related to a gendered narrative, mother's concerns not been taken seriously, perceived inadequacies in knowledge or competence of experts and decision makers in relation to family violence, and coercion from some professionals within the family law system. From interactions with broader statutory services, to professionals within the Family Court, mother's descriptions were seated in disempowerment and disbelief.

As suggested in Stage 1, that legal professionals potentially escalated high conflict, separated mother's descriptions similarly reflected their influence, particularly in relation to coercion by family law professionals. Stage 2 found that cognitive dissonance and anxiety potentially originated from long term involvement with the Australian family law system. Here in Stage 4 mother's explicit descriptions now provided specific examples for context of dissonance and anxiety. Their descriptions provided an aerial view of the issues which remain unaddressed, for example, the division of powers and potential legislative gaps. The published article that originated from the current study can be retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15379418.2019.1583151. The next chapter will discuss Stage 5 – Systemic Erasure and the Aftermath.

CHAPTER TEN

Stage 5 – Systemic Erasure and the Aftermath

Jaffe et al. (2003) poignantly stated "… separation is not a vaccination against domestic violence" (p. 29). Following separation from a violent or controlling relationship it is vital that women and children are supported, as ongoing child contact arguably provides opportunities for perpetrators of family violence to continue to harass, abuse, and control mothers and children (Hester, 2011; Holland et al., 2018). A risk factor set out in the Australian National Risk Assessment Principles for Domestic and Family Violence is court orders or parenting proceedings, which perpetrators of family violence may use as a way of exercising control over the other parent (Tiovonen & Backhouse, 2018).

Methodological Considerations

The methodological considerations in Stage 5 mirrored those in Stage 4. As in Stage 4 it was initially anticipated that both fathers and mother's rich descriptions would enable a more detailed analysis. Throughout the data collection phase, it became evident that there would be a low number of participant fathers. Hence the findings are primarily derived from separated mother's experiences. Given the limited research in this area, despite the low number of father participants and the exploratory nature of Study 2, it is suggested that these separated mother's experiences remain meaningful. The current study selectively reported on the findings in relation to mother's careers and finances, mother's health, mother's interpersonal relationships, and mother's mothering. The questions relevant to Stage 5 are numbered (1) to (4), (10) to (13), and (18) to (22) in Appendix C.

Systemic Erasure Within the Family Law System - Preliminary Thoughts from Separated Mothers in Australia

"It is just soul rape. It is not a normal breakup and if someone tells you to just get over it, it is like you are being abused all over again" (Mother, 51)

Abstract

Despite an increasing awareness in Australia of the prevalence and pervasiveness of violence towards women and children, it is suggested in the literature that the dynamic of family violence is overlooked within the family law system. The current qualitative study explored mothers' (N = 36) experiences within entrenched co-parenting conflict and the aftermath within the Australian family law system. A thematic analysis was guided by the contextual framework of the three-planet model. Results revealed that mothers experienced secondary victimisation in their interactions with the

Australian family law system. In the aftermath mothers described significant losses in careers, finances, health, personal relationships, and mothering. Second-hand reporting of the impacts on their children is included. A limitation of the current study is the second-hand reporting on the impact on children.

Introduction

After leaving a violent, abusive, or controlling relationship mothers and children often need long term support (Holland, Brown, Hall & Logan, 2018). Anderson and Saunders (2007) longitudinal study on the psychological recovery of women who leave abusive relationships reported that a women's need for intervention and protection does not usually end, but in fact increased, after separation. As Jaffe, Lemon, and Poisson (2003) poignantly state "… separation is not a vaccination against domestic violence…" (p. 29). With family violence services generally focused on the intervention, assessment, and crisis stages, a gap exists in support for mothers and their children in the years following separation, where court ordered contact arguably provides protracted opportunities for perpetrators of family violence to harass, abuse, and control their ex-partner or children (Humphreys, Thiara, & Skamballis, 2011; Tiovonen & Backhouse, 2018). In Australia, the prevalence of family violence claims in post separation parenting matters have led to family violence being described as the core business of the family court (Easteal, Young, & Carline, 2018). Within the literature there is limited research on the experiences of separated mother's experiences in the aftermath of post separation family violence, and protracted involvement in the Australian family law system (Ragavan et al., 2017). Within the situational context of separated mothers who experience entrenched co-parenting conflict, there is little research on the long-term impact on their health, finances, mothering, and wellbeing. The current study sought to address this gap with an initial qualitative exploration of mother's experiences.

Theoretical Framework

The current study was situated within the contextual framework of the three-planet model (TPM) developed by Hester (2011). The TPM sought to explain and understand the systemic problems that potentially undermine the effectiveness of different professionals in their practice. Broadly, the model refers to three separate planets. Firstly, the "domestic violence planet" (DVP), secondly, the "child protection planet" (CPP), and thirdly, the "child contact planet" (CCP).

On DVP the focus is on the adult and the key issue is primarily a male perpetrator of violence's impact on a female survivor. On CPP the focus is on the child and what is in their best interests. Research evidences that some mothers experience CPP as punitive. This might be in the

context of a failure to identify gendered inequalities or coercively controlling behaviours, which arguably lead to an invisibility around the behaviours of perpetrators (Humphreys & Thiara, 2002; Lapierre, 2010). In conjunction with a focus on the protection of the child, researchers suggest that advocacy and safety planning for female survivors need to be better supported on CPP (Stanley, 2011).

On CCP the legislative ethos is primarily focused on the risk of violence post separation in an approach that is "… future-focused…" (Hester, 2011, p. 846). Family violence arguably remains largely irrelevant to post separation arrangements on CCP. Trinder et al. (2010) reported that when mothers raised family violence that the issue would disappear, in that it would be either be rejected, reframed, or ignored by family court professionals. Hester (2011) suggested that the primary concern on CCP is getting women to overcome their fears of ongoing family violence, with the perpetrator of family violence perceived as being a "… good enough father…" (p. 849). Herein lay the paradox on CCP, the approach that "… families should continue to be families …" (p. 849) post separation, with mothers left to allow contact and manage conflict and violence on their own. Although mother's experiences do not exist in a vacuum that excludes life on DVP and CPP, the current study primarily focused on mother's post separation experiences within the orbit of CCP.

"Systems" or "systemic" in the current study include in the Australian context, statutory, and other related organisations. Not the least being the Family Court of Australia, the Family Court of Western Australia, and Federal Circuit Court of Australia. Also, government and non-government mediation and family relationship services, state child protection services, non-government community organisations, state police services, the child support agency, and government and non-government child contact centres. It was anticipated that the findings from the current study would be reflective of an issue of relevance in Australia, and arguably more broadly, being that the continued presence of entrenched co-parenting conflict post separation compromises recovery from family violence in two contexts. Firstly, through the systemic erasure of family violence within the family law system, and secondly, due to mother's inability to leave the orbit of CCP.

Method

Participants

The sample (N = 36) comprised English speaking, female, separated mothers, aged between 34 and 71 years (M = 46.22, SD = 8.25). Separation involved family violence that had continued past two years post separation and was primarily focused on difficulties involving the custody and care of a child or children. Participants had a total of 77 children between them, all of whom were

aged under 18 years at the time of separation. The sample included same-sex (n = 1) and other-sex (n = 35) relationships. All other demographic information is set out in Chapter 2.

Results

In the aftermath of their experiences of the Australian family law system, mothers described losses and trauma that impacted their careers, finances, health, personal relationships, and mothering.

Mothers' Careers and Finances – I Have Absolutely Nothing Now

Mothers reported that economic opportunities were not able to be taken advantage of, and within the context of ongoing litigation reported existing financial means as being slowly depleted:

> I haven't managed to go back to studying which is what I really wanted to do. Yeah, I haven't been able to. Like I lost my career. I was actually a *(name of profession)* and I had my own business. I can't trade anymore or anything like that, so I lost my big income (Mother 54).

Some mothers believed that they would not be able to recover financially. "Openly he tells his best friend, it is to bankrupt me" (Mother 54). "He was sucking me dry financially, he destroyed my credit, destroyed my ability to work…" (Mother 26). "I actually had two homes and two businesses when I met him. I have absolutely nothing now, not a thing. He destroys everything" (Mother 48). "So, it was a whitewash and I paid $500,000 in legal fees to be abused further" (Mother 33).

Mothers reported that the financial strain impacted not only them but extended out to other family members who sold assets or homes to pay for ongoing litigation. One mother, who had cancer, shared:

> And there was a hearing date set for a day when I was on a drip with chemo, where I had five days in a row of eight hours on a drip, and they wanted me to go to this hearing … and they said if she doesn't turn up then he will get an undefended hearing … I couldn't represent myself and borrowed $20,000.00 from a friend to find a lawyer for this hearing, and since then my mum has had to sell her house and spend over $200,000 on these various hearings (Mother, 36).

For this mother, who experienced significant health issues, financial stress was exacerbated by ongoing involvement in the family law system, not only for her, but for her extended family.

Mothers' Health – It's too Long to Live Under Stress and Trauma

Mothers reported being burdened, not only by a heavy toll on their current health, but by grave concerns for their future health.

Emotional Wellbeing

Multiple mothers reported having to facilitate access that impacted their emotional wellbeing. One mother reported that she was ordered by the court to supervise visits between an abusive ex-partner and their three-year-old child. She shared "… and a few months earlier he was trying to kill us and smash toys into us and now I am at a waterpark watching him, just not being emotionally able to cope with him" (Mother 25).

Mothers reported long term depression and anxiety. "My nerves were getting so messed up because I just constantly. At that point I had been living on eggshells for four years." (Mother 42). "I feel I have lost who I was … my memory is completely shot." (Mother 53). Recovery on an emotional and psychological level reportedly took many years "… the biggest thing I had to do was to get him out of my head. To get him OUT! Fifteen, sixteen years to get the whole thing out of my head" (Mother 34). Two mothers reported contemplating suicide. One shared that after years of entrenched co-parenting conflict within court ordered shared parenting:

> … it got to such a point that I was unwell, and I had to walk away, but if I didn't, I would have been in the hospital, or I would have been dead. No doubt about it, it certainly crosses your mind because there is no-where to go, there is literally no-where to go, and it doesn't stop (Mother 47).

Physical Wellbeing

Beyond the emotional and psychological challenges, mothers described the erosion of their physical health. "It's torturous. I think I attended family law court nine times throughout our whole process and every time was hugely taxing on my health, on my energy, and just took a lot from me." (Mother 38). One mother reported being initially unaware that she had cancer until she went into renal failure:

> I don't think it is normal when you live for eight years being threatened that your child is going to be removed from you … it's too long to live under stress and trauma. I didn't even know I was sick with cancer … and everyone threatening to remove her from me for so long, that I didn't even know that I was nearly dead. (Mother 36).

Some mothers believed that the serious health consequences they experienced were associated with the stress and trauma of long-term involvement in the family law system and family violence. Other health issues described by mothers included chronic fatigue, adrenal fatigue, high blood pressure, or complex post-traumatic stress disorder:

> And for me, mine was a newborn at the time … real people can't go eighteen years in this kind of violence and conflict. It is absolutely draining and ruined my health, absolutely ruined my health, and it has probably taken twenty to thirty years off my life dealing with someone who I should never have to deal with (Mother 53).

Although the current study makes no statement of causation, the mothers in the sample were adamant in their reporting that ongoing involvement in the family law system and continued involvement with a perpetrator of family violence had impacted their current and future health.

Mother's Interpersonal Relationships – Constantly Treading Water

In the years following separation mothers reported a ripple effect across intimate relationships, friendships, and family relationships. Isolation was reported within the sample. This was primarily attributed to the longevity of ongoing or threatened court proceedings. "I feel really disempowered. I had no one to turn to. I still have no one to turn to … no one cared … they just don't understand that you just don't get over these things and it hasn't even ended" (Mother 44). Mothers in the sample reported reaching out for understanding, connection, or support, however finding little "… at the same time when you reach out there is no support and there is nowhere to turn to, or to fumble your way through the court system, there is no real support with that" (Mother 46).

Mother's Mothering – A Mode of Protecting Rather than Parenting Children

Mothering, being a mother's capacity to nurture and care for a child, was reportedly impeded in two contexts. Firstly, mothering, where safety concerns were not believed or addressed. Secondly, within protracted involvement in the family law system. Where safety concerns were not addressed mothers in the sample reported experiencing fear and overwhelm. "So instead of being able to truly bond and build that maternal relationship with my girl, I constantly felt fearful" (Mother 21). Enforced ongoing contact reportedly rendered family violence irrelevant. For one mother, "… if I could take it all back, I would've stayed, and I would have let him kill me rather than go through this. At least I wouldn't have had to watch my children get tortured" (Mother 54). Conflicting and acute feelings of dissonance were observed around mother's beliefs of mothering and motherhood. "So, as a mother your natural instinct is to care and protect through this situation separating. I have really had to work at not caring about my kids sometimes, and that just goes against every grain of my maternal instinct" (Mother 29).

Within the sample, protracted involvement in the family law system found mothers reportedly withdrawing from, or struggling to be emotionally present, for their children. "It means I

am not able to be present … so it is very hard to compartmentalise the emotions and get on with your parenting" (Mother 23). "Oh, I am not half the parent to my kids that I should be. My time is monopolised by him and his ongoing abuse" (Mother 42). "I notice I do it when there is a lot of stress for court, or I am being hammered for documents, I notice that I simply don't have the time as a mum to invest in him" (Mother 25).

Two mothers reported injunctions being put in place by the court. These injunctions prevented mothers from talking to their child, or from allowing their child to talk to them, about the child's experiences of abuse. Here mothers were ordered to discontinue any conversation that their child instigated in relation to their experiences:

> And now this injunction is in place saying I can't start or continue discussions with my son about the allegations ... like I can't help him anymore … so I am at a loss… because you have injuncted me from finding out and actually helping my child (Mother 26).

During court proceedings mothers reported that their "… parenting got pulled to pieces" (Mother 39) and court orders were used by the other parent to undermine them. "He is constantly telling the kids that he has the papers that prove he is the best parent" (Mother 37). One mother felt shamed for her parenting choices, in this case homeschooling, and was eventually ordered by the Family Court to place her four children into the state schooling system. "It was just very painful and very shaming. And I felt like I was just being shamed for the type of woman that I am, and the type of mother that I am." (Mother 38). Feeling stuck between a rock and a hard place, mothers reported feeling powerless to protect their children, nor to influence any meaningful change in either their own, or their children's lives.

After experiencing significant losses in careers, finances, health, relationships, one mother stated that what was needed to fix the situation was a "… fucking unicorn …" (Mother 51). This mother believed from her experiences that family violence and the Australian family law system were so mismatched that what was needed to fix it did not actually exist. Another mother commented "… effectively, you need a system that understands family violence, takes it seriously, and actively identifies the perpetrator, and deals with the perpetrator" (Mother 42). Her statement highlighted the need, within the context of the three planets model, not so much for an integration of each planet's culture and focus, but of the necessity for co-operation, in that each planet might look to the other in order to draw on each one's expertise, knowledge, and practices to ensure the safety of mothers and children following separation.

Consequences for Children – A Long Dark Shadow Cast

Within the current study their emerged mother's second-hand reporting of child outcomes. Apart from question (16) in Appendix C which was asked in the context of Stage 3 – Hate, no questions were asked about children, and yet mothers had much to say. All mothers described children who were struggling. A mother of four children reported "… but the damage is done, and all of the children have severe depression, anxiety, PTSD. I have got a 12-year-old on Prozac who is suicidal." (Mother 33). Developmental challenges were reported. "As a mum that was very difficult because not only was I losing out on her new milestones, I also had to deal with rebuilding her from her regression" (Mother 20). Mothers in the sample attributed these negative outcomes for children to both family violence and involvement in the family law system:

> And on top of that I think *(child's name)* is going to need help and support because she is just so damaged, she is a damaged, damaged child, and in my way of thinking they have done this to her. Not just her original trauma with him *(father)*. The family court's traumatised her, and re-traumatised her, and re-traumatised her, to the point where she can't function in the world properly (Mother 36).

Discussion

Within the current study the harmful effects of mother's experiences were inflamed systemically. Mothers reported that the family law system did not act in ways that they believed protected them or their children. Some mothers held a view that the function of the court appeared to be on resolution of the dispute and parental rights, rather than the protection or best interests of the child. Within the sample mother's attempts to recover or forge new lives were often impeded as they remained tethered to CCP, with support from, or access to services available on CPP and DVP literally feeling like it was light years away.

In reflection of the literature, multiple mothers reported that shared responsibility and care provided many opportunities for perpetrators of family violence to continue their control and violence (Toivonen & Backhouse, 2018). Within reportedly unhelpful and invalidating encounters with the family law system, mothers experienced secondary victimisation, as they were ordered to co-operate with reportedly unsafe men and navigate an adversarial family law system where family violence, from their perspective had been rendered invisible under a cloak of silence (Rhoades, 2002). Each identified theme will now be discussed.

Mother's Careers and Finances – I Have Absolutely Nothing Now

In the post separation literature, financial hardship is associated with parenting stress,

negative health consequences, distress, and psychological strain for mothers and poorer outcomes for child development (Westrupp, Rose, Nicholson, & Brown, 2015). Levendosky, Lynch, and Graham-Bermann (2000) suggest that when financially stressful situations arise, parents respond to financial demands over the needs of children. Most mothers reported being confronted by economic challenges in rebuilding their lives. In the years following separation mothers reported having to move in with family members or extended family having to sell homes or assets to pay for lengthy court proceedings. Although there were some mothers in the sample who had maintained their financial independence, multiple mothers reported significant financial losses including loss of their home, business, employment, opportunities for promotion, or obstacles in expanding their qualifications.

Another potential factor impacting finances was vexatious and excessive litigation, with some mothers reportedly teetering on the verge of bankruptcy as a result of lengthy court proceedings (Thiara & Humphrey, 2017). Contemporary researchers argue that excessive litigation can serve as a catalyst for further abuse following separation and this was reflected in mother's descriptions (Easteal, Herbert & Kennedy, 2015; Robertson & Giddings, 2001). An example was one mother for whom separation had taken place when her child was a toddler. There were still matters concerning the child before the court at the date of interview. The mother reported that the child was now just shy of his 18th birthday.

Research evidences that 29% of women are likely to re-partner following separation (Hughes, 2000). Women with few resources are even less likely to re-partner. In the context of concerns about the high rates of poverty among single mother households, Hughes (2000) suggested that the pathway of re-entering work, appears to be a pathway that emerges as a platform for re-partnering for many women following separation. Within the child support system Natalier, Cooke and Pitman (2016) reported that participant's concerns about financial issues increased when describing their relationship with a former partner as highly conflictual or fearful. Within their findings, the Department of Human Services workers and processes did not recognise the interaction of child support, finances, and relationship, with participants reporting intensified financial disadvantage and personal and socioeconomic disempowerment. Despite a vision of the Department of Human Services as a means of neutralising emotions within child support negotiations, for participants their processes failed to respond to the financial and relationship complexities experienced, including a mother's sense of vulnerability when managing difficult relationships with former partners. Within the current sample where finances, careers and study opportunities were reportedly impeded, a

deeper investigation is warranted of the extent to which financial challenges are intertwined with the impact on personal relationships.

Mother's Health – It's too Long to Live Under the Stress and Trauma

The nature of qualitative research and associations between health problems is clearly inappropriate to determine. Few studies though have asked women to describe their health post separation (Karakurt, Smith, & Whiting, 2014; McGee, 2000; Ragavan et al., 2017). English, Marshall and Stewart (2003) in their study of 261 children, reported that family violence in a pre-separation context had negative effects on the health of caregivers, with decreased caregiver health associated with decreases in children's health.

An earlier review of the health literature reported that one to two thirds of women in family violence experience post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, or depression (Holtzworth- Munroe, Smutzler, Bates, & Sandin, 1997). This reflected reporting in the current sample. Mothers stated they felt like they were going through life like a robot. One mother shared that her GP recommended she not give up smoking due to the long-term, heightened levels of stress she was experiencing. Other mothers in the sample reported general health issues including inflammation, diarrhea, and weight loss. Anderson, Saunders, Yoshihama, Bybee, and Sullivan (2003) reported within their two-year study of 94 separated women that their levels of depression either did not improve, or significantly increased over time. Anderson et al. (2003) hypothesised that social support was the only resource that decreased depression. Concerningly, within the current sample isolation was reported across all participants and is now discussed.

Mother's Personal Relationships – Constantly Treading Water

Significant isolation and little social support were reported by all mothers in the sample. With little social support, mothers described life as being like juggling 20 plates in the air or being stuck constantly treading water. Anderson and Saunders' (2007) longitudinal study of the psychological recovery of women who leave abusive relationships reported that a women's need for intervention and protection does not usually end, but in fact increased, after separation. This was reflected within the current sample. Concerningly, as discussed later, the effects of isolation were not limited to mothers. Krusttschnitt, Gartner, and Ferraro (2002) reported that social isolation not only impacted parenting capacity, but compromised the opportunities that children need by limiting the development of relationships with friends and extended family members. The next part discusses mother's mothering.

Mother's Mothering – A Mode of Protecting Rather Than Parenting Children

Results from an Australian longitudinal study of children identified a range of negative consequences resulting from family violence post separation (Jaffe & Crooks, 2004; Westrupp et al., 2015). Negative consequences included poorer functioning, higher parenting stress, poorer relationships with their child, and poorer child wellbeing. Isolated mothers described living in fear and shared incidents of cars being keyed and tampered with, having their houses broken into, tracking devices placed in their children's items or being portrayed within school and sporting communities as mentally ill. One mother reportedly receiving up to 48 text messages a day and ended up receiving over 4000 abusive text messages before the court ordered that the father be restricted to sending two emails within a set period. Another mother reported that the father had set up fake online profiles after having stolen her identity.

Such was the intensity and longevity of their experiences that one mother described the nature of her experiences as a lifestyle that she believed would continue, not only for the rest of her life, but for that of her children and grandchildren's lives. Here despairing mothers described living in a mode of protecting their children, rather than a mode of parenting their children. Research suggests that a parent living in constant fear denies children the sense of basic trust and security foundational to emotional development (Levondonsky & Graham-Bermann, 2001). Again, the impact on the mother, potentially bled into the development and well-being of the child.

The quality of attachment and mothering were reportedly impacted, with mothers describing constant rupture and repair in mother-child relationships after visits with a potentially unsafe parent. These experiences mirrored earlier literature that suggested family violence negatively impacts children's behaviours in their interactions with their mothers. (Holden, 2003; Levondonsky, Huth-Bocks, & Semel, 2002; Levendosky, Huth-Bocks, Shapiro, & Semel, 2003; McIntosh, 2002). And although when mothers are more responsive to their child needs, problematic behaviours may be lessened, such was the intensity and longevity of their experiences, a handful of mothers in the sample shared that, in retrospect, they could have protected their children better if they had remained in the controlling and violent relationship. This was primarily attributed to an inability to get support from planets DVP, CPP, or CCP after separation.

Consequences for Children – A Long Dark Shadow Cast

Mirroring the dearth of research into health experiences, there is little literature on mother's perceptions of their children's health and wellbeing post separation (Ragavan et al., 2017). Interestingly, although the current study did not directly ask about children's post separation

experiences, mothers shared many examples of their children's trauma or exposure to family violence. Within the sample mothers reported that one child had a knife held to her throat by the other parent whilst he threatened that he had the means to kill her mother; three children had been barricaded in a house by the other parent who threatened to burn it down with them in it; one child had attempted suicide, and others experienced suicidal ideation; two children from different families, one aged 13 years at the time, and one aged 14 years at the time, after fleeing abuse from the other parent, ended up in adult refuges because court orders prevented them from living with their mothers; eight children were reported by their mothers as being sexually abused by the other parent following separation; two children were no longer able to attend mainstream schooling because of trauma, and others reportedly struggled in their schooling and peer relationships; three, who were now young adults, were alcohol dependent.

Trauma has been described as events that overwhelm human adaptation to life. Trauma is particularly damaging when it occurs in childhood and is disruptive to a child's capacity to manage internal states (Walls, Higgins & Hunter, 2016). Buchanan, Hunt, Bretherton, and Bream (2001) reported that children who experience high levels of post separation family violence are one of the most distressed populations. Mothers reported children experiencing a variety of traumatic behavioural, psychological, and emotional responses that they associated with continued exposure to post separation family violence (Harrison, 2008).

Within family violence literature children are described as the invisible victims. There are indications that children may be affected in their social adjustment, cognitive development, behavior, emotions, and physical functioning (Adams, 2006). Manetta and Pendergast's (2003) study of 125 mothers reported that children who had witnessed violence against their mother made suicidal statements. Lundy and Grossman's (2005) study of 4,636 children exposed to family violence reported one-fifth as experiencing peer difficulties, acting out, sadness, depression, and difficulties adhering to school rules. Within the sample the legacy of mothers and children's post separation experiences potentially cast a long dark shadow over their relationships, wellbeing, development, and lives.

Systemic Erasure

In Australia in 2009 the Federal Government announced funding for a pilot program to assist parents in managing post separation parenting disputes where there had been a history of family violence. Kaspiew, De Maio, Deblaquiere, and Horsfall (2012) in their evaluation found that not only was there a risk of potential victims experiencing emotional trauma, but that these families

experienced difficulties over a protracted period with limited assistance. Kaspiew et al. (2012) found a substantial proportion of separated mothers (53%) reported emotional abuse that continued after separation.

Despite copious evidence that family violence is likely to continue after separation, the lived reality reported within the current sample was that already isolated mothers and their children remained at risk (Hester, 2011; Humphreys & Absler, 2011). Johnston and Ver Steegh (2013) in their review of family law and family violence, argued that family violence cannot be dealt with appropriately in current family law contexts. Other research similarly suggests that mothers experiencing post separation family violence remain out of sync with the philosophical underpinnings of family law in Australia. This is specifically in the context of the support of a child's meaningful and continuing relationship with both parents following separation (Fehlberg, Kaspiew, Millbank, Kelly, & Behrens, 2015). Laing's (2017) study found that mother's allegations of family violence put them at odds with the Australian family law system, with the themes of control, silencing, and undermining, reflective of the dynamics of family violence. The findings in the current sample concur with Collier (2006) who reported that the need for continued paternal involvement overshadowed and disregarded any history of family violence. Further support is evident in research which highlights the lack of knowledge around family violence in Australia in relation to family report writers and independent children's lawyers (Kaspiew et al., 2014; O'Neill et al., 2018).

Since 2006 in Australia legislative reform in relation to family violence has continued, including the introduction of the *Family Law Amendment (Family Violence and Cross-examination of Parties) Act 2018* (Cth) (Austl.) and the *Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and Other Measures) Act 2011* (Cth) (Austl.). After the introduction in 2011 of further legislative changes addressing family violence the Honourable Justice Strickland cautioned that the:

> … inescapable reality is that maintaining a statutory framework in which legislative presumptions then trigger mandatory consideration of time means that the family violence reforms are compromised in their ability to protect children from harm associated with family violence. Viewed from an attachment perspective and indeed from that of anyone concerned about the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, the family violence reforms can be seen as an opportunity lost (AFCC 49th Annual Conference, 2012, p. 40).

His Honour reiterated that the court was still bound to mandatorily consider a child spending a substantial amount of time with each parent, even in cases involving family violence. The legislative complexity and interpretation by judicial officers and legal advisors who do not have a

clinical lens through which to determine developmentally what is in the best interests of the child, how the child may maintain a relationship with both parents, and the emotional aftermath of unresolved co-parenting conflict, arguably makes for a challenging decision making context on CCP.

Kaspiew et al. (2015) in their evaluation of family violence amendments based on two separate samples, each of over 6,000 separated parents, reported that there had been some positive changes in directions consistent with the intention of the legislation. However about one-fifth of separated parents reported that the services they used were not at all helpful to them. Mixed findings emerged from an examination of the consequences of disclosure of concern, with increasing increments of parents disclosing each type of concern across each pathway in both 2012 and 2014. Reports of disclosure of family violence was lowest for parents who used family dispute resolution, and highest for parents who used courts.

Broadly, it is suggested that the current study reflected Khwa, Bermea, Hardesty, Saunders, and Whittaker (2018) who reported that the family law process is complex and stressful, and one that leaves mothers with a legacy of ongoing mothering and mother-child challenges. From these mother's experiences it is tentatively suggested that within the Australian family law system, family violence may at times be treated as conflict between equals. This simplistic view arguably contributes to an eventual erasure of mother's experiences and renders invisible the harmful consequences and losses that are experienced, not only by mothers, but also children in their care (Herman, 2005).

Practical Implications

This nascent study highlighted the importance of understanding the complexity of separated mother's experiences in navigating post separation services that appear at times to be planets apart. For example, on CCP where there is a focus on the resolution of parenting disputes, that the more pressing need for some time, may be to address underlying problems that are a focus on DVP, being family violence and the fear of a former partner. Within post separation family violence, it is suggested that there needs to be adequate co-ordination, co-operation, and communication between all three planets. Despite the difficulties that exist on each planet, with their own competing priorities and other issues such as confidentiality, adequate training, and understanding of each planet's priorities and culture, it is important that early intervention and identification of family violence occur for these mothers and children. Where a relationship is ordered to be maintained between a perpetrator of family violence and a child post separation, the nature of the impact on the child warrants close attention and tracking. Within this context venues such as the healthcare systems and

school systems provide opportunities for multi-dimensional screening or follow-up (Wood & Sommers, 2011).

Strengths of the Study

Within Australia legislative restraints prevent the public discussion or dissemination of information relating to separated parents or children's experiences of family court outcomes and proceedings (*Family Law Act, 1975* (Cth) s. 121 (Austl.). Qualitative research therefore afforded separated mothers, who might not otherwise be heard, the opportunity to explore their experiences. A strength of the current study was to give voice to mothers' experiences and highlight the lack of integration that arguably contributes to the invisibility or erasure of family violence against separated mothers following separation.

Limitations and Future Research

One specific limitation of the current study was the nature of second-hand reporting of the consequences for children. As such the current study was unable to accurately associate or attribute children's traumatic responses to exposure to family violence or the family law system. Future research might include dyadic reporting of experiences within this context from both mother and child. Father's experiences remained a deficit in the current study.

Conclusion

This nascent study, through the exploration of entrenched co-parenting conflict, and the continued presence of family violence, sought to make a rudimentary contribution by providing a window of insight into the aftermath for these separated mothers. If it was thought that the story of family violence in Australia is overtold, within the current study it is suggested that the story is yet to be told. In the current sample the myth that separation ends family violence remained just that, a myth. What is often unacknowledged, unknown and hence invisible in these mother's experiences, is that family violence reportedly continued for many years after the controlling or violent relationship was left. In conclusion, it is argued that family law services in Australia not only need to be grounded in a philosophical base that is intrinsically linked to the empowerment and protection of the mother, but that considers the possibility of unfit fathering practices. Having left a controlling and violent relationship, mothers found that they could not healthily extricate themselves from the reportedly abusive relationship due to the gravitational pull of planet CCP. This is a planet which carried with it the expectation that, rather than holding men accountable for their behaviour, women overcome their fear of the other parent. Attention needs to be given to strengthening and supporting mother-child relationships, as mothers continue, often in isolation, to navigate post separation family

violence.

Chapter Summary

This is not the end of the story. However, it represents the end of the research within the current thesis. This chapter continued mother's post separation story within entrenched co-parenting conflict and the Australian family law system. Utilising the method of thematic analysis and the theoretical framework of TPM findings revealed that the experience of engaging with the Australian family law system and the systemic erasure of family violence contributed to long term trauma for mothers and children in their care. The current study selectively reported on the findings in relation to mother's careers and finances, mother's health, mother's interpersonal relationships, mother's mothering, and second-hand reporting on the impact on their children. From interactions with broader statutory services, to professionals within the Family Court, mother's descriptions were broadly isolating, negative, and an elongation of their experiences in Stage 4.

In linking back to Stage 2, which reported on cognitive dissonance and anxiety that potentially originated from long term involvement in the Australian family law system, mother's explicit descriptions in Stage 5 reiterated these experiences. An example of cognitive dissonance in the current study was in mother's mothering where what mothers valued as, and believed to be good mothering, was impeded, or just not possible. There were numerous examples of anxiety arousing situations and the impact on well-being, not the least being when having to supervise visits with the other parent.

Findings in the current study reflected findings from Stage 1 and the systematic review. Within high conflict, the literature evidenced pervasive mistrust seated in concerns for the child's safety, or concerns over the child's well-being when in the care of the other parent, and the disdain when such concerns were raised. Within the current study, not only was this experienced from the other parent, but as evident in mother's reporting, systemically, from some family law services. Findings in the current study also link back to Stage 4 where concerns over their own, or their child's safety were either not believed, were given lip service, or were disregarded by family law services. Further support was evident for findings from Stage 4 which referred to the lack of knowledge around family violence in Australia in relation to family report writers and independent children's lawyers. These tentative findings assist in building a long-term outlook of contextual complexity and challenges face by these separated mothers. The next chapter sets out the overview, general discussion, and conclusion for the current thesis.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Overview, General Discussion and Conclusion

The overarching aim of the current thesis was to better understand post separation entrenched co-parenting conflict. Across the literature the findings in relation to entrenched co-parenting conflict have been inconsistent. The current thesis explored entrenched co-parenting conflict through interactional, contextual, and intrapersonal characteristics including the 4HA, cognitive dissonance, hate, high conflict, and family violence. Outcomes from the research undertaken in the current thesis evidence an inability to resolve conflict, failures of interventions within the family law system, and difficulties in parents accessing post separation services, all of which arguably contribute to co-parenting conflict persisting over time.

Integration of Key Findings

Study 1

Study 1 sought to extend the post separation literature by identifying specific conflict behaviours, being criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling within co-parenting conflict. Study 1 had the potential to contribute to the literature through an examination of the four conflict behaviours and implications on children's wellbeing and outcomes. Due to the low participation rate no meaningful analysis was able to be undertaken, although defensiveness and contempt was significant in mother reporting. The gap in knowledge within the post separation literature remains under researched.

Study 2

Study 2 sought to contribute to the post separation literature by undertaking a qualitative exploration of separated parents' experiences of entrenched co-parenting conflict within the Australian family law system. Specific areas of focus were cognitive dissonance, high conflict, family violence, and hate. Findings for each stage are now summarised.

Study 2 - Stage 1

The guiding research aim of Stage 1 was to undertake a systematic review of the available qualitative literature of separated parents' experiences of high conflict in their co-parenting relationships. The reviewed literature evidenced that separated parents' experiences of high conflict were embedded in pervasive mistrust, disdain, and underpinned by concerns over differing parenting styles, or the other parents' ability to adequately care for the child. What potentially maintained co-parenting conflict were parental concerns as to the child's safety and well-being when in the care of

the other parent. What potentially escalated co-parenting conflict was disdain directed at the other parent's concerns. Within disdain, and as indicative in Study 1, defensiveness was reported as an obstacle to effective communication or potential information sharing. More broadly, defensiveness and stonewalling were reported as arguably contributing to the escalation of conflict. This was primarily evident in the lack of information sharing, or dismissal of parental concerns, either in relation to the care of the child, or in relation to financial concerns. In summary, within the systematic review, reports of defensiveness and stonewalling were evident.

Study 2 - Stage 2

The guiding research aim for Stage 2 was separated parents' experiences, if any, of cognitive dissonance within entrenched co-parenting conflict. Stage 2 findings identified the mature defense mechanisms of altruism, suppression, anticipation, and humor as potentially adaptive responses to cognitive dissonance within entrenched co-parenting conflict. The mature defense mechanism of sublimation was not identified as a potentially adaptive response to cognitive dissonance within entrenched co-parenting conflict. Within negative affect, anxiety was the predominant affective state reported within entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Study 2 - Stage 3

The guiding research aim for Stage 3 was to explore and understand the phenomenon of hate within entrenched co-parenting conflict. Three themes that contribute to understanding hate's genesis, growth, and stability were identified. Firstly, an inability or unwillingness to self-reflect, secondly, inverse caring, and thirdly, relentlessness. Within grounded theory a conceptualisation of hate, being the circular theory of hate in co-parenting conflict, was developed. This conceptual model theorised that hate functionally serves as a self-protective mechanism following separation that enabled a parent to avoid experiencing their own emotions, avoid confronting or taking responsibility for their own behaviour, or avoid facing their own lived experiences. In being developed within a specific contextual framework of entrenched co-parenting conflict, the conceptual model contributes and provides a suggested theoretical refinement within the extant hate literature. Similar to Stages 1 and 2, disdain was evident within parents' reporting of being hated, particularly when the behaviours of the other parent made the interviewed parent describe their experiences as one in which they were made to feel unworthy, or that they did not matter. In summary, hate appeared to functionally serve as a self-protective mechanism, and evidenced disdain and contempt within inverse caring, with hate's relentlessness and an inability or unwillingness to self-reflect maintaining and contributing to the entrenchment within co-parenting conflict.

Study 2 - Stage 4

The guiding research aim for Stage 4 was to explore separated parents' experiences of entrenched co-parenting conflict within the Australian family law system. As evident in Stage 3, findings from Stage 4 suggest that the experience of engaging with the Australian family law system caused separated mothers' considerable anxiety and distress. Principal themes related to gendered narratives, mother's concerns not been taken seriously, perceived inadequacies in knowledge or competence of experts and decision makers in relation to family violence, and coercion from some professionals within the family law system. Separated mother's descriptions in Stage 4 broadened the findings in Stage 2, in that specific examples and context for cognitive dissonance and anxiety were provided.

Study 2 - Stage 5

In Stage 5 mother's post separation story continued, in the context of the aftermath of their long-term post separation experiences. Findings suggested that the systemic erasure of family violence within the Australian family law system, potentially contributed to longer term trauma or loss for mothers and children in their care. From interactions with broader statutory services, to professionals within the Family Court, mother's experiences were largely negative and comprised isolation and fear. Within Stage 5 disdain was again reported, not only from the other parent, but systemically within the Australian family law system. In exploring descriptions of the longer-term outcomes, findings in Stage 5 extended the findings from Stage 4 where concerns over their own, or their child's safety were either not believed or disregarded by family law services. All five stages within Study 2 contributed to a bigger picture of the experience for separated mothers, not only of the contextual complexity and challenges faced, but of the trauma and loss in the years following separation. Given the current social and political environment in Australia where there is increasing pressure on the government to introduce reforms that address potential gaps within the family law system, the findings in the current thesis are relevant.

Methodological and Practical Implications

The findings within the current thesis make both a methodological and practical contribution to the existing body of post separation knowledge

Practical Implications

There were several important practical implications identified in the current thesis, not the least being that these separated parents need support from an array of post separation and family violence services, and they need support in accessing support services long term. Within their

experiences within the family law system, an adversarial state of mind represented a stark contrast to a much needed, and near absent, therapeutic state of mind. From a practical perspective these separated parents remained long term within the gravitational pull of the adversarial orbit of the family court system (CCP). During these experiences, what felt like light years away was access to the therapeutic or protective services on CPP and DVP. Within the current thesis these separated parents exhibited strengths that can and need to be supported by practitioners. The findings highlighted the importance for professionals and practitioners working with these families to accurately assess what does work in their post separation relationships.

Within the context of hate, it is suggested that the identification of nuanced dynamics within entrenched co-parenting conflict provides an opportunity for practitioners to support self-reflection or identify a parents' ability to contain conflict for the sake of the child. There remains a need for the family law system to not only investigate allegations of family violence where entrenched co-parenting conflict is evident, before parenting issues are decided, but also to not assume that these issues are being taken care of elsewhere in the system. In conclusion, these findings add further weight to a variety of recommendations for reform put forward in several family law inquiries within Australia.

Theoretical Implications

The findings in the current thesis were underpinned and guided by several theoretical perspectives and frameworks. Within Study 1 the 4HA and CCPCM guided an investigation into the identification of specific conflict behaviours within the conflictual co-parenting relationship. By placing the child's observations into the broader context of the emotional environment following parental separation, the CCPCM laid a foundation for a more complete understanding of the impact of co-parenting conflict behaviours on a child's development in the years following separation.

Despite the limited sample, descriptive indicators suggest mothers experienced more defensiveness and contempt in their post-separation interactions than fathers. Defensiveness and contempt were evident in Study 2. Although it is well established in the literature that co-parenting conflict and hostility negatively impact child outcomes, limited research had explored these four conflict behaviours within entrenched co-parenting conflict. This study demonstrated that this theoretical perspective may yet provide a useful avenue for focused research in a larger sample. Given that there are antidotes available for each of these conflict behaviours within intact couple relationships, further investigation might support evidence-based frameworks for practitioners who work with these parents, and provide them with information to support the determination of suitable

therapy. Future research within an adequate sample size might yet yield relevant findings. Even within the current thesis, although the sample size was inadequate, early descriptive indicators in relation to defensiveness and contempt were evident in later findings.

Within Study 2 thematic analysis enabled broad analysis to be undertaken, whilst additionally providing the flexibility to gain understandings within differing phenomenon. Thematic analysis enabled the decision to be made as to whether the analysis was to remain descriptive, or whether there would be a more focused drilling down into the data. Within hate and cognitive dissonance, grounded theory guided the development of a conceptual model of hate, and the identification of adaptive defence mechanisms. Misconceptions around grounded theory exist, and in order to explain findings that link to previous knowledge, Walsh et al. (2015) clarified that grounded theory may include the conceptualisation or production of theories which might then be integrated into extant formal theory. It was here that grounded theory formed an important theoretical framework that involved the integration of emerging theory in the specific context of cognitive dissonance which identified four of the five defence mechanisms within parental experiences of entrenched co-parenting conflict. Within hate, the theoretical framework of grounded theory supported the interpretative exploration of the phenomenon of hate within entrenched co-parenting conflict, rather than simply separated parents' experiences of hate. This resulted in the development of a conceptual model of hate within post separation entrenched co-parenting conflict.

Within a descriptive exploration of separated mother's experiences of the Australian family law system, social conflict theory provided an adequate framework. Separated mother's descriptions within the theoretical framework of social conflict theory highlighted the underlying inconsistencies in judicial approaches when family violence was present, and that the effects of family violence were not yet fully understood within the judiciary. Finally, the use of the theoretical framework of the three planets model supported a greater understanding of the challenges separated mothers faced in the years following separation. This was particularly evident within a system that comprised multiple post separation services at differing state and Federal levels. In summary, the theoretical frameworks enabled the development of a conceptual model and supported the identification of nuanced understandings in relation to entrenched co-parenting conflict and separated parent's experiences. These in turn now contribute to the body of knowledge in extant post separation literature.

Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions

Strengths, limitations and future directions were addressed in detail throughout the current thesis. The next part presents an overarching summary of key strengths.

Strengths

There are several strengths within the current thesis, one being the systematic review of the qualitative literature over the last twenty years. This synthesis provided a clearer understanding of separated parents' experiences of high conflict. In relation to cognitive dissonance there are no studies within a post separation context in Australia. Although inferences beyond that study are limited, the tentative findings provided important insights into potential strengths and adaptive mechanisms utilised by separated parents experiencing entrenched co-parenting conflict. Similarly, within the phenomenon of hate there are no theoretical models of hate within a post separation context in Australia. Again, the substantive theory of hate conceptualised in the current thesis is neither predictive, nor generalisable, however it is suggestive of insights into nuanced dynamics that might otherwise be missed.

The voices of separated mothers in the sample situated a critical need for collaborative and independently derived, investigation and information, in post separation situations involving entrenched co-parental conflict. A strength in giving voice to mother's experiences was to highlight the lack of integration that arguably contributes to the invisibility or erasure of violence experienced by mothers' post separation and contributes to the aftermath discussed. The next part discusses limitations and future directions.

Limitations and Future Directions

One of the most important methodological limitations involved sampling and the low participation rate of fathers. Despite reaching out to both fathers and mothers, primarily mothers agreed to participate. Low father participation was evident in both Study 1 and Study 2, and this appears to be significant, although its' meaning remains unclear, but reflected recruitment challenges in this area generally in Australia. A gendered analysis was not possible on what may be very different experiences for fathers and mothers. Further, these separated parents' relationships are tainted by uncertainty, conflict, litigation, loss, and grief, and there is little doubt that these factors influence their ability or willingness to participate in research. For some separated parents talking about what they are currently experiencing or have experienced in the past, may be triggering. For other separated parents to put aside an hour to speak with a researcher may not be viable or realistic in their circumstances.

Overall, the limitations of Study 1 are reflective of an ongoing gap within the post separation literature, that of findings from mother/father and parent/child dyads. This was evident within Stage 3 where themes of hate were generated primarily through separated mother responses. Here the

current thesis remains incomplete without dyadic or meaningful analysis into the lived experience and awareness of the other parent. Dyadic analysis in a larger sample is also necessary before formal theories in a post separation context may be developed meaningfully. The second-hand reporting of the aftermath for children again reflected this limitation. Future research might include dyadic reporting of experiences from both mother, father, and/or child.

The qualitative component of the current thesis had several limitations that spanned all stages. Within these limitations, there were additional methodological considerations that impacted specific stages which were discussed in the relevant chapter for that stage. Broadly, the primary limitations within Study 2 lay in the qualitative nature of the research. As such, inferences and generalisations beyond the sample are cautioned against. For some participants, retrospective self-reporting of experiences of entrenched co-parenting conflict may have been confounded in terms of accuracy of recall of what may have been, or continued to be, highly emotional experiences. Also absent from the current thesis was an exploration of separated parents from CALD backgrounds. This is another area lacking within the post separation literature, and yet one that may comprise understandings of other important layers of complexities and challenges.

Due to their experiences, separated parents in the current thesis held strong views about the Australian family law system. Participation did provide these parents with an opportunity to share their experiences. Parents shared that change was needed and that they hoped their experiences might contribute to change. It is however acknowledged that there was no independent corroboration of their situations, nor input from other decision makers in their cases which again highlights the value of third-party reporting.

As set out in the earlier literature and reviews, and given the non-resolution of entrenched co-parenting conflict, it is suggested that longitudinal research is needed in order to add understanding and definitional clarity to entrenched co-parenting conflict. Finally, and perhaps reflective of the broad use of the term high conflict, the qualitative literature is surprisingly small, yielding only eight studies, all of which were published within the last seven years. Given that much of the current thesis is qualitative, future directions might consider the use of measures that quantify tentative findings within this population, such as, for example, defence mechanisms.

Conclusion

The aim of Chapter 11 was to summarise the key findings and integrate the findings to enable a broader understanding of the interactional exchanges and psychological climate within entrenched co-parenting conflict. Early indications of the conflict behaviours of defensiveness and contempt

were evident, albeit at differing levels, through Study 1 and Study 2. One thing is clear from these separated parents' descriptions, and that is that at no point was the conflict able to be resolved. Overall, the current thesis tentatively suggests that defensiveness, not taking responsibility, and contempt and disdain, a belief that the other parent and their concerns no longer mattered, were present within entrenched co-parenting conflict. Hate's functionality as a self-protective mechanism requires further consideration.

It is arguable whether the family law system in Australia has provided adequate protection for women and children experiencing entrenched co-parenting conflict. Most of the sample reported remaining bound for years to a family law system where there existed multiple divisions of power, systemic erasure of family violence, and jurisdictional gaps. Disbelief, lip service, and non-investigation of concerns around child safety deeply impacted these parents' post separation lives. Pervasive mistrust, hostility, isolation, and fear were prevalent.

Entrenched co-parenting conflict kept these separated parents' lives off balance and it remains unclear how each parent may be better adjusted and supported to rebuild or build, post separation relationships. A paucity of research continues to hamper the development of evidence-based screening tools, policy, and needs orientated support for separated parents experiencing entrenched co-parenting conflict. These separated parents do need to be approached differently. Within ongoing litigation, allegations of neglect, and custody disputes, it is easy to lose sight of the interactional and interpersonal dynamics that either maintain or escalate their conflict. Clearly absent within entrenched co-parenting conflict was the opportunity to recover, or a willingness to accept relationship repair or influence.

It is important that the Australian family law system continue to incorporate and recognise social science research in its legislative and judicial reasoning. The current thesis speaks to a need for greater academic discussion and research which explores how entrenched co-parenting conflict is defined, understood, and acted upon. The current thesis suggests that entrenched co-parenting conflict may comprise nuanced behaviours and beliefs, and not so much filled in gaps, but suggested possible paths of enquiry in fields of knowledge not yet adequately explored in the post separation context. The current thesis holds significance in its position as a foundation for further academic discussion and research around hate and high conflict. Within the ambiguous and uncomfortable contexts of hate, high conflict, and family violence, there remains a reticence to explore how these are defined and understood. The current thesis is a step towards changing these paradigms, if not, at the very least, for the children who spend their formative years growing up in entrenched co-parenting conflict and the shadow of the Australian family law system.

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(* Denotes study in systematic review)

APPENDICES

Appendix A – Parent Survey

It is very important that you and your child choose a code that will link your anonymous surveys together. If your child is also participating, please enter the same code at the beginning of your survey. The code needs to have a total of six letters/numbers and some examples are provided below. First three letters of your pet dog's name and last three numbers of parent's telephone number i.e.

Pet Dog – Benji Telephone Number 0004 123 345

CODE = BEN345

First three letters of parents' name and last three letters of adolescent's name:

Parent – Peter Child – Barbara

CODE = PETARA

Parent – Joan Child - Michael

CODE = JOAAEL

Last three numbers of parents' telephone and last three number of adolescent's telephone:

Parent – 0004 123 345 Adolescent – 0005 234 456

CODE = 345456

So have some fun with your code. Keeping your surveys <u>linked</u> is a powerful way for your anonymous information to be analysed

<u>General</u>

Age: 18-34yrs 35-44yrs 45-54yrs 55-64yrs 65yrs +

Gender:

Male Female

Age at separation: 18-34yrs 35-44yrs 45-54yrs 55-64yrs 65yrs +

Number of children at separation:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 +

Age of children at separation:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13
14 15 16 17 18

Gender of children: Males 1 2 3 4 5

Females 1 2 3 4 5

Time spent with each child to 10 year's old:

a) Never or almost never

b) On holidays only

c) Daytime only contact

d) 50/50 care

e) Standard (primarily with me and every second weekend/half holidays with other parent)

Time spent with each child to 18 year's old:

a) Never or almost never

b) On holidays only

c) Daytime only contact

d) 50/50 care

e) Standard (primarily with me and every second weekend/half holidays with other parent

Care Arrangement:

a) Court Order

b) Consent Orders

c) Parenting Plan

d) Verbal Arrangement

e) Other

Highest level of education achieved

a) Primary school

b) High school

c) TAFE

d) Tertiary – Undergraduate

e) Tertiary - Postgraduate

Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness and Stonewalling

Yes No

1. After separation I thought it best just not to respond at all.
2. After separation I kept thinking of ways to retaliate.
3. After separation I stopped listening because it no longer mattered what the other parent had to say.
4. It is important to me to point out inaccuracies or to explain my position.
5. I don't get any credit for the positive things I do with our children.
6. When the other parent is upset, I think "I don't have to take this kind of treatment".
7. Since separation I can't recall the other parent's positive qualities.
8. I hate it when the other parent stops being rational.
9. The other parent can be pretty stubborn, arrogant and smug at times.
10. I let things build up for a long time before I complain. I don't complain until I feel very hurt.
11. I often feel a sense of righteous indignation when the other parent is complaining.
12. I only bring up issues if I know it is the best thing for the children and I want the other parent to accept my point of view.
13. I point out patterns and analyse the other parent's personality as part of my complaints.
14. I think it is best to withdraw to calm down, avoid a big fight and not get my feelings hurt.
15. I withdraw when the other parent's emotions are out of control.

16. In a disagreement I think it's important to determine who is at fault.
17. In any discussions I make general points instead of being specific about one situation or action.
18. I may be emotional, sarcastic or call the other parent names. Later I regret this.
19. It's hard for me to see the other parent's point of view when I don't agree.
20. When complaining about the other parent I use phrases like "you always" or "you never".
21. The other parent is too touchy and gets their feelings hurt too easily.
22. To avoid blame I have to explain why and how the problem arose.
23. When the other parent complains I feel like I have to get away.
24. When the other parent complains I have to control myself to keep from saying what I really feel.
25. When the other parent complains I realise that I also have complaints that need to be heard.
26. In arguments sometimes my response is to sigh, or roll my eyes.

<u>Parent Personality</u>

Disagree strongly Disagree moderately Disagree a little Neutral Agree a little Agree moderately Agree strongly

I see myself as:

27. Extroverted, enthusiastic
28. Critical, quarrelsome

29. Dependable, self-disciplined
30. Anxious, easily upset
31. Open to new experiences, complex
32. Reserved, quiet
33. Sympathetic, warm
34. Disorganised, careless
35. Calm, emotionally stable
36. Conventional, uncreative

Emotional Regulation

Strongly Disagree Moderately Disagree Neutral Moderately Agree Strongly Agree

37. When I want to feel a more positive emotion (such as joy or amusement), I change what I'm thinking about.
38. I keep my emotions to myself.
39. When I want to feel a less negative emotion (such as sadness or anger), I change what I am thinking about.
40. When I am feeling positive emotions, I am careful not to express them.
41. When I'm faced with a stressful situation, I make myself think about it in a way that helps me stay calm.
42. I control my emotions by not expressing them.
43. When I want to feel more positive emotion, I change the way I'm thinking about the situation.
44. I control my emotions by changing the way I think about the situation I am in.
45. When I am feeling negative emotions, I make sure not to express them.
46. When I want to feel less negative emotion, I change the way I'm thinking about the situation.

Strengths and Difficulties

Not True Somewhat True Certainly True

My child is:

47. Considerate of other people's feelings
48. Restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long
49. Often complains of headaches, stomach aches or sickness
50. Shares readily with other youth, for example books, games, food
51. Often loses temper
52. Would rather be alone than with other youth
53. Generally, well behaved, usually does what adults request
54. Many worries or often seems worried
55. Helpful if someone is hurt, upset or feeling ill
56. Constantly fidgeting or squirming
57. Has at least one good friend
58. Often fights with other youth or bullies them
59. Often unhappy, depressed or tearful
60. Generally liked by other young people
61. Easily distracted, concentration wanders
62. Nervous in new situations, easily loses confidence
63. Kind to younger children
64. Often lies or cheats
65. Picked on or bullied by other young people
66. Often volunteers to help others (parents, teachers, children)
67. Thinks things out before acting
68. Steals from home, school or elsewhere
69. Gets along better with adults than with other young people
70. Many fears, easily scared
71. Good attention span, sees tasks through to the end

Co-Parenting Conflict

Almost Never Some of the Time Much of the Time Almost Always

72. Do you feel friendly toward the other parent?
73. Do your children feel friendly toward the other parent?
74. Are gifts to the children a problem between you and the other parent?
75. Is shared care a problem between you and the other parent?
76. Do you have friendly talks with the other parent?
77. Is the other parent a good parent?
78. Do your children see the other parent as often as you would like?
79. Do you and the other parent agree on discipline for the children?
80. Are your children harder to handle after a visit with the other parent?
81. Do you and the other parent disagree in front of the children?
82. Do the children take sides in disagreements between you and the other parent?
83. Are money and child support payments a problem between you and the other parent?
84. Do your children feel hostile toward the other parent?
85. Does the other parent say things about you to the children that you don't want them to hear?
86. Do you say things about the other parent to the children that they wouldn't want them to hear?
87. Do you have angry disagreements with the other parent?
88. Do you feel hostile toward the other parent?
89. Does the other parent feel hostile toward you?
90. Can you talk to the other parent about problems with the children?
91. Do you have a friendly divorce or separation?
92. Are pick-ups and drop-offs of the children between you and the other parent a difficult time?
93. Does the other parent encourage your child to live with them?
94. Have you adjusted to being divorced/separated from the other parent?

95. Has the other parent adjusted to being divorced/separated from you?

Distress

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

In the last 30 days …

96. My worries overwhelmed me

97. I felt hopeless

98. I found social settings upsetting

99. I had trouble staying focused on tasks

100. Anxiety or fear interfered with my ability to do the things I needed to do at work or at home

Kids Helpline is Australia's only free, private and confidential telephone and online counselling service specifically for young people aged between 5 and 25 years and can be contacted on **1800 551 800**.

Parentline can be contacted from 8.00am to 10.00pm seven days a week for the cost of a local call. Parents, carers and family members have direct access to qualified counsellors and can choose to speak with either a male or female counsellor. Parents are also able to arrange a call back and speak with the same counsellor. Parentline can be contacted on **1300 301 300**.

Lifeline is a free 24-hour telephone crisis support service available from a landline, payphone, or mobile. Anyone across Australia experiencing a personal crisis or thinking about suicide can contact Lifeline. Regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation, Lifeline's trained volunteers are ready to listen, provide support and refer. Lifeline can be contacted on **13 11 14**.

Counselling by family counsellors is also available. Sessions are at the rate of $120.00 per hour. Any

person eligible for a mental health care plan can receive a rebate through Medicare for up to 10 sessions within a calendar year. This should make access to counselling services affordable to most people. Fiona Cuskelly specialises in counselling for young people and adolescents and can be contacted on (0451) 838 298. Julie Stirling specialises in counselling with adults and families and can be contacted on (0407) 539 372.

Appendix B – Young Adult Survey

It is very important that you and your parent choose a code that will link your anonymous survey's together. If your parent is also participating, please enter the same code at the beginning of your survey. The code needs to have a total of six letters/numbers and some examples are provided below. First three letters of your pet dog's name and last three numbers of parent's telephone number:

Pet Dog – Benji Telephone Number 0004 123 345

CODE = BEN345

First three letters of parent's name and last three letters of adolescent's name:

Parent – Peter Adolescent – Barbara

CODE = PETARA

Parent – Joan Adolescent - Michael

CODE = JOAAEL

Last three numbers of parent's telephone and last three number of adolescent's telephone:

Parent – 0004 123 345 Adolescent – 0005 234 456

CODE = 345456

So have some fun with your code. Keeping your surveys <u>linked</u> is a powerful way for your anonymous information to be analysed.

<u>General</u>

Age: -18yrs 18-34yrs 35-44yrs 45-54yrs 55-64yrs 65yrs +

Gender:

Male Female

Age at parental separation: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18yrs

Before my parent's separated, they argued:

Always Sometimes Never

Who was the parent you lived most of the time with after separation?

Mother Father

Who was the parent you did not live with most of the time after separation?

Mother Father

Are either of your parents' dead?

Yes No

If yes, which parent?

Mother Father

If yes, how old were you when that happened?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14
15 16 17 18yrs

How were the care arrangements decided?

a) Court Ordered

b) Consent Orders

c) Parenting Plan

d) Verbal Agreement

e) I don't know

How often did you spend time with the parent you lived with most of the time?

a) Fulltime

b) 50/50

c) All week and every second weekend

d) I don't know

e) Other

How often did you spend time with the parent you did not live with most of the time?

a) Never or almost never

b) Holidays only

c) About once a month

d) Only day visits no overnight visits

e) Every second weekend

f) Every weekend

g) A couple of times per week

h) I spent equal time with both parents

Did your mother remarry?

Yes No

How many times?

1 2 3 4 5

Is your mother currently married?

Yes No

How old were you when your mother first remarried?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13

14 15 16 17 18yrs

Did your father remarry?

Yes No

How many times?

1 2 3 4 5

Is your father currently married?

Yes No

How old were you when your father first remarried?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13

14 15 16 17 18yrs

What is your relationship like with your mother now?

a) I never see my mother

b) I keep in contact/see my mother occasionally

c) I keep in contact/see my mother often

d) I see my mother often and can talk to her about my life

What is your relationship like with your father now?

a) I never see my father

b) I keep in contact/see my father occasionally

c) I keep in contact/see my father often

d) I see my father often and can talk to him about my life

Self-Efficacy

Not at all Hardly True Moderately True Exactly True

1. I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough
2. If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want
3. It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals
4. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events
5. Thanks to my resourcefulness I know how to handle unforeseen situations
6. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort
7. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities
8. When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions
9. If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution
10. I can usually handle whatever comes my way

Problem-Solving

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

11. When faced with a difficult personal problem, it is better to decide yourself rather than to follow the advice of others.
12. I value other people's help and advice when making important decisions.
13. In general, I do not like to ask other people to help me solve problems.
14. I prefer to make decisions on my own, rather than with other people.

15. I like to get advice from my friends and family when deciding how to solve my personal problems.
16. I prefer to consult with others before making important decisions.
17. I usually find other people's advice to be the most helpful source of information for solving my problems.
18. I would rather struggle through a personal problem by myself than discuss it with a friend.
19. I do not like to depend on other people to help me to solve my problems.
20. I usually prefer to ask other people for help rather than to try to solve problems on my own.

Co-Parenting Behaviour

21. Almost Never Rarely Sometimes Often Almost Always/Very Often
22. My parents complained about each other
23. My father told me bad things about my mother
24. My parents argued about money in front of me
25. When my parents argued I was forced to choose sides
26. When my parents talked to each other they accused each other of bad things
27. My parents talked nicely to each other
28. My mother asked me questions about my father that I wished she would not ask
29. I felt caught between my parents
30. My father asked me to carry messages to my mother
31. My parents fought about where I should live
32. My father asked me questions about my mother that I wished he would not ask
33. My mother wanted me to be close to my father
34. When my mother needed to make a change in my schedule my father would help
35. My parents argued in front of me
36. My mother used to tell me to ask my father about child support
37. It was ok to talk about my father in front of my mother
38. My parents talked to each other about how I felt about the divorce/separation

39. My parents talked to each other about my school and health
40. My father used to get angry at my mother
41. When my parents talked to each other they got angry
42. My parents talked to each other about big choices in my life
43. My parents talked to each other at least once a week
44. My mother told me bad things about my father
45. When my mother needed help with me, she would ask my father
46. My mother asked me to carry messages to my father
47. My mother told me good things about my father
48. My parents talked to each other about the good things that I did
49. When my father needed help with me, he would ask my mother
50. My mother used to get angry at my father
51. My father told me good things about my mother
52. My father wanted me to be close to my mother
53. My parents got along well
54. My parents used to yell at each other
55. When my father needed to make a change in my schedule my mother would help
56. My father liked being with me
57. My mother and I had friendly talks
58. My mother asked me about my day in school
59. When I did something wrong my mother would talk to me about it
60. I felt that my mother cared about me
61. My father talked to me about big choices in my life
62. I felt that my father cared about me
63. I spent time doing fun things with my mother
64. My mother knew who my friends were and what they were like

65. My mother knew what kinds of things I did after school

66. My mother liked being with me

67. I talked to my mother

68. I had chores to do at my father's house.

69. My father told me he loved me and gave me hugs.

70. When I left the house, my father knew where I was and who I was with

71. If I had a problem in school my father knew about it

72. When I broke one of my mother's rules, she would punish me

73. My father asked me about my day in school

74. My father knew who my friends were and what they were like

75. My father knew what kinds of things I did after school

76. I had chores to do at my mother's house

77. When I would leave the house, my mother knew where I was and who I was with

78. My mother talked to me about big choices in my life

79. If I had problems in school my mother would know about it

80. When I did something wrong my father talked to me about it

81. My father praised me when I would do something good at home or at school

82. I talked to my mother about my problems

83. If I got in trouble at school my mother would punish me

84. My mother used to say nice things about me

85. I spent time doing fun things with my father

86. My father knew who my teachers were and how well I was doing at school

87. I had rules to follow at my father's house

88. I talked to my father

89. I talked to my father about my problems

90. My father used to say nice things about me

91. I had rules to follow at my mother's house

92. My father and I had friendly talks

93. When my father said he was going to punish me he did

94. My mother knew who my teachers were and how well I was doing at school

95. When I broke one of my father's rules, he would punish me

96. My father talked to me about my friends

97. My mother talked to me about my friends

98. My father was patient with me

99. I talked to my mother about things that I did well

100. My mother praised me when I did something good at home or at school

101. My mother told me she loved me and gave me hugs

102. If I got in trouble at school my father would punish me

103. My mother was patient with me

104. I talked to my father about things I did well

105. When my mother said she was going to punish me she did it

106. My father used to tell me to ask my mother about child support

107. It was ok to talk about my mother in front of my father

Distress

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

108. In the last 30 days …

109. My worries overwhelmed me

110. I felt hopeless

111. I found social settings upsetting

112. I had trouble staying focused on tasks

113. Anxiety or fear interfered with my ability to do the things I needed to do at work or at home

Emotional Regulation

Strongly Disagree Moderately Disagree Neutral Moderately Agree Strongly Agree

114. When I want to feel happier, I think about something else

115. When I want to feel less bad (sad, angry, worried) I think about something different

116. When I am worried about something, I think about it in a way that makes me feel better

117. When I want to feel happier about something, I change the way I am thinking about it

118. I control my feelings about things by changing the way I think about them

119. When I want to feel less bad (sad, angry, worried) I change the way I think about it

120. I keep my feelings to myself

121. When I am feeling happy, I am careful not to show it

122. I control my feelings by not showing them

123. When I am feeling bad (sad, angry, worried) I am careful not to show it

Painful Feelings About Divorce Scale

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strong Agree Does Not Apply

124. My father caused most of the trouble in my family

125. My father caused the breakup of my family

126. If my father had been a better(nicer/stronger) person, my parents would still be together

127. Before my parent's divorce it was my father who usually made my family unhappy

128. Sometimes I feel angry at my father for my parent's divorce

129. I still have not forgiven my father for the pain he caused my family

130. I feel like I might have been a different person if my father(mother) had been a bigger part of my life

131. I had a harder childhood than most people

132. I really missed not having my father around as much after my parent's separation

133. I wish my father had spent more time with me when I was younger

134. My childhood was cut short
135. My friends whose parents are not divorced seem to have happier lives
136. I probably would be a different person if my parents had not gotten divorced
137. I often wonder how life would be different if my parents were still together
138. I worry about big events like graduations or weddings, when both my parents will have to come
139. My parent's divorce still causes struggles for me
140. I still think a lot about the time around my parent's divorce
141. I feel doomed to repeat my parent's problems in my own relationships
142. I sometimes feel that people look down on me because my parents are divorced
143. Sometimes I feel angry at my mother for my parent's divorce
144. My mother caused the breakup of my family
145. If my mother had been a better (stronger/nicer) person, my parents would still be together
146. I still have not forgiven my mother for the pain she caused our family
147. Before my parent's divorce it was my mother who usually made my family unhappy
148. My mother caused most of the trouble in my family
149. I sometimes wonder if I could have prevented my parent's divorce
150. I wish I had tried harder to keep my families together
151. A lot of my parent's problems were because of me
152. If I had been an easier child, my parents might not have gotten divorced
153. My parents eventually seemed happier after they separated
154. My parent's divorce relieved a lot of tensions in my life
155. Even though it was hard, divorce was the right thing for my family
156. I feel comfortable talking to my friends about my parent's divorce

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Parentline can be contacted from 8.00am to 10.00pm seven days a week for the cost of a local call. Parents, carers and family members have direct access to qualified counsellors and can choose to speak with either a male or female counsellor. Parents are also able to arrange a call back and speak with the same counsellor. Parentline can be contacted on **1300 301 300**.

Lifeline is a free 24 hour telephone crisis support service available from a landline, payphone, or mobile. Anyone across Australia experiencing a personal crisis or thinking about suicide can contact Lifeline. Regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation, Lifeline's trained volunteers are ready to listen, provide support and refer. Lifeline can be contacted on **13 11 14**.

Counselling by family counsellors is also available. Sessions are at the rate of $120.00 per hour. Any person eligible for a mental health care plan can receive a rebate through Medicare for up to 10 sessions within a calendar year. This should make access to counselling services affordable to most people. Fiona Cuskelly specialises in counselling for young people and adolescents and can be contacted on (0451) 838 298. Julie Stirling specialises in counselling with adults and families and can be contacted on (0407) 539 372.

Appendix C– Separated Parent Questionnaire

Descriptive

1. Tell me about your experiences of conflict with the other parent immediately following separation …
2. Tell me about your experiences of conflict with the other parent two years and thereafter following separation …
3. Tell me about your experiences of conflict with the other parent now …
4. Tell me about your experiences of the family law system (including courts, child protection, police, family law professionals and community support organisations) …
5. Tell me about any experiences of hate with the other parent …

Grounded Theory

Hate

(Shand, 1920)

6. Since separation to what degree does your emotional life tend to track and react with the other parent? (i.e. how does the other parent react when you do well, how do you react when the other parent does well?)
7. Is the other parent sympathetic towards you? Do you have sympathy towards the other parent?
8. What you do you believe the other parent would have to confront, face, or take responsibility for if they did not have this conflict in their life?

Cognitive Dissonance

(Festinger, 1957; Sweeney, Hausknecht & Soutar, 2000)

9. I am going to run through a list of emotions, and I want you to indicate which ones you have experienced in your relationship with the other parent since separation –
    a. Despair
    b. Resentfulness
    c. Disappointment with yourself
    d. Being scared
    e. Hollowness
    f. Anger

g. Uneasiness
h. That you've let yourself down
i. Annoyed
j. Frustrated
k. In pain
l. Depressed
m. Furious with yourself
n. Felt sick
o. In agony
p. Shame

10. Since separation have you ever wondered if you should maintain a relationship with the other parent at all, or if you have done the right things?
11. Since separation have you wondered if you have been fooled or spun a line by the family law system? Were you aware of the consequences for decisions that you made? Can you give an example?
12. Have you wondered if the family law system got the property and parenting settlements, right?

Non-Normative Lifespan Development

13. Prior to separation did you believe that you and the other parent would raise your children and grow old together?

Hate

(Sternberg, 2003; Smyth & Moloney, 2017)

14. Do you believe that the other parent has a negative attitude towards you as one who is evil and not deserving of respect?
15. Do you believe the other parent would ever relent? If not, why not? If yes, under what circumstances?
16. Since separation do you believe the other parent is willing to incur personal costs or harm to your children?
17. Do you believe the other parent has a steadfast inability to self-reflect?

Conflict Management

18. If there were no change in your co-parenting relationship, what do you believe you and the other parent are realistically able to achieve in relation to the shared care of your children?
19. If you knew that this conflict would never end what would you do differently?
20. What support as a parent did you have initially post separation – professionally and personally?
21. What support as a parent do you have now – professionally and personally?
22. What support as a parent do you wish you had – professionally and personally? Why?