

A case study of protracted conflictual divorce

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine how the disputing spouses (husband and wife) perceive and represent themselves and each other in their narratives of protracted conflictual divorce.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used a qualitative longitudinal research strategy in the form of a case study. The participants were a legally married couple (husband and wife) who had been undergoing the divorce process for two years at the time of the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using narrative positioning analysis.

Findings – At the beginning of his narrative, the husband positions himself as a people-pleaser in his relationship with his wife, but by the end, he sees himself as a fighter, defending himself against an aggressor (his wife). Meanwhile, the wife initially perceives herself as an independent woman, and by the end of her story, she views herself as even stronger and financially stable, capable of providing for both her and her children. At the beginning of the story, the husband positions his wife as the woman who has fulfilled all his dreams; at the end of the story, he positions her as the aggressor who tries to take away his property and children. The wife positions her husband as someone who wants to be above her and harm her in every possible way. The findings reveal that although both spouses try to understand their own contributions to the situation, they continue to perceive each other through a lens distorted by defense mechanisms.

Research limitations/implications – The results of this study are not generalizable due to methodological limitations and a small sample size. However, it provides a deeper insight into how both spouses perceive themselves and each other during a prolonged, high-conflict divorce before the legal dissolution of marriage.

Practical implications – It is crucial for professionals working with families to recognize how dynamics such as splitting and projection emerge during a high-conflict divorce, as these mechanisms can hinder any possibility of conflict resolution. It is essential for specialists not only to support everyone's innate resilience and sense of self but also to ensure that personal beliefs, values and attitudes do not become so dominant that they hardly give space to other people's perspectives.

Social implications – Given that divorcees are important sources of information for changes in policy and practice, knowing about their experiences can help improve the resources and assistance available to them and their children.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is one of the first studies that is focused on what is representation of self and other of both parties in the context of protracted conflictual divorce.

Keywords High-conflict divorce, Case study, Experiences and perceptions, Narrative positioning analysis, Qualitative research, Longitudinal study

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

With a significant portion of marriages ending in divorce each year, marital dissolution is a common occurrence in contemporary countries. Some 1.8 million marriages and an estimated 0.7 million divorces took place in the EU in 2023 (Eurostat, 2025). Divorce or separation proceedings can go on for years for some couples (Lebow, 2019; Crabtree and Harris, 2020). According to statistics, persistent and widespread disagreements are present between 10% and 25% of divorces (Kelly, 2012; Perrig-Chiello *et al.*, 2015).

There is a dearth of scientific study on divorcees' self-transition through the contentious divorce process. Few research examine the psychological and emotional experiences of people going through lengthy and acrimonious divorces (Treloar, 2019; Francia, 2021). In this study, our focus is on what is representation of self and other of both parties in the context of protracted conflictual divorce before legal divorce has taken place and individuals are still legally married.

Given that divorcees are important sources of information for changes in policy and practice, knowing about their experiences can help improve the resources and assistance available to them and their children (Johnston, 1994; Kelly and Emery, 2003).

Outsider and insider approach to protracted conflictual divorce

It can be difficult to completely understand the experiences of divorcees in conflictual divorces and offer suitable solutions since their voices are frequently ignored (Bertelsen, 2021). Many instead describe divorcees from the third-person perspective of professional and academic competence, presenting outsider-expert perspectives rather than empirical facts.

Instead of taking into account the complexity of their experiences and demands, these studies paint divorcees as mistrustful, irate and self-centered (Treloar, 2018, 2019). It is common to compare extremely conflictual spouses to an abstract ideal of a "normal" family, focusing on the pathological characteristics of individuals and their effects on children (Haddad *et al.*, 2016; Archer-Kuhn, 2018; Bertelsen, 2021).

Divorcees are frequently individualized by this outsider perspective which also oversimplifies their experiences and ignores how special and complicated transition is. It is challenging to completely comprehend the changes divorcees go through when their voices and experiences are ignored, and this impedes attempts to effectively and efficiently handle the intricacies concealed behind the generalized term "conflictual divorce" (Bertelsen, 2021). Our study aims to further bridge the gap between internal and exterior understandings of this complicated phenomena by examining how both parties in a divorce represent themselves and one another.

Some recent qualitative research that examine how parents themselves feel and comprehend their divorce-related conflicts question the notion that divorcees in conflictual divorces are perpetually involved in their disputes (e.g. Bergman and Rejmer, 2017; Cashmore and Parkinson, 2011; Gulbrandsen *et al.*, 2018; Jevne and Andenæs, 2017; Treloar, 2019). These studies paint a different picture, showing that people involved in high-conflict divorces are regular people trying to make their daily lives safe and satisfying despite persistent and unreconcilable conflicts. Only eight qualitative studies from the past 10 years examining parents in conflictual (often post-divorce) relationships were found in a systematic review conducted by Francia *et al.* (2019). These investigations cast doubt on the widely held belief that divorcees in contentious divorces are obsessed by their arguments, which are frequently seen as widespread, unnecessary or focused on irrelevant subjects. Rather, the study indicates that this image may be a misrepresentation of the experiences of these families.

A rare study exploring how individuals reflect on themselves following a divorce and found that participants commonly reported positive internal changes and adjustments to their new realities, despite experiencing high-conflict separations [Treloar (2019)]. Challenging dominant theoretical perspectives on conflictual marital breakdowns, the scholar emphasized that individuals have diverse needs, challenges and interpretations that shift throughout the divorce journey, underlining the need for nuanced, context-sensitive support. However, this research centers on the phase after the divorce has been finalized, leaving unanswered how people perceive themselves and others during ongoing, unresolved and conflict-laden divorces where closure is not yet attainable.

Levite and Cohen (2012) used the theoretical framework of object relations theory to investigate the dynamics of couples involved in high-conflict divorce. According to the theory of object relations, high-conflict couples frequently exhibit primitive object relations and use splitting and projection as a means of living. Partners who are unable to accept their own destructiveness must split and project their negative traits onto the spouse (Levite and Cohen, 2012). The study examines the post-divorce high-conflict case, not ongoing conflictual divorce.

Research capturing the dynamics of divorce as they unfold in real time remains limited, despite repeated calls for such approaches (e.g. Thuen, 2001; Cipric *et al.*, 2020). To the best of the authors knowledge, this is the first study focusing on how each partner constructs representations of themselves and their spouse during a drawn-out, high-conflict divorce process. By engaging with individuals who are currently navigating the divorce, this study reduces reliance on retrospective accounts and helps improve the reliability of participants' recollections (Francia *et al.*, 2019).

Postdivorce data collection may be affected by what has been termed the "time heals effect," which can obscure or downplay the negative consequences of the divorce experience (Sander *et al.*, 2020). By speaking with individuals prior to the legal finalization of their divorce, this study captures more immediate insights into their internal transitional processes with minimal delay. Through a longitudinal design that includes two interview points, we are better equipped to observe both continuity and change in participants' experiences over time, offering a more nuanced and accurate view of their evolving inner landscapes.

This study centers the voices of the individuals themselves, offering an alternative lens through which to examine the divorce experience. By prioritizing their personal narratives, we move away from externally imposed interpretations that often cast divorcees in a negative light. Instead, we delve into their internal worlds, exploring the specific challenges and experiences they face throughout the process. This inward-focused perspective enables a richer understanding of how individuals represent themselves and others during divorce, highlighting the deeply personal and varied nature of their emotional and psychological journeys during this major life shift.

Drawing on the existing literature and the identified gaps in research on conflictual divorces, we formulate the following research questions:

- RQ1.* What is representation of self and other of both parties in the context of enduring conflictual divorce?
- RQ2.* How husband positions himself in relation to his wife? How husband positions his wife in relation to himself?
- RQ3.* How wife positions herself in relation to her husband? How wife positions her husband in relation to herself?

Method

We conducted a qualitative longitudinal research strategy in the form of a case study. According to Flyvbjerg (2004), case studies yield concrete, context-dependent knowledge that is more important than the pointless pursuit of universals and predictive theories. A single case can frequently serve as the basis for generalization, and the case study may contribute to scientific advancement through generalization as an adjunct or substitute for other approaches. However, "the force of example" is undervalued as a source of scientific advancement, whereas formal generalization is overvalued (Flyvbjerg, 2004).

Participants

The data analysis was based on interviews conducted with a married couple, identified as husband and wife. Husband is a 48-year-old male, and wife is a 47-year-old female. At the time of the interviews, they had been married for 22 years and were undergoing a divorce process that had been ongoing for two years. The couple has three children, aged 12, 18 and 20.

During the divorce proceedings, both individuals used the services of private and public attorneys, as well as mediation. The primary points of contention were the division of shared property and the custody arrangements for their youngest child. During the interview period, wife resided in the house with their daughter, whereas husband stayed in a separate part of the house a few days each week. Each of them had individual psychological counselling before and during the divorce. They also tried couples counselling before the initiating divorce.

Data collection

The interviews were conducted as part of the doctoral dissertation research, alongside interviews with other individuals undergoing divorce. The research was undertaken in compliance with the ethical standards outlined in the Code of Ethics for Scientific Research in Belgium and the Lithuanian Code of Ethics for Scientists. Approval for the study was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No. 6/-2021). Given the emotional nature of the subject matter, careful measures were taken to prioritize the participants' psychological well-being and personal freedom. The following steps were implemented:

- Before each interview, participants were given clear explanations about the study's purpose, interview procedures, anticipated duration and the use of digital recordings. They were also informed of their rights, including the freedom to skip questions or terminate participation at any time. To ensure transparency, participants were explicitly reassured that their responses would not be shared with their former partner, fostering an atmosphere of openness. Written consent was obtained at the beginning of the initial interview. Verbal consents were obtained at multiple points, particularly when sensitive topics arose ([Agre and Rapkin, 2003](#); [Van den Hoonaard, 2002](#)).
- Recognizing that discussing personal experiences of divorce might provoke discomfort, interviews were conducted with the utmost sensitivity. The interviewer created a safe and supportive environment, allowing participants to share their experiences at their own pace. Efforts were made to avoid judgment or emotional interference, using active listening techniques such as paraphrasing, observing and reflecting. While the researcher used counselling psychology skills to address participants' emotional cues, their role was strictly observational and nontherapeutic.

By taking these measures, the research ensured the protection of participants' rights while fostering a respectful and ethically responsible environment for data collection.

Two waves of semi-structured interviews with each participant were conducted separately online. Both participants opted for audio-conferencing. The duration of each first wave interview was approximately 1.5 h. Second-wave interview with the husband took place eight months later and lasted 1.5 h. Second-wave interview with the wife took 10 months after the first-wave interview and lasted for 1 h. Participants were still legally married. An audio recording of both interviews was made and transcribed *verbatim*.

Data analysis

We applied integrative approach to narrative analysis – positioning analysis ([Bamberg, 2020](#); [Bamberg, 2021](#)). We have carried out a first level narrative positioning analysis. We

looked at how husband constructed himself and his wife in his divorce story. We navigated how he constructed himself and his wife in three positioning arenas: sameness/different, agency/passivity and continuity/change (Bamberg, 2020). We then carried out the same analysis with the wife's transcribed divorce narrative. We navigated how wife constructed herself and her husband in three positioning arenas: sameness/different, agency/passivity and continuity/change.

Findings

Husband

Self-positioning of the husband in his relationship with the wife

The husband adopts both active and passive roles in his relationship with his wife. At the beginning, he took control by proposing marriage:

[...] within three months, I had practically realised that this was the person I wanted to spend my life with, and I proposed".

Later, he once again assumed control – this time by initiating the divorce:

[...] then I suggested we get a divorce, because I said I didn't see any common ground between us.

He revealed his passive role in the marriage by admitting that, with the help of a psychologist, he came to understand how dominated he had been by his wife:

[...] with a third party—when I began working with the psychologist—I started to realize that we had a toxic relationship. [...] I was under her thumb the whole time.

The husband also describes himself as having been in a long-term codependent relationship with his wife:

[...] my mother was very bossy, and so was my grandmother. [...] I came to understand that I have issues with co-dependency. [...] I'm a people-pleaser [...] That's what allowed the relationship to continue for so long.

He had been in a codependent relationship with his wife for many years without realizing it. Through psychological counselling, he gained awareness of the unhealthy dynamic and recognized that he could no longer continue living the way he had. He began to change. He positioned himself as no longer willing to be dominated by his wife and actively sought change in the relationship:

My desire not to be under her thumb kept getting stronger [...].

He saw the relationship as destructive – one he no longer wanted but was unable to change, despite his efforts. Eventually, he came to the conclusion that divorce was the only path to real transformation:

Then I began to see that the only way to stop these terrible relationships was divorce.

For him, divorce represents a painful but necessary transition from his former codependent self to a more mature version of himself – one capable of standing up for his own needs, asserting boundaries, and no longer yielding to his wife as he often did in the past:

It's a painful maturation [...] a true transformation of personality [...] I've been standing by my own boundaries and attitudes for some time now.

He describes the divorce process as a journey of learning how to defend himself:

[...] I'm learning how to defend myself [...] this divorce is teaching me how to be a good defender, and to protect myself, my parents, and their property as much as I can.

The husband portrays himself as a highly sensitive person: “My sensitivity is still at a higher level, because I’m quick to burst into tears and to take offence.” He finds it easier to communicate with his wife through email rather than face-to-face, as even brief encounters – such as passing each other in the kitchen – provoke intense physical reactions and the motion of fear:

[. . .] it’s easier for me to communicate in writing, because I still experience bodily sensations—like fear—when we meet, even just passing in the kitchen.

He also acknowledges a kind of emotional addiction, describing how he became aware of his tendency to react impulsively to negative emotions. To manage this, he now delays his responses to his wife’s messages:

I used to respond immediately. So now, I deliberately wait a few days—usually three—for the intense emotions to settle. Then I can respond with a clear head.

He reflects on one of the most emotionally difficult moments of the relationship – when, following a conflict, his wife began sleeping alone in their daughter’s room:

[. . .] it’s been two years since she left [our bedroom] in October. That was the hardest part.

In the second wave of interviews, the husband maintains a self-image as someone engaged in a struggle for justice, particularly within the legal context of the divorce:

I must think about what my wife has written about me—what injustices she’s claimed in court. I’m convinced that many of these statements are lies, and I believe I can fight against them.

The husband’s positioning of his wife in relationship to himself.

The husband portrays his wife as the ideal partner at the beginning of their relationship – someone who appeared to fulfil all his long-held dreams:

[. . .] I found the one I had been dreaming of for a long time. She matched absolutely everything—she embodied all my dreams.

In the husband’s narrative, the “princess of his dreams” undergoes a dramatic transformation. Over time – specifically by the 17th year of their marriage – he describes her as having shifted from an ideal partner to someone who began threatening him with divorce and engaging in manipulation and emotional blackmail:

Then came the first angry remarks from my wife about divorce, which felt threatening [. . .] there were manipulations and blackmail. She would set traps—like suggesting I start going to dances alone [. . .] then next time everything would seem fine again [. . .]. It was only when I started seeing a psychologist that I began to understand—this is manipulation.

The husband also portrays his wife as a powerful and increasingly dominant figure within the marriage – someone who advanced professionally while simultaneously exerting greater control at home. He notes that her assertiveness intensified over time, eventually escalating into physical aggression during moments of anger:

[. . .] my wife’s pushiness kept growing—she was advancing in her career, in her work, her profession, her studies. And her pushiness at home was increasing as well. [. . .] When she got very angry, she could scratch or slam. The last time, she hit me on the head—I can’t even remember what for.

The husband speculates that his wife displays narcissistic traits, drawing a connection between her behavior and that of the influential women in his early life – his mother and grandmother. He reflects on a recurring pattern of attraction to emotionally distant, demanding women:

[. . .] with my wife—I assume she has some narcissistic traits, like those of my mother and grandmother. [. . .] Even my grandmother, who was my favorite, had this kind of disorder, which

made me fall in love with such people. [...] Cold and unattainable women [...] who expect to be served and constantly pursued.

In his account, the husband presents his wife as a powerful, narcissistic figure who seeks dominance not only in their emotional relationship but also in the legal and financial aspects of the divorce. He describes her as demanding a larger share of the marital property, pressuring him to relinquish everything to her and their children, and manipulating public perception to cast him as the villain:

My wife wants more than just half. [...] I don't agree with that, especially because we still owe a debt to my parents—and now I'm the only one left to repay it. [...] She has been telling everyone that I initiated the divorce. [...] so now I'm the bad guy. [...] She's saying the same thing to the kids, and she even says that if I were a real man, I would leave everything to her and the children.

The husband also characterizes his wife as dishonest, accusing her of deliberately misrepresenting facts during their separation:

For example, she lies—she says she hasn't seen something, which simply isn't true. [...] She claims she never saw the Excel file I filled out for her, which included details about loans involving her brother and her mother, and the financial support my parents had provided. But I sent that file to her twice—once in 2008 and again in 2010.

Finally, the husband positions his wife as the aggressor in the divorce, portraying himself as being on the defensive – both emotionally and legally. He describes her actions as an attempt to strip him of both his assets and his parental role:

So far, this has been a form of defense for me—against an aggressor [...]. Because she wants to take away from me my property and my children.

In the second wave of interviews, he continues to describe his wife as resolutely combative and unwilling to compromise, highlighting what he sees as her relentless pursuit of personal gain at any cost:

[...] the determination to lie, to slander, to fight to the bitter end—whatever you want to call it—is there. She refuses to give in, refuses to agree to any kind of peace. We even had a peace agreement drafted [...]. There's a strong desire on her part to keep the house for herself, no matter what.

The husband consistently positions himself in contrast to his wife – less powerful, more passive but also more open to self-reflection and personal growth. At the beginning of his narrative, he describes himself as a people-pleaser, shaped by a pattern of codependent relationships. By the end, however, he portrays himself as a fighter – actively defending himself against what he now views as an aggressor, his wife.

Wife

Self-positioning of the wife's in her relationship with the husband

The wife positions herself in relation to her husband as someone who entered the marriage impulsively, acknowledging that she accepted his proposal quickly and without truly knowing him. She takes partial responsibility for this decision, framing it as a reflection of her spontaneous nature:

Well, it was such a hasty decision [...]. It didn't feel very safe [...]. But I have a spontaneous character—I make decisions quickly [...]. So, I take some responsibility for having made a hasty move.

The wife positions herself as an independent woman who did not strongly depend on her husband and who deliberately kept her expectations low in the relationship. She reflects on this stance with a hint of regret, suggesting that she may have underestimated her own needs or the importance of setting clear standards:

Well, I thought I could survive on my own and only needed a man to a limited extent. I didn't want to make things harder for him—but now I realise I could have raised the bar.

The wife also positions herself as highly active and responsible within the family. She acknowledges that she took on an excessive share of responsibility for both her husband and the family as a whole:

I took too much responsibility for the family [...] for everything, for him, for his well-being. Well, I have such personal qualities.

She further frames herself as the leader of the family, explaining that her assumption of this role was a response to her husband's inability or unwillingness to lead:

Well, naturally I took that responsibility, because if one doesn't take it, the other must [...] for the children, for everything, for the household. Someone must do it.

The wife portrays herself not only as a strong and responsible woman but also as someone with emotional vulnerability. She openly discusses her long-term struggles with mental health, revealing a history of severe anxiety and depression. Despite seeking psychological counselling for 15 years, she admits to having underestimated the seriousness of her condition. The onset of the divorce marked a turning point, prompting her to acknowledge the need for medication:

I had very strong anxiety [...] And I went to counselling for maybe 15 years [...] When he said, 'I'm divorcing,' I cried a lot [...] That's when I realised, I needed medication.

The wife presents a complex self-positioning in relation to her husband – balancing compliance with boundary-setting. On one hand, she describes herself as someone who yielded to her husband's preferences for the sake of peace, even to the extent of discarding clothing he disapproved of:

Well, I agreed to everything for the sake of peace. Okay, the clothes don't fit, I'm throwing them away.

On the other hand, she asserts her autonomy and the right to set firm boundaries:

[...] however, those boundaries must be in my world [...]. That's how I said those rules would never work for me.

The wife presents herself as someone who has made a deliberate decision to cut off verbal communication with her husband, as every interaction triggers intense anxiety that requires medication to manage:

I don't talk at all [...] I've decided not to [...] I just get a lot of anxiety from all this and then I rush to take my medication.

She also describes strong emotional and physical reactions to written communication, particularly her husband's letters, which leave her overwhelmed and incapacitated:

I read it [the letter] immediately, I start shaking, I'm shaking so much [...] I can't do anything anymore, it knocks me out—just from reading. But now maybe the reaction is a little softer [...]. I'm learning to deal with it.

She positions herself as someone who actively attempted to save their deteriorating marriage by inviting her husband to attend joint counselling:

I invited him to a joint consultation [...] A very good psychologist—she listened attentively and worked more with him.

At the outset of the divorce process, the wife positions herself as completely overwhelmed – emotionally destabilized and uncertain about how to continue with her life. She recalls experiencing a sense of hopelessness and financial insecurity:

[...] if you had asked me two years ago [about divorce], well, it would have been the end of the world for me. [...] I didn't see any hope of going on living at all. I didn't know what to live on [...].

However, she describes a significant transformation over the following two years. Her emotional state stabilized, and her financial circumstances improved dramatically:

Well, a lot has changed in two years [...] I got back on my feet [...] and a lot of projects came up very quickly where I could start to work, and the situation was resolved financially very quickly.

The wife positions herself as someone who, during the marriage, was unable to fully express herself or live authentically. She describes a pervasive sense of restriction, as if she needed her husband's approval for her choices – or had to conceal them altogether:

[...] as if I didn't have the full right to live the way I wanted to live when I was married. It was like I had to steal. That's the feeling—if you want something, you must hide it. Whether it was about making my own decisions or simply dressing the way I wanted —there always had to be confirmation, and I never knew if he would be happy or not [...].

She also recounts how even basic parenting responsibilities, like buying things for their children, had to be done in secrecy:

[...] you had to hide it [...] get money secretly from somewhere and then buy everything for the children [...] so he wouldn't notice.

Now, in the process of divorce, she experiences a return to autonomy and self-expression:

[...] now I go with the kids and buy them everything.

In the second wave of interviews, the wife portrays herself as someone who opposes the divorce terms proposed by her husband, signaling her continued resistance to what she perceives as unfair or one-sided conditions:

I do not agree to his terms. He is demanding [...], which I find unreasonable.

The wife's positioning of her husband in relationship to herself.

The wife positions her husband as the more active partner after their marriage – someone who began asserting control and imposing his expectations about family life. She recalls that he laid out his conditions only after the marriage had taken place:

[...] then he said his conditions—how he needed things to be, what the family should look like [...].

She describes this shift as the emergence of “male power,” which began to manifest in attempts to regulate her appearance and behavior:

[...] then the male power started to show—how he sees it. I mean, what should be my dress code, what my clothes [...] so much control has started.

She positions her husband as the one who initiated the divorce, stating:

He said he was getting a divorce – this came up around the third counselling session.

She assumes that it is important for her husband to feel superior to her, but believes he struggles because he cannot achieve that:

He imagines that he must be above his wife [...] and since he can't be above, he can't live.

She positions her husband as someone who has not yet taken on the roles and responsibilities of an adult. In her view, he has withdrawn from his duties, especially since announcing the divorce:

"[...] he hasn't yet stepped into a conscious, normal, adult role [...] he's not taking responsibility for anything. From the moment he said he was getting divorced, he began to withdraw—he stopped contributing financially, even stopped buying food, though he continued eating at home.

She presents her husband as someone who, after attending psychological consultations, began to dictate how things should be in their family:

He used to go to a psychologist at the clinic [...] and then he would come back and say, 'We have decided'—meaning he and the psychologist—that this is how things are going to be in our family.'

The wife positions her husband as someone who invested less than she did—both in her and in their relationship:

[...] he contributed less. Naturally, a relationship isn't valued as much when one hasn't invested in it—whether in the person or in the partnership itself. If he had invested more, he would have valued it more.

She perceives her husband as attempting to undermine her in the divorce process by any means possible:

[...] he wants to live here and continue doing harmful and destructive things—anything he can to hurt me [...]. But it was still clear what his motives were: to destroy, to cause harm.

In the second wave of interviews, the wife portrays her husband as someone seeking to benefit financially from the divorce:

The husband seems to want to profit from the divorce—he doesn't really want to separate, but rather to earn something from it.

The wife positions herself as a *different* from her husband: more mature, more responsible and more investing in their family.

At the beginning of her story, she presents herself as an independent woman who did not rely heavily on a man. By the end of her conflictual divorce narrative, she has become a financially stable individual, fully capable of taking care of herself and her children, with a clear sense of direction and the ability to protect her children and property.

Discussion

There is a lack of research exploring the experiences and internal transformations of individuals going through a prolonged, high-conflict divorce ([Bertelsen, 2021](#)). Our study focuses on how both parties perceive and represent themselves and each other in the context of a protracted conflictual divorce before the legal proceedings are finalized.

Our study emphasized the importance of conducting interviews before the formal dissolution of marriage to examine divorce as an ongoing process. This approach was crucial, as post-divorce studies often fail to capture the uncertainty and complexity individuals experience throughout the divorce process.

Our findings indicate that both parties undergo a profound transformation in their self-perception during the divorce process. The husband transitions from his former codependent self to a more mature individual who can assert himself and establish clear boundaries. Meanwhile, the wife evolves into a financially stable woman capable of providing not only for herself but also for her children. This aligns with [Treloar's \(2019\)](#) study, which found that all divorced participants experienced positive shifts in their identities.

Our findings indicate that the wife was unable to express herself freely during the marriage. However, through the divorce process, she regained the ability to fully express herself once again. This aligns with the study by [Mendoca et al. \(2020\)](#), which found that post-divorce

women often develop a heightened sense of resilience and experience newfound freedom, fostering personal growth.

Our study revealed that both spouses engaged in self-reflection regarding their contributions to the circumstances that led to their divorce. With the help of psychological counselling, the husband acknowledged his struggles with co-dependency in the marriage. Meanwhile, the wife admitted that she had rushed into marriage and had taken on excessive responsibility for the family. While other studies have explored reflexivity, they have primarily focused on the post-divorce period rather than the divorce phase itself (Heshmati *et al.*, 2022; Quah, 2018).

Our study revealed a significant shift in the way the husband perceived and portrayed his wife. At the beginning of his narrative, he described her as the woman of his dreams. However, by the end, he positioned her as an aggressor seeking to take away both his property and his children. We interpret this shift as a defense mechanism – specifically, splitting and projection. Initially, the husband idealized his wife, but later, he demonized her. Notably, he made no mention of her vulnerability, anxiety or depression.

Our study found that the husband was unaware of his own controlling behavior in the relationship and instead projected this trait onto his wife. Similarly, the wife projected her aggressive impulses onto her husband, interpreting his actions at the start of the divorce as deliberate attempts to harm her. According to Levite and Cohen (2012), some couples struggle to cope with ambivalence, frustration and rage, resorting to defense mechanisms such as splitting and projection. This, in turn, contributes to heightened conflict in both marriage and divorce.

The results of our study showed that spouses continued to perceive each other through the lens of defense mechanisms even eight to 10 months after the first wave of interviews, despite both having received psychological counselling. This aligns with the findings of Levite and Cohen (2012), whose case study revealed that ex-spouses exhibited high levels of splitting and projection even three years after their divorce.

It is crucial for professionals working with families to recognize how dynamics such as splitting and projection emerge during a high-conflict divorce, as these mechanisms can hinder any possibility of conflict resolution. It is essential for specialists not only to support everyone's innate resilience and sense of self but also to ensure that personal beliefs, values and attitudes do not become so dominant that they hardly give space to other people's perspectives. Effectively managing a protracted, contentious divorce requires maintaining a balance between personal growth and consideration for others.

The results of this study are not generalizable due to methodological limitations and a small sample size. However, it provides a deeper insight into how both spouses perceive themselves and each other during a prolonged, high-conflict divorce before the legal dissolution of marriage. Further research could involve larger scale qualitative studies to explore the prevalence and commonalities of protracted conflictual divorce; longitudinal studies to track the long-term impact on all family members; effectiveness studies on new or adapted interventions specifically designed for high-conflict, protracted cases; cross-cultural comparisons of protracted conflictual divorce; research into systemic factors that perpetuate conflict within legal or social service systems.

Conclusion

This is one of the first qualitative longitudinal studies that is focused on what is representation of self and other of both parties in the context of protracted conflictual divorce.

Our study's findings indicate that while the husband first portrays himself as a people-pleaser, shaped by a pattern of codependent relationships, by the end he views himself as a warrior who is protecting himself from an aggressor-his wife. By the end of her story, the

wife, who at first sees herself as an independent woman, believes she is even stronger and more financially secure, able to support herself and her kids.

The husband presents his wife at the start of the story as the one who has made all his dreams come true, and at the conclusion, he presents her as the one who is trying to take away his children and possessions. The husband positions himself as being less strong, more submissive than his wife, yet also more adaptable.

The wife positions herself as more responsible, mature and family-oriented than her husband. According to the wife, her husband tries to dominate her in whatever way he can in the divorce process.

Our research shows that even when both parties try to comprehend their own roles in the divorce process, they nevertheless view one another through a defensive mechanism-distorted lens. After eight to ten months of the first wave of interviews both spouses continued perceive each other through a lens of defense mechanisms.

It is crucial for professionals working with families in conflict to recognize these dynamics and their impact during a high-conflict divorce. Keeping a balance between one's own development and compassion for others is essential to handling a prolonged, high-conflict divorce.

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Further reading

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