

DISSERTATION

FAMILY MEMBERS' NARRATIVES ON DIVORCE
AND INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

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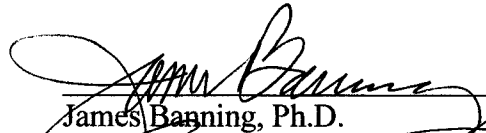
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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE DISSERTATION PREPARED
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MEMBERS' NARRATIVES ON DIVORCE AND INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT
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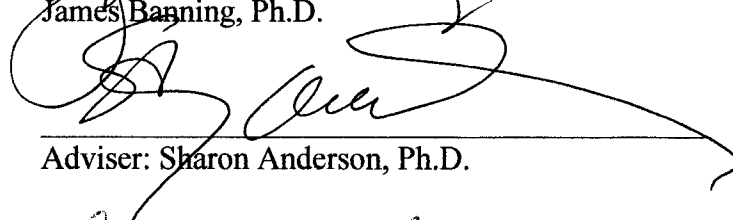
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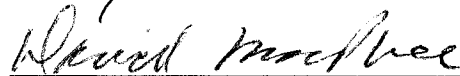
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION
FAMILY MEMBERS' NARRATIVES ON DIVORCE
AND INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT

This study aims to interpret the internal dynamics and family relationships in post-divorce families experiencing ongoing interparental conflict and parental alienation. Interparental conflict and children's triangulation between parents increase the likelihood of parental alienation, which is associated with children's adjustment levels and parent-child relationship quality. This research employed narrative interviews with members of 3 families to explore their meaning structures. Results show how parents and children think, feel, and create meaning from their experiences; how family members respond to conflict and behaviors associated with parental alienation; and how they view relationships with one another. Meta-level findings suggest each family member holds dichotomous views, uses cognitive and behavioral control response strategies, and are involved in parental alienation as a relational dynamic.

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Brevis esse latore obscurus fio.

“No human being, adult or child, male or female ... should be allowed the entitlement of being believed without question. And no human being ... should ever be deprived of the right to be heard by a mind open to the possibility that the individual speaking is telling the truth.”

—originally from Kopetski, 1991, as cited in Kopetski, Rand, & Rand, 2005, p. 69

Latine loqui coactus sum. Quid quid latine dictum sit, altum videtur.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Parental alienation refers to the verbal, behavioral, and emotional activities one parent employs in order to form an alliance with children while distancing them from the other parent. Clinical reports and research findings indicate parental alienation most likely occurs when parents divorce, maintain high levels of conflict, and are involved in legal disputes (Darnall, 1998; Gardner, 1992; 1999a; Johnston, 2003; Rand, 1997). To date, divorce-related research suggests parents' ongoing conflict after divorce promotes more problematic child adjustment, increases the possibility of children experiencing loyalty conflicts, lowers the quality of parent-child relationships, and affects one's parenting ability. However, the actual individual and family processes involved in parental alienation are as yet poorly understood. In particular, one's own internal dynamics (i.e., feelings, responses, motivations, and meaning-making structures) and family relationships in the context of parental alienation have not been well researched. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand and interpret the internal dynamics and family relationships in post-divorce families whose parents engage in ongoing interparental conflict and parental alienation.

Research Questions

Following the purpose, there are three research questions driving this inquiry.

First, what stories do family members maintain and what meaning, including thoughts and feelings, do they derive from their experiences with interparental conflict and parental alienation? Second, what are family members' responses to parental conflict and parental alienation? Third, how do parents and children view the relationships with one another in the context of divorce, interparental conflict, and parental alienation?

Given (a) the need for systemic and family focused approaches within parental alienation (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1995; 1999; Johnston, 2003; Kelly & Johnston, 2001); (b) the likelihood that family members will have distinct interpretations and perceptions (Burns & Dunlop, 2002; Pelton & Forehand, 2001) related to divorce, conflict, and parental alienation; and (c) the call for qualitative methods and clinical interviews to develop awareness of family members' experiences (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999), I conducted a research project addressing these issues using constructivist and narrative frameworks. Constructivism asserts truth and reality to be contextually bound social constructions. Narrative inquiry aligns with the constructivist paradigm, interprets how people make meaning from life events, and allows the existence of multiple realities (Riessman, 1991). This project employed separate interviews with family members to access narratives and explore family relationships in the context of divorce, ongoing parental conflict, and parental alienation. The family relationships that were studied include mother-child, father-child, and mother-father dyads.

Definition of Terms

Internal dynamics: For the purpose of this research, internal dynamics refers to an individual's own meaning-making structures, feelings, responses, and motivations.

Parental alienation: Refers to the verbal, behavioral, and emotional ways a parent conveys dislike, disapproval, or hatred when children are present in an attempt to alienate children from the other parent (Darnall, 1998). This definition focuses specifically on parents' behavior and not the outcome of alienation techniques. For the purpose of this project, parental alienation referred to parents and children who feel alienated from one another due to parent-child-parent triangulation.

Parental Alienation Syndrome: Refers to the outcome (e.g., denigration, criticizing) children experience when they feel alienated from a parent for unjustifiable reasons (Gardner, 1987). The term Parental Alienation Syndrome concentrates on the effects children experience when alienation occurs and not the etiology of the alienation.

Delimitations and Limitations

This research is delimited to the participating families from northern Colorado families who experienced divorce, ongoing parental conflict, and overt forms of parental alienation. The findings are restricted in that family members must self-identify with levels of high conflict and overt types of parental alienation. As such, families whose members are not aware of high conflict or parental alienation may create different meanings about their experiences. In addition, families who experience more subtle forms of parental alienation may create unique meanings and their parent-child relationships may look distinct from those who participated in this research. Given that this project drew upon the constructivist paradigm and narrative methods, the findings are

bound by their context and not generalizable to the larger population who experiences parental alienation.

Like all research, this project has limitations based on the paradigm from which was oriented as well as the methodological and analytical procedures that occurred. First, with respect to procedure, I interviewed parents before their children, so there could have been some coaching of children after the adult and prior to the child(ren)'s interviews. To address this limitation, I asked parents not to coach their children before the interview. If I suspected coaching had occurred, while conducting member checking I asked if children had been told by their parent to share anything specific with me.

As a second limitation, the findings of the research will undoubtedly serve as a reduction of the data I deem important based on my context (Riessman, 1993). Unless the data were included in this report without interpretation, in essence left to represent themselves, there was simply no way to analyze data without some reduction or attention to certain aspects. This limitation is inherent in all qualitative analysis.

Third, because this project was rooted within constructivist and narrative paradigms, the interpretation of participants' stories was interpreted through my context as the researcher. The stories can have multiple meanings, however, and not all are represented in the text for logistical reasons. Similarly, others with different backgrounds may interpret the data in alternative ways (Riessman, 1993). To overcome this limitation, I infused extensive narrative text to support my interpretation; the text can also be used to provide sufficient rationale for other accounts.

Finally, I anticipate questions from some people about the representativeness of the findings. If one views research from a positivist or postpositivist view,

representativeness and generalizability are appropriate to question. However, because this project maintained a different ontological assumption about the nature of truth, my response to such questions would be twofold: (In a positivist mindset) “It doesn’t matter; I am not aiming to generalize this information to the whole population who has experienced parental alienation. And (from a constructivist angle), these findings are an absolutely true representation of how I, with my background, interpreted these particular participants’ stories at this point in time.”

Need for and Significance of the Findings

The findings from this research project are likely to be useful in many ways. Clinicians and legal professionals may learn from the results, providing them a more in-depth understanding of parental alienation to guide their work and advice to their clients. Parents who experience post-divorce conflict and parental alienation may also gain an enhanced understanding of conflict and parental alienation. Gaining personal insight and learning how these issues affect members of their family may influence parents in their decision-making and subsequent actions. For instance, using the findings of this research, a parent may seek peer support for feelings rather than making destructive comments in front of the children. A third area that is likely to advance, due to the findings about parents and children’s meaning-making about their relationships with one another, is advancing knowledge of meaning creation within the areas of parental alienation and parent-child relationships. The complexities in the findings illuminate some nuances not found in strict categorization of parental alienation. Based on the results associated with people’s meaning-making, this project may also provide preliminary help to begin changing the “unproductive” or “misinformed constructions” (Schwandt, 1990) of

parental alienation, parents who engage in alienation tactics, and how family members experience divorce, ongoing interparental conflict, and parental alienation. Finally, by maintaining an awareness of intersubjectivity (Miller, 1996), and remaining transparent, especially about these sensitive topics, this project can serve as a model for future ethical research. To truly listen and understand how one constructed meaning, necessitated me as the researcher, to give up personal or political agendas. In order to sincerely connect with people and come to a deeper understanding of their lives, researchers must act with the highest ethical considerations. When this happens, the process can keep one honest and acting in the highest regard.

Reflexive Statement of Researcher's Relation to the Subject and Project

My interest in understanding more about families who experience divorce, ongoing parental conflict, and parental alienation stems from my own family experiences as a child with two parents who criticized the qualities in each other, leaving me feeling distant from both of them. The end of my parents' marriage, occurring when I was about 6 years old, did not curtail their conflict. Nearly any issue was divisive: One of my parents would vigorously defend one stance while the other would claim a different one. What I remember most was how each one would try to diminish my affection for the other parent by expressing displeasure with various issues related to him or her. Ultimately, neither parent fully succeeded in pulling my affection away from the other; however, their criticism of one another affected my relationships with each of them. From these early experiences I learned parents' scrutiny of and attempts to alienate each other from children feels terrible for a child and should be avoided as much as possible.

During my final year as an undergraduate student, I took a course on family conflict and was immediately attracted to the subject for the same reasons I am drawn to the topic of parental alienation. The information I learned in that course was foundational to the research I would engage in as a graduate student. While working on my master's degree, I learned my parents' contentiousness and their critical remarks made about each other in front of me were described by the term "parental alienation." In reading more about this topic, I also learned parental alienation likely damages the quality of parent-child relationships and how feeling emotional distance from their children worries and hurts most parents. The topic of parental alienation easily connected with my interest in family conflict, so I aimed to discover more about it with the intent to educate parents about the negative affects of alienating practices so that their children would be protected and the parent-child relationship kept intact. I chose to conduct my master's thesis on parental alienation and, while learning more about the topic, simultaneously took research courses in preparation for my study. This research training shaped the way in which I thought about parental alienation and conducted the research.

My research training as a master's and undergraduate student was based on what I now know as the positivist paradigm. In that light, I learned that good positivist research involved increasing knowledge of what is real, which can only be determined if strict scientific methods were followed and the results of the study could be generalized to a majority of the population (Gliner & Morgan, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 2004; Shaughnessy & Zechmeister, 1994). With this as my research foundation, I grounded my thesis research in a positivist framework. However, something was amiss while I was in the middle of the analyses. Within the positivist paradigm, I had been taught about reducing

chance, eliminating bias, and working methodically to locate objective findings. In choosing the analyses to complete and what to enter into each of the statistical calculations, I realized how much subjectivity there was in positivist research. This realization came as a tremendous shock.

Looking back, while going through the process of my thesis, I clearly had a personal agenda to fulfill. My view on parental alienation paralleled the literature: I was overwhelmingly unilateral, focusing on only young adults' perspective of feeling distanced from their parents, rather than on various family members' perspectives, and I thought parental alienation damaged parents and children severely and irreparably. Essentially, I bought in to the deficit model that entrenched the early parental alienation literature. Unfortunately, using the positivist paradigm, I never had to articulate my perspective. Instead, given the positivist epistemological stance, I was hoping and expecting the methods and statistics to eliminate my biased assumptions. Even though I am proud of the findings and of the research, I now have a clearer sense that using a positivist framework merely covered my agenda from the readers' and participants' view.

Fortunately, the insights gained from my thesis analysis experience piqued an interest in diverse forms of research. In my doctoral program, I took three qualitative research classes that legitimized the usefulness of qualitative, constructivist, and narrative approaches. As a result, I now view more forms of research with legitimacy and I am more open with myself and with others about the purpose of my research. I aimed for this research project to illuminate the intricacies not seen through survey research. I purposefully strived to avoid strict categorization, and instead focused on the variety and depth of others' experiences.

Using my new-found appreciation for the wide array of research paradigms and methods presents challenges and unique opportunities. Given my personal background and research training, one challenge to remain vigilant against is imposing my original agenda upon the people participating in my research. In my work as a therapist, I battle my personal agenda from leading counseling sessions by consistently maintaining openness to others' experience while being able to reserve my own thoughts and beliefs, not permitting them to dominate. To be honest, I still waiver between understanding parental alienation as negatively as it is depicted in the literature and wanting to explore it in-depth for its drawbacks as well as potential usefulness. In order to temper my negative views about parental alienation, I had to explore the intricacies of what participants mean when they said something challenging or that differed from my personal experience. I also had to take extra precautions (e.g., sensitive listening, respectfully explaining my background) when doing this so I did not offend them.

There are not only challenges associated with learning and conducting qualitative research, however. Using a more exploratory framework that allows various perspectives to coexist is particularly useful with regard to parental alienation research due to the unverified assumptions within the literature. Drawing upon such a framework while utilizing parents' and children's views of parental alienation shifts the focus from preconceived assumptions and personal agendas and begins to deconstruct them. Using family-centered data collection also elucidates the complexity of family members' various viewpoints, problematizing a singular conception of parental alienation.

Given my personal history with parental alienation, there were important considerations for how and why I engaged in parental alienation research. First, clearly

my interest in parental alienation stems from my exposure to it as a child. However, following Miller's (1996) assertions, the purpose of this research was not to tell my own story or to have my own agenda carried out through examining others' stories. Conversely, this research was an "aid to self-reflection" (Miller, p. 131) and helped me maintain sensitivity and awareness to understand others' experiences (Miller). Second, I did not choose this topic in order to comprehend more about myself or my family or to rework my past; instead, all of my life experiences—the positive and the negative—enriched me and worked to create the person I am today. I am fortunate to have found an area of research that I not only personally experienced, but that is intriguing, incites passion, and is new enough to benefit greatly from additional inquiry. Third, the intersubjective nature of interview interactions (Miller) keeps me honest and reflective about the intent of my research and questions. Delineating my perspective as a researcher stretched further self-discovery, both in my own as well as others' storied experiences (Miller). Thus, by acknowledging the influence of my background, consumers can clearly identify my stance and with such transparency, it enhances the ethics with which I conduct this project and treat the interview participants.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

“Parents wonder why the streams are bitter when they themselves have poisoned the fountain.” –John Locke, philosopher

The topic of parental alienation gained attention after Gardner (1985, 1987) coined the term “Parental Alienation Syndrome” (PAS) as an indicator of the effects parents’ criticism and alienation attempts can have upon children. Gardner (1985, 1987, 1992, 1999a, 1999b) used the phrase Parental Alienation Syndrome to emphasize the effects children exhibit when they feel alienated from a parent. Gardner’s emphasis on the outcomes children exhibit when they experience PAS suggest a child’s feelings are the “gold standard” or primary indicator alienation has occurred. In the 20 plus years since then, various other terms have evolved, each with its own emphasis. Darnall (1998) refocused PAS to the term “parental alienation,” which maintained a focus on the parents’ behavior inciting alienation; thus, the term parental alienation centers on parental behavior and not the effects experienced in alienated children, like PAS does. Most recently, Kelly and Johnston (2001) proposed “alienated child” to refer specifically to children who are alienated from a parent regardless of the alienation’s etiology. For the present research project, the term parental alienation is used because I specifically target

parents and children who feel alienated from one another due to parent-child-parent triangulation induced by interparental conflict and parents' pejorative verbal remarks about one another.

Parental alienation is thought to occur most when parents divorce and maintain ongoing custody disputes (Darnall, 1998; Gardner, 1992, 1999a; Johnston, 2003; Rand, 1997). However, due to differences in terminology (e.g., aligned, alienated) and the lack of good, large-scale research, there is little solid information as to the prevalence of parental alienation. Gardner's (1992) clinical reports indicated that as many as 90% of "disputed custody cases" show signs of PAS. Lampel's (1996) research indicated between 41% and 50% of children whose parents are fighting over custody exhibit some signs of preference for one parent. On the other hand, Johnston's (2003) research suggested most children do not experience alignment toward one parent over the other. In litigating families the prevalence of parental alignment was between 8% and 18%; extreme alignment to one parent comprised only 8% to 9% of all children in the sample (Johnston). Similarly, Moné (2002) found between 2% and 10% of college students felt they experienced parental alienation as child. Further research estimated about 20% of children whose parents dispute custody experience parental alienation (Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, 2005). These widely varied estimates confuse when parental alienation is most likely to occur and leave the exact prevalence undetermined. Because children's loyalty conflicts are especially likely when parents continue to engage in ongoing conflict with each other (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990; Hetherington, 1999; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Kelly, 2000), it may be that parental

alienation is found in 10% to 20% of divorced families (Hetherington, Johnston & Roseby) where parental conflict remains high.

Parental alienation is primarily associated with parents who experience divorce, but may occur in other contexts as well. Gardner (1999a) indicated false allegations of child sexual abuse or child physical abuse are telltale signs of parental alienation. Gardner reasoned that the custodial parent instigates the alienation by trying to form an alliance with the child against the noncustodial parent to maintain custody. In addition to cases of divorce and ongoing conflict, parental alienation may also arise in other family types. For example, it can appear when a parent remarries and forms a stepfamily (Shopper, 2005; Warshak, 2000). In stepfamilies, parental alienation may occur as a result of competition between the absent parent and stepparent, or it may be fueled by attempts to minimize or erase the absent parent from a child's history or it (Warshak). The possibility has also been raised that parental alienation could occur in never-divorced families that maintain high levels of interparental conflict and where children are triangulated between parents during conflict (Moné & Biringen, 2006; Shopper, 2005). The fact that parental alienation is linked with divorce and children's loyalty conflicts calls attention to the connections between parental alienation and parental conflict, children's adjustment, and parent-child relationships.

Connection Between Divorce, Conflict, Children's Adjustment, and Parental Alienation

After divorce, parental conflict usually diminishes in about 2 to 3 years (Kelly, 2003), which is also when children's adjustment to the divorce begins to stabilize (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1995; Kelly). Some parents, however, do not reduce

their conflict after the initial post-divorce adjustment. When this occurs, the ongoing interparental conflict is regarded as more hurtful to children's adjustment than the parents' actual divorce (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Forehand, & McCombs, 1989; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). For those parents whose conflict remains high even years after divorce, the children are at highest risk for adjustment difficulties.

Continuing conflict is a significant predictor of variability in several aspects of adjustment, including externalizing problems, internalizing problems, self-esteem, social competence, cognitive competence, academic achievement, and young adult attitudes toward marriage and quality of romantic relationships (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001, p. 339).

For children who experience divorce and parents' ongoing conflict, it is clear they are at higher risk for adjustment difficulties than their peers who live in an acrimonious two-parent home (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

It is not the mere presence of conflict, but how parents handle it, that damages children the most. The intensity, frequency, style of parents' conflict, as well as the extent of its resolution are all important in determining the influence of parental conflict on children (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Kelly, 2000). Children show the highest forms of distress and poorest overall adjustment when parental conflict involves physical aggression (Cummings, 1998), contains topics relating to the children (Cummings), and places children in the middle of an argument in an attempt to make them choose sides (Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Interestingly, overt and covert forms of conflict both damage children. Children perceive parents' nonverbal anger responses. Children can also detect when parents resolve conflict "behind closed doors" (Cummings). Even when mothers and fathers disagree, if they resolve conflict, children exhibit less distress and aggressiveness than if conflict was left unresolved

(Cummings). Taken together, this information suggests that it is not just parents' overt conflict expressions that matter; there is something about the emotional landscape in families that children detect and to which they react.

Cummings and his colleagues mapped out the family's emotional landscape in their discussions of emotional security (Cummings, 1998; Cummings & Davies, 2002; Harold, Shelton, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2004). According to the emotional security hypothesis, children perceive how emotionally safe or comfortable their environment is based on what occurs in it (Harold et al.). A person's sense of emotional security is based on one's emotional regulation, cognitive representations, and behavioral regulation (Harold et al.). When parents engage in conflict, children attach meaning to and create perceptions of what they experience based on how conflict is handled in their families and between parents (Cummings; Cummings & Davies). When the emotional security hypothesis was tested, children showed increased aggression when exposed to parents' conflict (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2004). Moreover, the impact of parental conflict affects children's sense of emotional security over time. Parents' conflict influenced children's view of family relationships and their own psychological distress even 1 year later (Harold et al.). Children's reports further indicate when they hear negative remarks about a parent the information "destroys a lot more than just their relationship with the other parent" (Summers & Summers, 2006, p. 256). These findings indicate children do not simply get used to conflict (Cummings). Instead, how parents engage in conflict and whether they experience resolution continues to affect how a child perceives and reacts to the emotional landscape in his or her family (Cummings; Cummings & Davies). Children's sense of the emotional landscape in their families is

informed by how parents manage conflict and how children perceive the family's emotional security.

When parents maintain high levels of conflict with one another, there is a higher likelihood children may experience loyalty conflicts (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Fauber et al., 1990; Hetherington, 1999; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Kelly, 2000). When parents argue, they can place children in the middle of conflict by directly involving them and telling them about the other parent's faults. Interparental conflict and parents' negative disclosures about one another have been shown to negatively affect children and their adjustment after divorce (Afifi, 2003; Kelly). Children's loyalty conflicts, in fact, mediate the relationships between parent conflict and children's adjustment (Buchanan & Heiges). However, because children can detect the emotional landscape in their families, they can also detect sentiments their family members have about each other, even if they are not openly discussed. This phenomenon, known as the spill-over hypothesis, explains how parental conflict creates a ripple effect, upsetting others in the family. According to the spill-over hypothesis, emotions in one relationship can spill over and affect other, related relationships, such as those in a family (Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Cox, Paley, & Harter, 2001). Specifically, when parents argue with one another and involve their children in loyalty conflicts, their emotion spills over to the parent-child relationship and can create triangulation between the child and both parents (Erel & Burman, 1995). It is clear that the effects of parental conflict are not confined to the marital relationship; the impact of conflict spreads through a family, affecting each individual and the relationships among family members in profound ways.

Therefore, whether parents openly comment about the other parent's faults or show their disgust in other concealed (e.g., behavioral, emotional) ways, their sentiments can seep into their children. As children perceive how mothers and fathers feel about one another, if they are asked to or believe they should choose sides in parents' conflict, children will likely experience loyalty conflicts. Parents may use this triangulation to their benefit in an attempt to win the approval of children and alienate them from their other parent. When this occurs, parents put their children at risk for difficulties with adjustment as well as with their family relationships.

Influence of Divorce, Conflict, and Parental Alienation on Parent-Child Relationships

Not surprisingly, parental conflict affects more than loyalty conflicts and children's adjustment; it also influences the quality of parent-child relationships and parenting skills. Interparental conflict damages parent-child relationships (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Erel & Burman, 1995), which in turn mediates children's adjustment (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). Sadly, these effects are enduring. Parental conflict affects parent-child relationships not only during one's childhood, but also has lasting effects on the parent-adult child relationship (Amato & Sobolewski; Riggio, 2004). The influence of parents' conflict on children's adjustment also depends on the quality of parenting, especially by the custodial parent (Hetherington, 1999). Parents who divorce experience diminished parenting quality, exemplified by less authoritative practices, reduced levels of warmth and responsiveness, and lower monitoring and control over their children (Hetherington, 2003). Harsh discipline and lack of parental involvement are negatively associated with children's adjustment (Buehler & Gerard, 2002) whereas authoritative

parents promote more positive adjustment outcomes (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1995). Clearly, parental conflict, parent-child relationship quality, and parenting are all highly interconnected, maintain a big influence upon children's post-divorce adjustment, and have enduring affects on family relationships during childhood and adulthood.

Research on post-divorce parent-child relationships parallels that of child adjustment: When divorce occurs, parent-child relationship quality is at risk, but not just because of the divorce. Specifically, adult children whose parents divorce during one's childhood have more distanced relationships with their parents than those whose parents remain married; however, disruptions to the parent-child relationship after divorce are actually present years before any changes to family structure (Amato & Booth, 1996). Thus, changes to the parent-child relationship are rooted in family functioning rather than divorce (Amato & Booth). Because ongoing parental conflict is associated with lower quality parent-child relationships (Cummings & Davies 1994; Erel & Burman, 1995), whether parents remain married or divorce, for those families embroiled in conflict, the quality of parent-child relationships are at stake. But what happens to the relationship between parents and children when parental alienation occurs?

Clinical and legal literatures indicate parental alienation likely affects parent-child relationships, both while the alienation is ongoing and after the alienated child becomes an adult. Children who experience parental alienation are described as having "obsessive hatred" for the rejected parent, and feeling grief and loss akin to the death of a parent (Cartwright, 1993; Faller, 1998; Gardner, 1992; Kelly, 2000). Parental alienation research suggests adults who remember experiencing parental alienation as children felt guilt for

betraying the rejected parent and felt rejection due to internalizing and personalizing negative comments one parent made regarding the other (Baker, 2005a). Although children may experience grief, guilt, and rejection, the alienated parent struggles with the loss of a previous relationship with the child (Cartwright). These difficult emotions weigh heavily and distress the rejected parent-alienated child relationship.

In terms of long-term effects of parental alienation on parents and children, clinicians have suggested parental alienation can permanently destroy the rejected parent-alienated child relationship even into adulthood (Gardner, 1999a). Adults who experienced parental alienation as children may have feelings of guilt and loss as if there was “something missing” from their childhood (Cartwright, 1993). Research indicates the rejected parent-alienated child’s relationship does suffer and the effects are not time limited (Moné & Biringen, 2006). Rejected parents and their adult children, who experienced parental alienation as children, continue for years to bear the brunt of alienation. Moreover, there appears to be a backfiring effect on the relationship between the instigating parent and now adult child. It may be that adult children come to realize the alienating parent’s sabotage and when this occurs, they may distrust or distance themselves from the instigator. Thus, their relationship becomes more distant than if parental alienation was not present to begin with.

Gaps in Parental Alienation Literature

Until recently, the majority of the parental alienation literature has been clinically and legally focused. For instance, Gardner’s prevalence ratings were based on clinical perceptions, not empirical data. Further, his initial assessments of PAS were based on a problematic evaluation tool (for a review see Faller, 1998 and Gardner, 1998). The

clinical literature, compounded by the lack of empirical research, has led to unverified assumptions regarding parental alienation. Two assumptions within the literature are most controversial and problematic. The first troubling and unverified assumption involves mothers who are blamed for instigating parental alienation (e.g., Cartwright, 1993; Gardner, 1992; Rand, 1997; Shopper, 2005; Siegel & Langford, 1998; Warshak, 2000). Gardner asserted that mothers, more often than fathers, incite PAS because mothers were at risk of losing children to the custody of the father. Contradicting the mother-as-instigator assumption, research indicated both mothers and fathers initiate parental alienation, even though mothers were credited with more badmouthing than fathers (Moné, 2002). Other reports also showed both sexes participating in parental alienation, though with fathers to a lesser extent than mothers (Baker, 2006; Kopetski, Rand, & Rand, 2005). Furthermore, Johnston et al.'s (2005) results implicated mothers as well as fathers in parental alienation. Lampel's (1996) findings add additional verification that alienation can stem from either mothers or fathers. Results indicated children who align with one parent do so with the parent who exhibits more outgoing, capable, and problem-solving traits, regardless of that parent's sex (Lampel). Moreover, children not aligned with one parent over another still make more preferential statements for mothers than fathers (Lampel). Given children's apparently normative preference for mothers, additional research might benefit from an exploration of why mothers continue to be blamed for inciting parental alienation.

A second assumption apparent in the literature involves pathologizing the parents who incite parental alienation (Caplan, 2004; Lampel, 1996). For instance, parents who engage in parental alienation are labeled as sexually uninhibited or passive-aggressive,

and are described as having mental illnesses such as narcissistic, paranoid, histrionic, and borderline personality disorder (e.g., Dunne & Hedrick, 1994; Gardner, 1999a; 1999b; Rand, 1997; Siegel & Langford, 1998). Women are hit with double jeopardy by these assumptions: They are blamed for causing parental alienation and then pathologized because of it. Lampel's (1996) findings indicated that preferred parents have higher scores on defensiveness and lack awareness of the effects of their behavior; however, Lampel also called for additional research with larger samples to identify if mothers versus fathers exhibit different behavioral, emotional, and psychological aspects in the context of parental alienation.

Relationship research from a variety of sources may hold clues as to which parents engage in alienation and how they incite it. Linder, Crick, and Collins' (2002) work on relational aggression as well as researchers investigating alienation or alignment (Baker, 2006; Johnston, 2003; Johnston et al., 2005), implicated both males and females as instigators in creating alienated children. Baker suggested parental alienation can take different forms and alienators may have different underlying motivations. Parents' techniques to distance each other from children may depend, in part, on a parent's gender. Kelly (2000, 2003) suggested that mothers tend to be gatekeepers. If a mother is angry, hostile, and retaliatory, it may be she uses her power by conveying negative information to harm the father's relationship with the children and to get revenge against him.

These assumptions have incited debate within the parental alienation literature and have begun to spark some empirical examination into parental alienation. Since the turn of the century, increasing amounts of parental alienation research have recently been

published; however, various flaws exist in some of these studies, hindering advancement on the topic. First, some research (e.g., Rueda, 2004) ignores the variations in definition, implying that parental alienation employs a solitary, unified definition. Rueda's article on *Parental Alienation Syndrome* treats the subject as if there are undisputed criteria comprising parental alienation, when in fact a consensual definition has yet to be reached. Whereas there is no consensus as to the criteria for PAS, the PAS case examples upon which Rueda's research is built are a major point of concern. Second, some research reports lack important details for furthering the field. For example, Vassiliou and Cartwright's (2001) article did not detail results with sufficient evidence such as participant quotations. This leaves readers wondering about the support for the findings. In addition, Rueda's publication provided few details about the specifics of that project. The case examples he employed are not listed or summarized for readers, leaving them to assume the cases are ones in which parental alienation had occurred. Third, because parental alienation has not yet been studied enough to define its parameters, it makes sense that qualitative research would be used to map the terrain. However, using qualitative methods with small sample sizes, generalizations to the larger population are incomplete at best. Unfortunately, some of the parental alienation qualitative research has presented findings as if they were representative of the general experience of parental alienation. From Vassiliou and Cartwright's set of interviews conducted with only six interviewees, generalizations cannot be drawn about parent or family characteristics. Their findings provide preliminary information from which to test hypotheses or complete additional inquiry.

Whereas some of this early research has encountered methodological issues, other research challenged some of initial assumptions and has helped to illuminate who is involved in parental alienation and the effects of it. Some of the parental alienation literature has avoided blame and moved to a contextual focus. For instance, Kelly and Johnston (2001) asserted that in order to determine if a child is alienated from a parent, one needs to know the history of the parent-child relationship, explore the parent's behavioral history, and determine if the child's feeling of alienation is disproportionate to those factors. Stoltz and Ney (2002) also encouraged taking contextual factors, including the adversarial nature of legal involvement, into consideration in cases of parental alienation.

Solid empirical studies are now beginning to surface, giving a first glimpse of the influence parental alienation can have. Several studies have explored different aspects of parental alienation. Johnston's (2003) study conducted on children within a year of divorce showed how both parents, the alienator and the rejected, contribute to the alienation, with lack of nurturant parenting as the biggest predictor of parental rejection. Baker's research focused on adults who reported experiencing parental alienation as children. From their interviews, common consequences of the alienation were low self-esteem, feelings of rejection or self-hatred, feelings of guilt with the belief one betrayed the rejected parent, depressive symptoms, drug and alcohol problems, difficulty with trust, and the experience of divorce and subsequent alienation from one's own children (2005a). Baker (2005b) also shed light on the various tactics parents employ during their attempts to produce parental alienation. Her findings showed parents used verbal (e.g., badmouthing, demeaning the other parent's extended family), behavioral (e.g., limiting

contact between the child and the other parent, forcing the child to reject to other parent), and emotional (e.g., negative emotional reactions associated with the other parent, loyalty conflicts) means to alienate children from their other parent. Johnston et al. (2005) studied effects of alienation on children and found they experience increased behavioral problems and more personal and social challenges. Baker's (2006) report highlighted three distinct patterns of parents who alienate. Finally, Moné and Biringen's (2006) research on college students found higher levels of parental alienation were associated with more distant parent-child relationships during childhood, and as young adults, with both parents. Johnston's, Johnston et al.'s, as well as Moné and Biringen's findings suggest parental alienation may be constructed differently depending on the sex of the parent. For example, it may be possible that children feel distanced from fathers if their dads lack involvement with their children and if mothers sabotage the father's reputation. On the other hand, a father's badmouthing of the mother is not associated with alienation from mothers; instead, child social and behavioral adjustment and mother's lack of warm involvement are associated with mother rejection. As a whole, these studies indicate parental alienation may occur as a result of both mothers' and fathers' actions, may consist of a variety of techniques, may influence issues related to self-worth later in one's life, may negatively affect parent-child relationships, and may be created differently when felt toward mothers versus fathers.

How Research on Parental Alienation Might be Advanced

Even with these research-based findings, several aspects of parental alienation research necessitate improvement. First, the parental alienation literature contains a narrow focus, tending to concentrate either on the children who are affected by parental

alienation, the parent who incites alienation, or the rejected parent. Several divorce researchers (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1995; 1999; Johnston, 2003; Kelly & Johnston, 2001) caution against utilizing a single respondent's perspective; instead, they suggest drawing upon developmental, ecological, and family models to gain a clearer sense of how relationships and interactions among family subsystems influence children. In line with these suggestions, Baker (2005c) suggested including both parents in studies, those who alienate and parents who experience rejection. Moreover, although Johnston's studies implicated both parents in the creation of parental alienation, no research has examined the depth of their experiences, illuminated their motivations, or described their perceptions of parental alienation and its influences. Including children along with their parents in developmental, family-focused research is important. Deal, Stanley-Hagan, Bass, Hetherington, and Clingempeel (1999) called for inquiry utilizing family triads because parents act differently when children are present than if they are not. Adding children to this area of research can give them voice to indicate, through their own words and understanding, how they perceive and make meaning about parental alienation and its influence on family relationships. In support of using children and accessing meaning-making structures, Cummings and Davies (2002, p. 35) stated a "consensus of current theory and research is that ...effects on children are more a function of children's *perceptions of the meaning* of conflict for themselves and their families than simply the frequency or even the physical characteristics of conflicts ..." (emphasis mine). Finally, Fauchier and Margolin (2004) encouraged research to involve multiple family members in order to understand the family context. Incorporating mothers, fathers, and children

into parental alienation research will shed light on the complexity of interparental conflict and parental alienation.

A second aspect needing attention research on the parental alienation topic is the inclusion of family members' divergent perspectives. Some studies (e.g., Burns & Dunlop, 2002; Pelton & Forehand, 2001) have shown mothers, fathers, and children maintain different views about conflict and relationship quality. Fauchier and Margolin (2004) noted family members also have different perspectives on how much conflict affected parent-child relationships; specifically, fathers and mothers disagreed as to the extent parental conflict affected parent-child relationships. Furthermore, divorced mothers and fathers possessed contrasting perspectives with respect to fathers' child-rearing skills, mothers' willingness to accommodate visitation changes, and each other's satisfaction with custody arrangements (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2002). Pelton and Forehand's research on perceptions of mother-adolescent relationships and adolescent adjustment further suggested each person has his or her own interpretation of what is going on in the family, likely due to social and contextual factors. Divorce seems to polarize perspectives, leading parents and their children to perceive their relationships more differently than parents who remain married. Thus, including all family members in studies of parental alienation would be helpful in discerning each person's understanding of divorce, conflict, parental alienation, and how those issues are connected to family relationships.

Parental alienation research could also benefit from a reconsideration of the paradigm from which research is conducted. Thus far, a majority of the empirical work regarding parental alienation has employed quantitative methodologies, suggesting a

positivist or postpositivist framework grounding the research. By not employing more qualitative, exploratory methods, researchers have skipped a common aspect of information gathering in research. In fact, to gain understanding about family members' divorce-related experiences, Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999) explicitly advocated for qualitative methods and clinical interviews. It would be useful to follow their suggestions for more qualitative work and to explore the parental alienation topic, searching for all types of associations, not just confirmation of the negative assumptions that prevail in the clinical and legal literature.

In summary, authors indicate the need to make a shift in research content by suggesting all family members be included and recognizing each one's perspective, which is likely to be divergent from others' views. The emphasis on quantitative research thus far and using only positivist or postpositivist paradigms is insufficient to understand the complexity of meaning and family members' different perspectives. Limitations in the current literature suggest new directions as to *what* the focus of this research is and *how* parental alienation research is conducted. Creating qualitative studies will provide information unattainable in survey-based research, such as meaning-making processes. This research project followed these suggestions for more qualitative work and openly explored the parental alienation topic, searching for all types of associations.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

Theoretical Framework

This project was rooted in a constructivist paradigm, which considers reality to be constructed. Constructions of reality are based on individuals' viewpoints and allow them to make sense of and attach meaning to life events (Lincoln, 1998). Thus, within the constructivist paradigm, individuals interpret events and their surroundings based on the lens from which they view the world. These lenses and meaning interpretations are created by social interactions, not simply on an individual basis (Lincoln; Lincoln & Guba, 2004).

There are several hallmarks of constructivist research. First, constructivist work focuses on describing people's experience from their own point of view (Schwandt, 1990). As one example, Riessman (1990a) used interviews with people who experienced divorce to understand how they made meaning of their experience. Believing those who participated in her research were experts about their own experience, Riessman allowed those who participated in her research the freedom to convey their own stories, thereby guiding the outcomes of the project. Second, meanings and interpretations are bound by

the context in which they occur (Lincoln & Guba, 2004; Schwandt). In this light, objective truth is not the primary aim; in fact, in a constructivist framework, objective truth does not exist (Lincoln & Guba; Schwandt). This means the entire context must be considered when interpreting meaning from an experience in order for understanding to occur (Lincoln, 1998).

A second aspect of constructivism is maintaining awareness of multiple realities. In her work with individuals who experienced divorce, Riessman (1989) showed how people experiencing the “same” life event structure their stories and construct meanings differently. Constructivist researchers seek multiple realities, which can often be in conflict with one another, to show the complexity of human experience (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003; Lincoln, 1990). In other words, one person’s constructed reality can contrast with another’s interpretation of the same event. Each person’s view only represents partial reality (Lincoln & Guba, 2004), highlighting the importance of combining several interpretations to show the complexity of experience.

Another hallmark of constructivist research includes examining the phenomena of interest within the context it naturally occurs. Researchers who conduct this type of research are described as going “out into the field” or “doing fieldwork.” Likewise, research is conducted using the epistemological position of “investigator-as-instrument” (Schwandt, 1990). Lincoln (1990), Riessman (1990a), and Schwandt added to the notion of using researcher’s self by asserting investigators should create a relationship with, and not remain distanced from, the participants in order to understand their experience.

A final indicator of constructivist work is that analysis maintains a focus on inductive procedures, resulting in a textual representation of the findings (Schwandt,

1990). The interpretation for the researcher is not without its own subjectivity, however (Lincoln & Guba, 2004). Therefore, many authors include significant text to support their interpretations or include participant interpretations alongside their own (Hatch, 2002; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998).

One may wonder if constructed realities and meaning-making are even worth studying considering constructivism's assertions that reality is a constructed entity, constructions are bound by their context, and researchers use their own stance for interpretation. After all, if meanings are individually and socially created, and if there is no objective reality, is interpretation merely relative? Schwandt (1990) suggested this is not the case: Just because there may be other viewpoints or interpretations does not mean that *any* interpretation is conceivable or justifiable. Instead, although interpretations can differ and are often challenged, they need justification to support their assertions (Schwandt). Having such a rationale precludes relativism. Just as many viewpoints add complexity and detail about a phenomena, so can many evidence-supported interpretations be offered to illuminate the various beliefs, constructions, and contexts from which meaning is created. Furthermore, constructivist research is important because if we know what meanings and interpretations people create, it is possible to change the "unproductive, incomplete, or misinformed constructions" and work toward creating more positive constructions, thus influencing people's thoughts and behaviors (Lincoln, 1998, p. 16).

Mode of Inquiry

For this project, narrative inquiry functioned as the method. Narrative inquiry involves accessing narratives, which are considered to be a set of events and their

constructed meanings, and interpreting the stories (Riessman, 1991). Riessman's work (1990a, 1990b, 1991) with individuals who experienced divorce indicated that, indeed, people recount narratives to make sense of their divorce experiences. The primary goal of narrative inquiry is to understand the meaning others make from experiences (Bloom, 2002; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Daiute & Fine, 2003; Josselson & Lieblich, 2003).

Narrative inquiry aligns with a constructivist framework and was therefore appropriate to use as the mode of inquiry in this project. One way narrative inquiry fits constructivism is in the way people recount their past. People do not merely report a list of events when recounting what has occurred; instead, they tell stories to organize and interpret their experiences (Riessman, 1990a). They convey these stories by structuring events in a logical sequence, albeit not necessarily sequential, and by creating justifications for their interpretations. The narrations and derived meanings are compatible with constructivist's assertion of created realities.

Another way narrative inquiry fits with constructivism is the social context in which the meanings and interpretations are embedded. People compose and project constructions of who they are and how they view events and the world through social interactions with others (Chase, 2003). "People are forever composing impressions of themselves, projecting a definition of who they are, and making claims about themselves and the world that they test and negotiate in social interaction" (Riessman, 1990a, p. 74). That is, construction does not occur on a separate, individual basis, but social and interactional processes influence it. By these social processes, individuals create their own realities and shape their narratives (Chase, 2003; Riessman, 1990a, 1990b). In

addition, the telling of one's narrative is intersubjective—a joint creation between the teller and the listener (Lincoln & Guba, 2004; Miller, 1996; Riessman, 1991). Josselson (1995) extended this assertion, suggesting it is only through a close relationship with the narrator that personal and social commentary can be interpreted. Therefore, narrative inquiry parallels constructivism in that both contend the construction of meaning is embedded in social norms, discourse, and cultural context. Precisely because there is not much clarity about parents' motivations for and interpretations of parental alienation and because little is known about children's meaning-making about alienation, narrative inquiry and the constructivist paradigm are not only compatible, but were legitimate to employ given the aims of this study.

Narrative methods can clarify how families make meaning of prolonged conflict, parental alienation, and relationships with one another. Due to the paucity of empirical research on the issue of parental alienation and lack of information on family members' meanings, motivations, responses, and relationships associated with parental alienation, narrative inquiry illuminated (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) the intricacies of family members' experiences. Moreover, using narrative in empirical work is advocated (Riessman & Quinney, 2005) as a remedy for the areas with limited understanding, such as with the topic of parent alienation. Narrative inquiry as an interview method may also help combat the negative assumptions imbedded within parental alienation by using an inductive, exploratory method. This area of research does not need more "objective" professionals like clinicians, lawyers, and positivist researchers categorizing, stigmatizing, and talking about those who are involved in divorce, post-divorce conflict, and parental criticism. Much of the previous objective literature has been too hasty in

assuming what family dynamics and parental motivations look like without the data to support such assertions. Rather, this topic needs to incorporate those personally affected by parental alienation to explain the complexities of their experience. This use of narrative inquiry, to focus on meaning creation and with goals of visibility, has a precedent. Narrative inquiry challenged the pathologizing language, stigmatizing labels, and seeking of causality within sexuality research (Gamson, 2004) and it could similarly illuminate the experiences of parental alienation.

Considering the fit of narrative inquiry with constructivism, I embarked on designing an interview-based research project with these theoretical frameworks in mind. Following the narrative tradition, I organized data collection using stories to illuminate the kinds of experiences the participants had and how they understood them. Following constructivist thinking, because I do not necessarily share in the same social context or construct events in the same way as the participants, I had to delve deep and create relationships with them to understand their frame of reference. To make sense of an interviewee's experience, researchers have to understand the narrator's viewpoint. Per the hallmarks of constructivism, I became intimately aware of the interviewees' lives, situations, and contexts in order to understand and interpret their experiences.

Method

Recruitment and Sampling Procedures

In order to prepare for participant recruitment, I created a research flyer to inform potential participants about this research project. The flyer (Appendix A) was created and distributed assessed for the constructs upon which this project is based: divorce, high interparental conflict, and parental alienation, without mentioning "parental alienation"

due to its negative connotations. The questions on the recruitment flyer describe scenarios with which parents may be familiar if they qualified for the study. Further, the flyer contains information about the purpose, general procedures for the research project, and the nonjudgmental aim and exploratory emphasis on learning more about the lives of families dealing with these issues. Interested people were directed to call me in order to be screened for fit in the study or for additional information.

After creating the flyer, I shifted focus to determine how to recruit participants for the study. I sought a purposeful sample due to the highly specific nature of parental alienation. Given parental alienation's connection to divorce and ongoing parental conflict, I utilized family attorneys, family therapists, and high-conflict parenting workshops for divorcing parents (a.k.a. Succeed: Parenting after Divorce when there's High Conflict), offered through Divorce Transitions, as recruitment sources. I spoke with each recruitment source to inform them about this study's purpose, its design, and how they could refer potential participants to the project. Due to the diversity in types of recruitment sources, I recruited participants in several different ways. I distributed research flyers to attorneys and therapists and asked them to mention it to those with whom they work who might qualify for the project. Referrals from attorneys and therapists did not produce any of the participants and only one prospective participant called after being referred from a family therapist. For recruitment at the high-conflict parenting workshops, I briefly presented information about the research project to the attending parents. Two parents interested in participating contacted me after hearing the presentation and invitation to participate in the project. Divorce Transitions also offered me access to their database containing names and addresses for past years' participants of

the high-conflict parenting workshop. I sent a flyer, accompanied by a supportive letter from Divorce Transitions describing the project to the parents who attended the high-conflict workshop within the past 2 years. In total, over 400 letters were sent and 20 letters were returned due to mailing address changes, which was expected due to normative changes in residence that occur for many parents during divorce. The sent letters generated 10 calls from prospective participants about the study. Finally, because I anticipated there may be a need to recruit additional participants, recruitment flyers were available for others aware of the research project (e.g., participants, faculty members in the Human Development and Family Studies department and School of Education, current graduate students, etc.) to take to those they knew who have experienced divorce, ongoing interparental conflict, and parental alienation. No participants were generated through the means of these personal referrals.

When prospective participants—parents who have experienced or are experiencing divorce—called with an interest in the project, I conducted a screening via telephone to evaluate their appropriateness for inclusion in the research project. Like the initial recruitment flyer, the phone screener questions (Appendix B) assessed for the presence of the main constructs of the study (i.e., divorce, interparental conflict, and parental alienation) by asking prospective participants the same information presented on the research flyer. The final criterion for admittance in the study included the presence of at least one child at or over the age of 9 years old whose parent agreed to allow participation in the project. Children age 9 and above are appropriate for inclusion within this project because by that age a normative 9 year old has more stable moods, has some empathic capability, is able to express ideas and wishes, and can move between play-

based and direct-question interview situations (Morrison & Anders, 1999). Moreover, by age 9 children have the ability to hold many perspectives at once and can consider how their parents view them (Johnston & Roseby, 1997). This also means children can feel loyalty conflicts. All children within one family who were 9 years old or older were allowed the choice of participating in the research.

Those individuals who met the criteria for inclusion in the research project were given a detailed description of what the project entailed and were asked about their interest in participating further in the study. Each parent who was eligible agreed to participate and at the end of the telephone screener conversation, a date for the first interview as well as other logistics was arranged. Each participating parent agreed to give their former spouse's name and mailing address so he or she could be contacted. I mailed each participating parent's former spouse a research flyer and letter (Appendix C) detailing information about the study. The aim of this letter was to inform the other parent that his or her child might be participating in the project and to invite the parent's participation, so as to involve as many members of a family in the study as possible.

Based on the telephone screening, some parents who contacted me were not eligible to participate. The parent referred by the family therapist had a child below the age limit criterion and was therefore ineligible to participate. Both parents who heard my brief presentation at the high-conflict divorce workshop had at least one child old enough to participate and met the other eligibility requirements. Of the 10 calls generated from the Divorce Transitions mailing, 5 were not eligible due to their children being younger than the minimum age permitted in the study. Two were not eligible based on the presence of domestic violence in the parental relationship. One parent had no contact

with his children, and therefore no way for him to inform them of the study, which precluded him from participation. One other parent who left a message about her interest in the study did not respond to return calls and messages, despite multiple attempts to reach her. Thus, from the Divorce Transitions mailing, one parent and eligible child were admitted to the study. In total, three parents (two from the workshops and one from the mailing) and their children met the eligibility criteria and were admitted into the study.

Participants

At the outset, I set out to recruit between 2 to 8 families, comprised of mothers, fathers, and children. However, due to the sensitive nature of the topics involved, I knew it was possible that parents experiencing high levels of conflict might not both choose to be involved with the project. With this in mind, as long as one parent and one child from the same family agreed to participate, they were included in the study. None of the former spouses/“other parents” contacted me after receiving the research flyer and study information and none of these letters were returned in the mail. As a result, the final sample of participants included three “families;” each “family” consisted of one parent and one or two children. In light of this, the terms “family” and “family member” are used to describe this project; although both parents from each family did not participate, multiple informants (two or three) from each family were interviewed and provided information on how mothers, fathers, and children interacted. Finally, it is important to note that none of the participating parents were married or previously married to one another; that is, the participating families were not related to one another legally or biologically.

Of the three parents who participated, one was a father and two were mothers. Parents ranged in age from 37 to 44. Two parents identified themselves as Caucasian and one parent self-identified as both Caucasian and Native American. Parents indicated they had been married to their former spouse for 4-12 years. In terms of the length of time that had passed since the marital breakup, one parent indicated divorce was still in process, another parent divorced less than 1 year ago, and the third parent had been divorced over 9 years. One participating family was a blended family, with the stepparent functioning as a parental figure for the children. Thus, the data related to that family dealt with the biological parent and stepparent instead of two biological parents. In total, four children participated: one son and three daughters. Children who participated ranged in age from 10 to 14 years old.

Data Collection: Interview Structure and Questions

The data for this study resulted from in-depth interviews I conducted separately with each member of participating families. Individual interviews with each family member took place either at the participant's home or in a private office at CSU. Each interview lasted about 60 minutes and all interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim.

Upon meeting for the first interview, I re-explained the study in brief again, asked if the participant had any questions, and asked the participant to read the consent form (Appendices D-F). Once the consent form was read and signed, to encourage interviewees to actively participate and to empower them in the telling of their stories (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003; Tierney, 1994), I asked participants to elaborate or to adjust the interview questions as needed in order to fit their own experience; this approach

places primary importance on participants' stories and meanings rather than curtailing their experience to fit within the confines of the interview questions. After this discussion, the audio taped interview commenced.

Special considerations were created for including children as interview participants. Each child or teenager who participated was asked to read and, if willing to participate, sign an assent form (for children ages 9-13, Appendix F) or adolescent consent form (for teens ages 14 and older, Appendix E). In order to remain developmentally appropriate, a menu of options from which children could choose to participate in during the interview was available. Younger participants (approximately 9-12 years old), were offered opportunities to color, draw, or play with Play-Doh during the interview. Older children and adolescents (approximately 12-18 years old) were offered snacks while taking part in the interview in addition to choosing from among the activities offered to younger children. Adolescents sometimes chose to engage in no other activity during the interview.

Questions for the interview followed a thematic guide (Appendix G). The major themes of the interview protocol included "Story of divorce and family relationships," "Information about conflict and its meaning," and "Information about parental alienation and its meaning." The questions in the interview protocol served as flexible guides in the interview (Chase, 2003; Josselson & Lieblich, 2003). Because the questions served as guides for eliciting personal stories, rather than gathering sociological information or beliefs of society in general (Chase), based on the content a participant shared, not all of the questions were appropriate to ask (Barker, 1990; Chase; Eder & Fingerson, 2002; Kvale, 1996; Riessman, 1990a). "It may become clear only as the interview process

progresses that certain questions are inappropriate due either to ethical or substantive considerations, and these should then be omitted” (Eder & Fingerson, p. 185).

Furthermore, other questions were generated in situ, based on the participants’ stories, especially to clarify information or to generate depth.

After the first interview with each participant, the audio tapes were reviewed and transcribed verbatim by a research assistant. After transcripts were completed, I reviewed each one for accuracy and made any necessary changes. I also conducted a second interview, within 2 to 5 weeks of the first. One purpose of the second interview was to summarize the main points of the first interview. Summaries of the first interview were generated by listening to the audio tape of the first interview. Summarizing what I heard served as a form of member checking (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Richards, 2005). I did not provide a written transcript of the interview due to the likelihood of ongoing legal matters between parents (i.e., custody, support payment, etc.). The second aim of conducting a second interview was to ask follow-up questions in order to gather missing information and to ask any questions that emerged based on the first interview. Once the interviews within each family were completed, I gave parents a \$25 gift card to enjoy a family dinner at a nearby restaurant.

To verify parents participating in this project engaged in ongoing conflict with their former spouse, they completed the Acrimony Scale (Appendix H). The Acrimony Scale (AS; Emery, 1982) was designed to evaluate the level of conflict between divorced or separated parents (Emery & Wyer, 1987). The measure contains 25 questions on a 4-point Likert scale, with some item reversals. Internal consistency ($\alpha = .83$ to $.88$) and test-retest reliability ($r = .88$) are both high (Emery, 1982 as cited in Emery & Wyer;

Touliatos, Perlmutter, & Straus, 1990). The AS correlates with levels of child adjustment (Emery & Wyer), maternal depression, and children's appraisals of cognitive competence (Touliatos, et al.). Parents were asked to complete the AS and a general demographic questionnaire (Appendix I) while the child completed his or her first interview. Even though the AS served as validation for parents' high conflict, parents would not have been precluded from participating if their scores were low. Parents' total scores on the AS ranged from 63 to 73, with means in the range of 2.52 to 3.13. These scores indicated moderate to high levels of acrimony between interviewee parents and their former spouse. Interestingly, these levels are higher than Emery and Wyer's litigation sample means for the AS. All of the parents in this project were or are involved in litigious divorces, and were selected, in part, due to their own reports of high parental conflict. These scores verify the ongoing highly conflictual nature of these parents' relationships with their former mate.

Ethical Considerations

Because divorce, conflict, and parental alienation are such sensitive topics, from the inception of this project this research was carefully designed to tend to the various ethical issues inherent in it. One ethical issue to address included caring for any emotional distress that might arise for participants who experience emotional reactions when asked about divorce, conflict, and parental alienation. Special care was given to prospective participants who did not qualify for the research project, considering the fact that some of these individuals might have looked forward to the opportunity to talk about their experiences. To care for prospective participants' and actual participants' emotional and psychological well-being, prior to participant recruitment referral resources

(Appendix J) were solidified in the event they would experience any distress. Therapists and counselors were asked if they would like to serve as a referral source and about their fee structure. Regular and low-cost resources were available. During the telephone screening and the interviews, no one reported acute emotional distress. However, prospective participants who did not meet the eligibility criteria were offered the referral resources when they indicated a desire for them or when, based on their comments, I thought referrals may be useful. A list of referral resources was given to each family who participated in the study.

To protect children's psychological well-being beyond offering mental health referrals, I ascertained the appropriate age at which they have emotional stability (age 9 and above). A local therapist also accompanied me to each child interview because the topics were deemed to be potentially distressing for children; her presence prevented me from having a conflict of interest as the researcher and counselor. While the therapist was not physically present in the interview room, she was introduced to parents and children as being available in the event children felt any emotional distress. In addition, I debriefed (Appendix K) the participating parents after their child's interviews to inform the parents about the presence of any emotional distress, provide a forum for asking questions, and offer my general observations of the child's understanding of divorce and their family.

Another way participant distress was taken into consideration was with my previous counseling training. Miller (1996) indicated research participants reveal information to interview researchers like clients do with their counselors. As a result, Miller suggested interviewers have some clinical skills or supervision in order for ethical

research to occur. In order to create an inviting, safe atmosphere, I specifically showed listening, interest, respect, and empathy (Kvale, 1996). By remaining aware of slight cues indicating concern and by relating empathically, I was able to emotionally connect with what participants said and was able to track their level of distress more than an untrained, nonclinical interviewer. Even though my clinical skills were useful in this research, I remained strictly in a researcher role; I did not act as a counselor or provide therapy to participants.

A second ethical consideration encompassed the protection of interview data. Mothers and fathers who remain in high conflict after divorce can be involved in litigation for child support, custody, or other issues (Darnall, 1998; Gardner, 1992, 1999a; Johnston, 2003; Lampel, 1996; Rand, 1997). Parents who participated in this study were involved in litigation with their former spouse. The other (nonparticipating) parent or an attorney could find the information shared in this project's interviews worthwhile evidence for a legal case. In light of this, protection of data was addressed in this project's design in several ways. First, I obtained a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institute of Health prior to the study. Although not iron clad, this certificate added an extra layer of protection securing participant interview data from being released to attorneys or the court system. Second, pseudonyms were used in place of participant names and all other identifying information was omitted from the written transcripts. In addition, during member checking, I orally summarized the main points of the interviews rather than providing a written transcript to participants. Providing written transcripts to participants could have elevated the chance of participants or me as the researcher becoming involved in legal matters. Participants listened to an oral summary

of their previous interview and were provided an opportunity to clarify information. This served as one aspect of member checking while providing more protection than if a copy of the written transcript was readily available for attorneys or other court officials to view. Third, files have been protected via locks and data were held in different locations until destroyed. Specifically, while the audio tapes were in the process of being transcribed, they were stored in a concealed and locked area. Access to the electronic transcript files was restricted by password protection and audio tapes were destroyed once the transcripts were finalized. After the interviews and written transcripts were completed, the pseudonym link list was also destroyed. Research assistants who assisted with transcription were given clear instructions about the confidential nature of the tapes and were instructed to transcribe them in private so that others would not hear the information contained on the tapes or gain access to the transcripts.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSES AND FINDINGS

Approach to Analysis

Narrative data can be analyzed in various ways. In order to preserve and draw upon the contextual emphasis, I focused on holistic analysis rather than coding for data reduction. Riessman (1990a) advocated a position similar to this, indicating that coding “fractures” narratives, resulting in incomplete, noncontextual interpretation; such a stance would be inconsistent with the guiding paradigm of this research. Moreover, Lincoln (1998) indicated that within the constructivist paradigm context is important to consider, suggesting concordance in this research project can be accomplished with a holistic, contextual focus. Due to the dearth of research literature on the meanings of interparental conflict and parental alienation, the content from the narratives are of primary importance. Lieblich et al. (1998) support holistic-content analysis as a legitimate form of analysis, which worked well given the aims of this research. One’s contextual location is inextricably connected to constructions of meaning and reality. Therefore, following the work of Riessman (1993) and Lieblich et al., a holistic perspective, including a focus on context, was used in the analyses and interpretation of the data.

Coding

As a whole, data collection, coding, and analysis were not sequential, linear phases during this project. Instead, after the data collection started, the processes of coding and analysis were interwoven and completed in parallel with one another. For the coding process, there were two distinct ways I coded data. One way involved coding data associated with the research questions guiding this project. Given that this project employed a narrative mode of inquiry, the other coding strategy focused on ascertaining participants' meanings about their experiences by looking at the stories they told about divorce, parental conflict, and alienation.

I started the coding process by color coding passages in the transcripts for content related to each research question (i.e., topic coding; Richards, 2005). This proved difficult at times, because some data corresponded with two or three of the research questions, so some of the interview quotes were double or triple colored. To avoid being too reductionistic, I coded by using complete passages in order to capture the larger meaning and context. Once this first step was completed, I wrote codes in the margins of each transcript. Each code captured the essence of the information shared by using the participant's own words whenever possible (e.g., "she [mom] cares about how I feel ... and also tries to protect me..." was coded about the mother-child relationship using the code "she cares about feelings and protects").

Using Chase's (2003) sequence for coding and analysis, for each separate interview, I compiled a list of all the margin codes that related to each research question. Each interview yielded three code lists—one for each of the research questions. Per Chase, this served as a way to separate codes from my interpretive notes and to house all

related codes together so they were easily viewed. Because many of the code lists were multiple pages long, for my own ease in viewing the codes, I preliminarily grouped similar codes together (e.g., all feelings related to parental conflict were grouped next to one another). These codes did not necessarily stay linked together throughout the rest of the analytical process. Overall, during this part of the coding process, I completed inductive coding, generating codes from the data and not on an a priori basis.

The other coding scheme involved identifying stories each participant told. Using holistic-content analysis as my guide, I used a separate color to differentiate each story mentioned within an interview. If a participant readdressed a story told earlier within that interview, the subsequent story of information was coded in the same color as the earlier story. After separating and coloring each of the stories within an interview, I reviewed the transcript again to determine the meaning of each story and wrote interpretive comments. Reviewing each transcript twice for this narrative coding process proved useful because in the second reading of the stories, I found more linkages and could delve a bit deeper into the participant's meaning to make more complete connections.

Types of Analyses

Using holistic-content and narrative coding strategies, I conducted individual and family-level analyses. Typically, one conducts individual-level analysis (i.e., separately coding each participant's data and analyzing to find common themes across the coded interviews) during research. I completed individual-level analyses according to participants' developmental role (i.e., parent or child). That is, I analyzed data from all of the participating parents to answer the research questions. Separately, I analyzed children's coded data in order to answer the research questions. In comparing parents'

data, common themes emerged showing how parents create meaning about their divorce experiences and their family relationships. Similarly, analyzing for children's common themes allowed access into their meaning-making systems and gave them a voice that has heretofore not been heard in parental alienation research.

Given the systemic nature of this research project, I also conducted some family-level analyses in order to show how the same event can result in complex and diverse meanings for each family member. Because constructivism accepts multiple realities, there is conceptual justification to include family-level analyses that focused on multiple narratives and meanings derived by each family member. Hatch (2002) delineated a way to include multiple narratives in analysis, terming it "polyvocal analysis."

For developmental and for family analyses, I again followed Chase's (2003) suggestions, by reviewing the list of codes and creating categories of related themes across the different interviews. I separately compared codes across parents, across children, and within each family so that I would have a complete developmental (i.e., parent vs. child) analysis, and so that I would have a family-level analysis (i.e., with all participating members of a family compared to one another). As an example, in completing the parent developmental analysis, I examined all of the codes related to how the parents viewed their former spouse to find the commonality that views of a former spouse were predominantly negative. Following Hatch's (2002) guide to polyvocal analysis as well as Lieblich et al.'s (1998) structure for holistic-content analysis, I conducted family-level analysis by reviewing family members' coded data closely and repeatedly for content-related themes, identifying where various themes occurred. Several stories also emerged, some with family members having similar interpretations

but others with family members having divergent perspectives. I completed this analytical process five times: once for finding common themes among parents, once for themes across children, and once for each of the three families that participated. Even though I used the codes corresponding with each research question, I cross-checked my work by reviewing the narrative coding and the codes listed under the other research questions to ensure I captured a thorough list of common themes. For each set of analyses (i.e., parents, children, families), after grouping common themes under broad categories, I again reviewed the transcripts for additional supporting and contrasting evidence in order to show the complexity and depth of the narratives (Hatch; Lieblich et al.).

The findings presented include substantive text to support and illuminate my interpretation (Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman, 1990a, 1990b). In addition, I presented the results and interpretation to the participants. This served as another form of member checking and, within the constructivist framework, showed acceptance for the coexistence of multiple realities and interpretations. Differences between my interpretation and theirs were expected and I offered to include their own interpretations alongside the results so their own voices and views could be expressed (Chase, 1996). However, participants did not submit their own interpretations; instead, they communicated their belief that my interpretations were accurate.

Goodness Criteria

Following the constructivist paradigm used in this research, goodness criteria for the findings was conducted through, and aligned with, constructivist means. Because neither the positivist framework nor the positivist ontological stance of objective truth is the focus, this project necessitated a different way of conceptualizing the strength and

goodness of the findings from the typical notions of reliability and validity (Riessman, 1993). In order to show the findings of this project are trustworthy, I utilized Riessman's validation criteria. First, with respect to persuasiveness and plausibility, in interpreting the meaning of the data, I supported my interpretive claims by supporting them with evidence from the participants' own accounts and provided alternative interpretations by including participants' own interpretations.

Correspondence, the second goodness criterion, was accomplished through conducting member checks to summarize the interview content and provide feedback on, and alternative interpretations of, the findings. Because there are many interpretations that can be created from the data (Hatch, 2002; Riessman, 1993), conducting member checks increases the credibility of the findings. Member checking consisted of summarizing participants' first interview during the follow-up interview. Furthermore, before the final copy of the research report was completed, participants were contacted to review the results and interpretations. Participants were invited to comment on the findings and interpretations if they wished, in order to demonstrate use of this goodness criterion and to provide multiple viewpoints.

The third goodness criterion, coherence, consists of three aspects. Global coherence encompasses the main point conveyed through the telling of one's story. Local coherence refers to the effect produced by linguistic devices used within a story; this can include contrast, exaggeration, or disbelief. Thematic coherence is the repetition of themes one uses in the construction of a narrative, in order to provide justifiable rationale. In order to show the interpretations possess a logical connection to participants' stories, I have described my interpretations in as much detail as possible and used extensive

passages from participants' stories to support my claims. In support of such "thick" description, Riessman noted, "To show that an interpretation is more than ad hoc, coherence must be as 'thick' as possible, ideally relating to all three levels [of the coherence criterion]" (1993, p. 67).

Finally, a fourth criterion, pragmatic use, cannot be determined until after the research is available for others to incorporate into their own work. Although pragmatic use cannot be determined now, it is likely that the findings will be useful to provide some foundation for further inquiries into this topic given the gaps in the research literature, specifically the lack of information from children affected by parental alienation.

Findings

I have organized the findings into three major sections. First, developmental findings related to parents' common themes are listed. This section includes information about how parents view their former spouse and the relationship with their ex-spouse, their self-protection during interactions with their former mate, and their awareness of parental conflict and alienation behaviors on children. Second, I describe and discuss the children's emergent, recurring themes. This section includes information about the feelings and meanings children maintain about parental conflict and badmouthing, how children determine truth and decide whether or not to trust parents, children's decisions to intervene into parental issues, and how children view family members' relationships. Third, I highlight stories from within each family. This section describes how each family recognizes loyalty conflicts and activities associated with parental alienation. It also shows how different family members conceptualize and make meaning from events in sometimes distinct ways. Finally, in the following sections I note the speaker of an

excerpted quote as is customary in narrative findings. Names have been changed to pseudonyms to conceal the identities of the family members. For ease in associating family members with one another I use pseudonyms starting with the same letter to refer to members of the same family (Connidis, 2007). However, at certain times detailing the speaker or specific identifiable pieces of text could create conflict in families; therefore, sometimes only general references to the speaker are used. Finally, when numbers appear in parentheses at the end of quote, this refers to the number of the interview (first or second) in which the quote was stated.

So that each family can be understood in better detail, I briefly summarize essential information about each one. In the families with more than one child, all children who were over the minimum age limit agreed to participate. Sarah, who experienced divorce within the last year, had several children with her former husband, Sid. One of the children, Sam, participated in the research interviews. Per Sarah's reports, Sid is permitted supervised visitation time with the children, but the children see him and hear from him infrequently.

Another parent, Mary, had multiple children, was married to Mark, and is currently in the process of divorce with him. Two of Mary's children, Melissa and Maggie, were Mark's stepchildren, viewed him as a father during the marriage, and participated in the interviews. Melissa and Maggie do not visit with Mark now that he and Mary are separated; however, their siblings who are Mark's biological children spend time with Mark according to the parenting plan.

The third parent who participated in this project, Ken, was married to Karen and had one child with her, Katie. Ken and Karen have been divorced for 9 years. Since the

divorce, Ken remarried Kristine. The biological parents live near to one another and Ken has weekend visitation during the school year. In the summers the visitation schedule changes allowing Ken more time with Katie.

Common Themes from Parents

Several common themes emerged from parents' interviews. First, parents expressed ambivalent views about their former spouse and characterized their relationship negatively. Second, parents discussed their efforts and need for self-protection during interactions with their former mate. Parents also maintained an awareness of the harmfulness parental conflict and alienation behaviors had for their children.

Negative yet somewhat ambivalent views of one's former spouse. One common theme that emerged was that parents maintained entrenched negative meanings about their former spouse; however, they also characterized their former mate with some positive terms. Each parent's negative meanings differed from one another. For instance, one parent characterized the child's other parent as irrational and inflexible whereas another parent described the former spouse as manipulative, controlling, and deceitful. Nonetheless, parents' negative meanings were repeated often throughout their interviews. The characterizations parents made about their former mate coupled with the frequency with which they referred to their ex-spouse's attributes showed how they created meaning from their experiences and demonstrated the intensity with which they maintained these views.

Sarah asserted multiple times that she believed she needed to counteract what Sid says to their children in order to help them understand that information from Sid is

biased. Here is an example of Sarah's meaning structure about Sid, which served as the main foundation for her distrust and her justification for telling her children information about what their dad says:

I could say something and Sid could repeat it and it could almost be verbatim, but he would skew the context and it would be something completely different than what I meant. ... I mean they called [former President] Clinton "slick Willy" and nothing stuck to him. You know what I mean? Clinton's got nothin' on Sid. This is how he operates and this is why he is so hard to deal with. ... And so, and that's why he's so, in my opinion, dangerous. ... He told Sam "Well your mother's just keeping you away from me," and Sam came back saying, "Well, I know that's not true." It's like "Well, no Sam, it is true, but let me tell you the reasons behind it. It's not because I'm being nasty like your dad was implying. It's not because I don't want you to have interaction like your dad was implying." ... To be perfectly honest, I don't think Sid can not *not* talk that way. I think it is the only way he knows how to communicate with people. He is – he is a schmoozer. It's how he gets by in life. It's kind of like he uses people (2).

At a different point in her interviews, Sarah said:

And I don't even hate Sid; to tell you the truth, I don't. ... at one point in time, I did love him, and there was something really good about him. It just went away or I couldn't bring it out anymore, or something (1).

Sarah's view of her former husband as manipulative and, therefore, harmful to the children provided justification for many of her actions. Sarah believed Sid shifts the context of what he repeats to others in order to manipulate and control the situation. She indicated Sid also repeats this pattern with Sam, talking to their son without being completely forthright about the limits on father-child visitation. Despite the fact that Sid shares partial information with others, misrepresents Sarah's own words, and influences others' views of her, Sarah maintained that she does not hate him. Contrasted with the negative image Sarah maintained about Sid as verbally manipulative, it appears that Sarah can separate how Sid acts from how she felt about him. On one hand, she can view

Sid as grossly inappropriate by misconstruing information while not allowing that belief to dictate her feelings about him and the goodness and love that characterized him and their relationship once. In addition, by conveying both negative and positive messages about Sid, Sarah demonstrated the duality of perceptions parents in this study maintained.

Mary's meanings about Mark involved a consistent history of mistrust, sometimes with Mark manipulating a situation for his own gain. A recurring theme in Mary's meaning-making about her marriage and divorce dealt with Mark's untrustworthiness.

Leading up to this quote, there were four other stories of deceit:

Then the last straw was, we were struggling so much financially with that loan he'd gotten and we weren't [able to] make the payments. ... The money just went so fast. ... He showed me, "Well this is how much money [there is]" from our joint account, which I trusted him with. I *trusted* him with it, which I shouldn't have. ... I'd say, "Look we're getting really down there," you know, way down there on money. ... It's like, "I'm just trying to keep it going." ... So I got to looking at the joint account that he manages; it said, "Transfer from this [one] account to this [other] account." And I recognized one, but I didn't recognize the second one. ... And I confronted him, "What is this?" And then he revealed at that time that he had money that he was saving, I guess [several] hundred dollars. ... That was the final straw. It was after that I said "That's it. I can't do this anymore (1).

This story displays Mary's frustration about trusting Mark and how she blames herself for trusting him by saying "I *trusted* him...which I shouldn't have" due to his continuous record of deception. As a result of Mary's meaning-making from the trust-deceit-broken trust pattern, Mary's thoughts and actions changed to protect her from being misled and embarrassed further ("That was the final straw...I can't do this anymore."); part of this process involved deciding Mary could no longer save her marriage and filing for divorce.

Like Sarah, Mary was able to separate her former spouse's actions from her sentiments about him. In her first interview, she showed some positive views of her ex-

husband by saying “there’s a good person in there, somewhere” and “I’ve given this man so many chances. I’ve wanted to help him because I know there’s a good person in there.” To add to the contrasting views of her former husband, in her second interview Mary’s positive views of Mark became sour and she expressed her views of him as evil:

I haven’t seen anything good for a long time ... I can’t look at him. I can’t even look him in the eye because for me I’m looking at Satan. That’s what it seems to me. He’s just so evil.

Taken as a whole, these remarks show Mary’s evolving story about how she viewed Mark. In her first interview she said there was goodness in him and in her later responses stated she does not see the good anymore and now described him as evil. One will note, though, that even though Mary does not see “anything good” in Mark anymore, she does not recant her view of him being good at an earlier time. It may be that Mary’s change in her view of Mark is as a result of recent events in the divorce process; because the divorce is not yet complete, it may be that Mary’s meaning-making associated with Mark is still quite transitory. Overall, the complexity in Mary’s comments show nuanced views about her former spouse. The change in how Mary viewed Mark between the first and second interviews shows how meanings can shift over time and further adds to the complex ways she viewed Mark.

Ken’s meaning making system about his former wife, Karen, included views of her as unreasonable, inflexible, and mentally unstable:

Karen came over to the house one day when I was at work to pick up Katie and called the police ... [while Katie] was outside playing on the trampoline. [Katie] comes running in and says [to Kristine] “Come watch this!” [She was] jumpin’, showin’ tricks. Well then Karen shows up and ... was just coming unglued, yelling. She was telling the police “Get my daughter out of that house! She’s scared to death! She’s just scared to death inside of there! Get her out! I want her out of there now!” And the police said, “Your daughter is not scared to be here,” he said, “I was down

at the corner watching through my binoculars and she was having a great time.” You know, and so, they left. And, so when I took Katie back [to Karen’s] in August for the school year, I didn’t see [Katie again] until January (1).

This excerpt was ultimately about how Karen would not allow Katie to see her dad by keeping her away from Ken from August to January. This, along with his statements about Karen calling the police, yelling, and believing Katie was scared when she was enjoying herself playing on the trampoline, cast a shadow of suspicion on Karen’s mental state and her motivations. In addition, by commenting on the police presence, Ken begins a theme, that to deal with Karen effectively necessitates legal (i.e., police, court) involvement, which he continued later in the interviews. His portrayal of Karen structured how he interacted with her, as seen in his other excerpts.

Albeit subtle, despite Ken’s frequent negative characterizations about Karen, he noted some positive interactions between them. For instance, he said:

And just a couple of weeks ago when I was picking Katie up [for a visitation exchange], [Karen’s] pickup broke down ... and she called and said the pickup over heated, she had to stop, and Katie wanted her to call me to let me know that they weren’t going to be there right on time. So she called and she said, “If you want, you can come pick [Katie] up, I am right here.” So I said, “Okay, no problem.” I said, “I’ll come and pick her up” and I said, “Do you want me to bring some antifreeze or something for your pickup?” She said, “No it’s just an old pickup, you know, it just needs to sit awhile to cool down.” So I said “Okay.” So I drove over there, picked [Katie] up. And before we left I offered to give [Karen] a ride somewhere or give her antifreeze. She said, “No, I just decided to cool it.” So that time was good communication, no conflict (2).

Ken’s positive messages regarding Karen were imbedded in his stories, which suggested it was challenging to remark about her good qualities directly. This story conveyed how Ken and Karen can both be flexible with alterations to child exchanges, perhaps because neither one was trying to benefit more than the other in this instance. Ken seemed to give

Karen credit for her appropriateness and how she handled the situation, which could have been more contentious. His comments also showed a willingness to extend kind overtures to Karen at times, at least visible from his vantage point. Finally, Ken's statements further showed how parents in this study created negative meanings regarding their former spouse and how they also maintained some positive views about them as well. Taken in their entirety, the positive characterizations parents made did not pervade the descriptions of their former spouse to the extent that the negative messages did. Even so, these are worth noting because parents possessed complex and somewhat dualistic views of their ex-spouse.

Although parents presented ambivalent information related to how they viewed their children's other parent, one interesting commonality across all parents was that each one characterized or raised the possibility that the former spouse was mentally ill. In reference to his ex-wife, Ken said, "I think she's mentally unstable" (1) and Mary described her view in greater depth when she said, "He's a sick man. He's mentally ill and he's not willing to admit it. He's in denial; he's never been willing to admit responsibility (2)." Guessing about the possibility of mental illness for her ex-husband, Sarah described:

I look at the fact that Sid's dad was actually put into a mental hospital a couple times for treatment and observation. And his ... grandfather, actually died at a ... mental institution. ... So I look at it, and maybe this is part of the reason why I don't really hate Sid, because I look at [all of that] and think, "Well maybe there's some very legitimate mental issues here." You know? I mean, it's not a far-fetched possibility (2).

As a whole, the belief that one's former spouse is mentally ill served as a way for parents to discredit and maintain suspicion about their children's other parent, even in spite of their ambivalent positive and negative attributions. For Sarah it also conveyed to her a

reason to temper her feelings for Sid: The “reason she doesn’t hate Sid” is because he might be dealing with something that is not his fault.

Parents’ predominantly negative remarks about their former mate shed light on how they viewed their relationships with their ex-spouse. Not surprisingly, all parents characterized the relationships with their former spouse also as negative; however, one parent made a noteworthy and distinct separation between the parents’ relationship and the children’s relationship with their dad:

It’s not that I badmouth Sid or that I say “Oh your dad is an evil, awful person and I hate him.” I don’t. In fact [one of my kids] made comments about how she hates her dad and I’ve talked to her and I’ve asked her to try not to hate him because he is her dad. Maybe someday she would like to talk to him or maybe someday Sid would like to talk to them when things settle down. I don’t want her to cut herself off from that, you know. And quite frankly, in my prayers all the time I ask that Sid will come around. And not only that he’ll come around, but I will be able to accept it and to truly know that he has sincerely come around; that I would be able to recognize that. So I don’t want them to hate him. You know, I really don’t. He is their father. And he has things to offer. (2) ... I don’t even hate Sid. To tell you the truth, I don’t. ... Not to mention if I hated him, in a way I would feel like I would hate my kids, and I just can’t possibly ever do that. I mean, he is their father and at one point in time I did love him, and there was something really good about him. ... [So] I decided that even though Sid and I were splitting up, it didn’t mean that the kids were splitting up from the family. So I was going to try as hard as I could to maintain relationships with the family. So like I said earlier, his mother and I hated each other. We now talk like once-once a week. And we actually get along very well now. And I flat out told her from the beginning, I said, “Whatever our problems are, are *our* problems.” I said, “You are still their grandmother; they are still your grandkids. I am not going to do anything to interfere with that.” So, it’s been great... (1).

Sarah expressed a clear dislike for her ex-husband, but she also specifically conveyed that she does not hate him because he is the father of the children, she did love him once, and her children are part of him. Sarah also expressed that she has gone to extra lengths to encourage the children not to hate their dad because they might want a relationship with

him in the future, “he is their father,” and “he has things to offer.” In addition, she also made a concerted effort to maintain relationships between the children and their extended family by creating a better relationship with her former mother-in-law.

Self-protection during interactions with the former spouse. Despite some positive messages about one’s former spouse, the parents all mentioned that they believed they needed to protect themselves during interactions with their former partners. Not all of the parents protected themselves in the same way, but a measure of protection was present for each of them. Mary talked explicitly about protecting herself while communicating with Mark. “We talk on the phone, and that’s it. I had to I draw the line. ... So to look at it now it’s just purely unemotional and I have to keep my guard up all the time with him”

(1). Ken talked about putting his guard up through several different means:

In order for her to agree to sign the tax release form, she would come up with something [saying] “you have to sign this [document] before I sign that [one].” So our communication is— I think we don’t want to be used by the other one. She called me a bully; I think she’s a bully. We’re both, I guess, pig-headed and stubborn. ... When we try to talk, it’s been over the phone. She talks over me and she repeats herself. I mean, she will say the same thing over and over and over, and I’m trying to talk. And I get tired of it, so I hang up. It’s like, “Listen to me. I gave you a chance to talk; now give me mine.” ... And usually that’s the only time we talk, or try to work something out, is over the phone. Early on we would argue face-to-face like at exchanges and then finally I quit getting out of the vehicle. You know, I just stayed in the vehicle because it was, just, stressful” (1).

Parents protected themselves emotionally primarily by limiting contact with the other parent, especially by using the phone or limiting phone conversations, as evident in Mary’s and Ken’s excerpts above. At times, as Ken admitted, parents’ self-protection went as far as game-playing, even though the parents did not call it that. It is interesting to note from Ken’s example that the parents might both be stubborn. Neither parent wants “to be used by the other one” and therefore is

more guarded as a defensive posture. Especially if fairness is an issue, as Ken indicated, parents might view protecting themselves by defensive means as appropriate, even when it hinders communication or conflict resolution.

Awareness of parental conflict and its influence on children. Each parent in this study maintained an awareness of the effect parental conflict has on children, yet they also tended to rationalize the influence of conflict on children. Specifically, parents were conscious about the harm parental conflict had on their children, like Mary, who went to the extent of trying not to fight around them:

We had just had dinner and everything fell apart again because we started fighting. And I didn't want to fight in front of the kids because it's just so awful— hard on them. So I put myself in timeout I went back to the bedroom (1).

Because Mary knew conflict was “hard” for her children, she took matters into her own hands to limit her children's exposure to parental arguments. Parents also noticed children's difficulty with conflict evidenced by children leaving the room during parental arguments or by trying to intervene in order to stop the conflict.

Each parent noticed these negative influences, so it was surprising that they also minimized the effect on their children of hearing conflict or becoming aware of parental issues. For instance, one parent acknowledged her children's reaction to conflict by stating, “Well it turned into this *screaming* match, this absolutely horrendous screaming match between us [the parents]. ... The boys got up and went into the bedroom.” Later, when asked how her son reacted to hearing some negative information about his dad she said:

I think he was fine because I didn't have problems with him. When he gets angry ... he'll start bossing [his siblings] around or he'll just have a temper tantrum. ... But he was fine. I mean he was— it was almost really

weird, you know? ... I honestly think he understands. ...I don't think he understands the depth of it, but on [his age] level, I think he understands (1).

This mom demonstrated the distinct ways parents understand the influence of conflict and parental information for their children. She stated that her son was “fine” as a result of hearing what she said about his dad, primarily because he was not acting out. This ignored the fact that he could experience internalizing problems that are not readily observed in his behavior. Instead, she made sense of this by noting a lack of outwardly expressed anger; therefore, she concluded her son was not affected by what he heard. In turn, this confirmed that she can tell him information because he *appears* to handle it well.

Another parent, Ken, addressed his awareness of the harmful influence parental arguments had for his young child by saying, “It’s gotta be stressing her out. (1)” At another point in his interviews he suggested his daughter had found coping mechanisms to handle the conflict:

She shuts down, so she doesn’t have to listen, is what I believe happens ... With all the stress, I think she coped very well. I know it’s been a factor; I know it has affected her, but I think she’s a very strong little girl. She’s learned to deal with it. ... I think she’s gotten thick skinned”(1).

Although not a story, this seems to be the essence of what Ken believes about Katie: She has coped well and learned to be very strong despite all of the stress between her parents. This seems to guide and structure his thoughts about her. Ken said he “knows [conflict] has affected her” but he does not appear to realize the depth of how much. Although he is aware that his daughter blocks out conflict “so she doesn’t have to listen,” to which his daughter also admitted, he does not sense how much she “hate[s] it when they fight (Katie, 2)” or the lengths to which Katie has gone to stop the conflict.

Children are affected by parental alienation-type behaviors. All of the parents noticed and discussed how their children were influenced by behaviors that are emblematic of parental alienation. Whether the children's parents directly told them hurtful information about the other one or when parents modeled inappropriate behavior toward the other parent that children copied, it affected how children interacted with their parents, and parents took notice of it. Two examples were most indicative of this occurrence. In the first, one parent recounted how his daughter watched and heard how Karen treated Ken and began treating him the same:

[When] Katie was three and a half years old, I went to go pick her up. So I went to the apartment to go pick her up and she [Karen] wouldn't ... let me see Katie. And I had some clothes that I had of Katie's with me. ... Karen started yelling at me: "Give me Katie's clothes. Those are Katie's clothes, not yours." And then all of a sudden Katie screamed, "Give me my clothes back!" That kinda set me back; it's like "whoa!" ... it started back then that she [Karen] started doin' stuff or saying stuff about me in front of Katie (2).

This parent recognized this story as the first time his former wife would "do or say" negatively oriented information about Ken in front of their daughter. Even in the situation, Ken clearly noticed how words and actions had an effect on how his daughter treated and interacted with him. This parent, the only parent who mentioned the term "parental alienation" during the interviews, recounted how this story was indicative of the parental relationship dynamic was one involving parental alienation, which began around the time this event occurred.

This next example showed how a parent's words can directly influence a child's interactions with the other parent. Specifically, this parent viewed the former spouse's comments about needing to be with her dad motivated the child to act out of fear:

[The child] will follow me around the house like a puppy dog. [My current wife, Kristine, says] “You don’t need to follow your dad; you know, he’s not gonna leave you.” But she just, no matter where I go, she’s following me around, and ... [at the child’s current age] she still does it, you know. I guess I think she doesn’t see me a lot or if I’m out of her sight, she’s afraid I’m gonna leave. ... Karen has told her, and still tells her, that “the only reason you are over there is for your dad. If your dad’s not there, then you don’t have to be there.” Kristine and I have been married eight years, and she’s been in [Katie’s] life since she was four and they have a great relationship. But Karen’s like, “You know, that’s not your mom; you don’t have to like her” and, “When your dad’s not there, you don’t need to be there.” I think [Karen]’s got that in [Katie’s] mind[set]: “I have to be with my dad because that’s what Karen said, so when dad’s there I have to be with him” (1).

According to Ken’s meaning-making, that there are two reasons Katie follows him: fear of him leaving and belief in Karen’s comments about needing to be with her dad when visiting him. These two excerpts show how parents view their children as affected by badmouthing and by parents’ actions.

Given the totality of what these parents shared, “parent alienation” is a more complex and nuanced concept than is described in some of the current literature. It is not as simple as loving an ex-spouse and wholeheartedly supporting a relationship between children and their other parent versus hating a former spouse, having a mental illness, and attempting to ruin the children’s relationship with their other parent at every opportunity. Based on the comments from these parents, parental alienation may occur in families where parents have strong negative yet ambivalent feelings about one another, and these feelings may be conveyed to the children in ways that are subtle as well as overt.

Common Themes from Children

More than parents, children openly expressed the range of meanings they attributed to their situations. Children were generally more open than their parents in disclosing socially undesirable information. Children shared their feelings and meaning

making in relation to parental conflict and the meaning they created when parents said negative remarks about each other. Children also talked about how they determined truth and about the times they intervened in parents' conflict or in the parental alienation dynamic. By avoiding strictly polarized (i.e., good vs. bad; aggressor vs. victim) views of relationships, children were adept at describing their nuanced views.

Feelings and meaning about parental conflict. Children described how they felt about parental conflict. Although not all children expressed the same feelings associated with their parents' arguments, in their own ways, they were very clear about not liking parental conflict. For instance, when Maggie was asked about how she felt when her mom and stepfather fight, she simply replied, "upset" (2). Her sister, on the other hand, described it in more depth by saying, "When they were still together, they would both be at it, like argue, argue, argue and everything. And I used to go out there and try to stop them from arguing because I didn't like it" (2). The other two echoed similar sentiments, but noted that they were so affected by parental conflict that they experienced angry behavior as a result of it. Katie described it this way:

Sometimes I get mad ... I know where I get my madness from sometimes because I do burst out sometimes when I get really mad. ... It's like when they fight then I'm mad, but when they're done, I'm like ...[in a calm, satisfied tone] "O.K." (1).

And later she reiterated her view:

K: I hate it when they fight. *Every* time ... if ...anything goes wrong before school, and when, like sometimes, before night, I always have a bad school day the next day. It *always* happens!

J: So it affects school, when they-

K: -fight. Mm hmm (2).

Children were able to communicate how they felt about hearing conflict. More impressively, they were able to associate their reactions to conflict as when Melissa connected her parents' arguments to her attempts to intervene, and when Katie noticed she would "burst out" angrily as a result of interparental conflict as well as her awareness of how conflict influenced her own day at school. Katie also noticed the difference between when her parents were engaged in conflict and when they were not. She contrasted her "mad" feelings and "bursting out" when conflict is ongoing to feeling calmer and more at ease (e.g., "O.K.") when it is more peaceful.

The children's meaning-making could be astute and insightful, but at other times their limited information and cognitions led them to construct different meanings about conflict than would their parents, who had more first-hand experience. Nonetheless, children's meanings were very real to them. Katie provided one example:

It's really nice to have honest parents except for sometimes, like when they just get really mad they tell stories, you know. I remember hearing one part of a story one time when I was at my dad's [house]. And so I believed him and then I go home and I ask my mother the same question, and then she's like, "No, this and this happened" and I'm like "Huh, whatever" (1).

Here Katie noted the benefit and drawback of having honest parents. For her, she liked and apparently appreciated their openness saying "It's ... nice to have honest parents," but this honesty can go too far when parents are honest and, when "mad," openly share critical remarks about one another. Katie demonstrated how children can try to make sense from what parents say, asking both parents to share what happened. This added to the difficulty of her getting too much detail from them, although she just decided to shrug it off by saying "Huh, whatever" without being able to make sense of the conflicting stories.

In addition to sharing their meaning about their parents' conflict, children also expressed concern about it, sometimes believing serious consequences might befall their parents for the ongoing fighting. When asked how she feels about her parents fighting with one another, one child replied:

Scared, 'cause I don't know what's gonna happen, and I don't want either one of them to go to jail or anything, you know. So yeah, it's just scary. ... Sometimes they talk about how one could go to jail for doing this and doing that, you know, like being in contempt of court. So I don't want either one of 'em to be going to jail 'cause I love them both, but I just don't want them to go to jail (1).

The information this child heard about a parent going to jail has led to the fear that this could be a consequence for their conflict. This child loves both parents and does not want to see either one of them pay such a harsh penalty for arguing.

Children felt worried about the effects of conflict, and also suggested what parents should do to curtail their arguments. For instance, Katie implied that parents do not need to be *that* honest about everything. Although children supported mothers by saying that moms do more to reduce conflict and dads do more to instigate it, children also referred to both parents when they talked about stopping conflict. Sam clearly expressed his reaction to his dad initiating conflict and his wish that both parents would be responsible for stopping the arguments:

S: I think that they really don't like each other and that when they don't like each other, they're really getting into a really bad involved fight, but they just shouldn't ... They shouldn't hear each other again and should just walk away from each other and never hear from each other again.

J: Do you think one of your parents starts fights more than another or is it about- [interrupted question]?

S: I think it's Dad who starts most of the fights. ...and then Dad turns it into something really big. ... it's like an ant and he turns it into a lion (2).

Sam suggested what he thinks his parents should do to eliminate their conflict: “Walk away from each other” and minimize all potential arguments by “never hear[ing] from each other again.” Sam’s comment about his father initiating most of the conflict was echoed by the other children I interviewed. Each one had different ideas as to how their fathers were responsible for this; Sam’s metaphor of the conflictual issue initially being as small as an “ant” and then Sid “turn[ing] it into a lion” conveyed his belief that Sid made small issues into large ones. This excerpt from Sam also suggests that the way children make meaning about parental conflict can influence their view of the parental relationship. In Sam’s case, evidence of “getting into a really bad involved fight” indicated to him that his parents “don’t like each other.” Each of the children I interviewed saw their parents’ relationship as negative or poor in some way.

Meanings associated with badmouthing a parent. Children also described instances in which they heard one parent saying negative comments about the other one. As a whole, children expressed a dislike for hearing such critical remarks. Children also created their own distinct meaning making systems about why parents mentioned verbal putdowns about one another. For example, Sam articulated why he believed his mother tells him negative information about his dad:

S: ... Mom finally told me and she says she didn’t really want to tell me, but now she has to. ...

J: ... Why do you think your mom tells you that stuff about your dad?

S: I don’t know, ‘cause she’s trying to tell me what to look out for from my dad, ‘cause my dad can be very tricky sometimes (1).

Sam believed his mom Sarah is trying to protect Sam from Sid’s ability to “be very tricky,” which implies his dad is not trustworthy. Sam’s remark that Sarah does not want

to say such types of comments “but now she has to” suggests that his mom is the protector, although reluctantly so. Sam’s comments indicate an awareness of his parents’ intentions and illustrate how he used his awareness to create a belief about cause and effect. Sam insinuated that if his dad was more trustworthy his mom would not have to protect him by telling him “what to look out for.” This theme in Sam’s interviews was often repeated, indicating Sam had created a very clear meaning and understanding about his parents and their intentions.

In a similar fashion, Katie also made meaning from her experiences hearing negative information about each parents. For, Katie, though, the effect of hearing information about a parent depended upon which parent was the target of the badmouthing:

J: So what happens when your dad says [negative] things about your mom in front of you, or to you?

K: I just sit there ... it’s like I’m just not listening. ... Yeah, I try *not* to listen ‘cause I just don’t want to hear it, ya know?

J: When he says those things, even if we’re *trying* not to listen, what do you think, how do you feel?

K: It hurts. ... It’s hard ‘cause I know sometimes my mother’s not like that. ...

J: So what happens when your mother says mean things about your dad in front of you?

K: It doesn’t bother me ‘cause I know they’re not as bad as what my dad says. ... Sometimes it doesn’t hurt because I know that she tries not to be mean to him because she’s using *The Secret* more, and if she wants things to come her way, she tries to do the right thing and be nice to him (2).

Katie’s comments represent an emotional and relational dichotomy. When her dad has criticized her mom, Katie “[doesn’t] want to hear it,” tried “not listening,” and felt “hurt”

hearing it “because her mother [is] not like” the way Ken portrays her. When her father makes negative remarks about her mother, Katie is clear that she does not like hearing them. Conversely, when she hears her mother make negative comments about her dad, Katie admitted being less bothered. Katie appeared to give her mother more latitude for badmouthing her father because Karen’s words are “not as bad as what [her] dad says.” In another part of her interview, Katie admitted that her father has said “cuss words” about Karen whereas Karen’s comments were more mundane name-calling. Thus, Katie was affected by the harshness of the words, which played a key role in determining the meaning of parents’ negative remarks about one another. Katie also seemed to have created meaning about Karen’s motives. Presumably, her mother’s attempts to improve herself and her outlook led Katie to credit her mom because “she tries not to be mean” to her dad; mom “tries to do the right thing” presumably by being “nice” to Ken. Therefore, the meaning of her mother’s negative name-calling and the weight of the words are lessened in Katie’s mind.

Ascertaining truth and believing parents. Another interesting finding surrounds the level of trust children placed in their parents. The fact that children heard conflicting stories and contradictory information from their parents placed them in the position of having to decide for themselves what was true and which parent was more trustworthy. Parents’ views were conveyed to their children and, as a result of hearing contradictory information, children talked about how they went about seeking truth. Katie’s comments about being unsure of which parent was telling the truth, and the ways she tried to access the truth, were illuminating:

K: It’s funny to hear the different sides. ... One time, I don’t know if this was true or not, I mean I was just a little baby, but my dad says my mother

ran over my stepmom and my mother said she didn't run her over. So I asked my dad, "So what happened? May I see the [court] papers of her [Kristine] being run over?" He's like, "Sure." So like a few days later when I was over there [with him] he showed me [the court papers] and I'm like "Oh!" And so I went back to my mother's [house], I'm like, "So what happened when you ran over my stepmom?" And she looked at me she's like, "Well I didn't" so she just told me this story, and it was partly the same: They [dad and stepmom] were just giving me medicine and my dad says my mother backed out and hit Kristine while she was walking behind the truck. So, I don't really know the whole story, if it's true or not.

J: Wow. What did your mom say about that story? What did she say happened?

K: She's like, "Well I didn't run over her." But [my stepmom] was just knocking on the window trying to give my mother the medicine bag and so she rolled down the window and so she gave it to her, and then she just backed out and we left. And then my dad says that when my mother was backing out she ran over Kristine. So I don't know if it's really true or not. It doesn't bother me.

J: Who do you believe?

K: ... It just depends on what I've heard first and what I believe or not. So if I hear something first and I think I believe it and then I go to my dad and half of it is true, then I'll believe my mother. But if my mother tells a story and a quarter of it is true, then I don't know who I'm going to believe. So if it's half true, like half the things are the same, then I'll believe whichever one said it first (1).

Her account indicates that Katie has already come to realize that she cannot trust either parent implicitly, especially when it comes to information about the other parent. Katie recognized that each parent has his or her own "side" to the story. Her attempts to review the "court papers" and ask each parent about his/her version of the story are ways she tries to validate her parents' claims. She also sought a higher authority than her parents—the court papers—to assist her in her search for truth. Through the process of seeking the truth of what really happened, Katie learned she could not automatically accept her parents' comments as true. In response to this, Katie created an elaborate system to

determine who she would believe by considering who first told her a story as well as the overlap in information shared by the other parent. Later, Katie shared how she has attempted to resolve this dilemma about truth-finding and communicated how she has handled the different information she is told:

I'm getting stories from both parents that I shouldn't listen to one parent and then I should listen to another one. ... And then I just listen to my heart which tells me to love everybody, just love them the same, and just ignore them when they fight (1).

This quotation suggested that when her parents fight and have such different information from one another, it is hard for Katie because she does not know who to listen to or trust. Choosing one parent to believe at the expense of the other is viewed, in Katie's mind, as a betrayal of one parent. Rather than relying on her parents, Katie has decided to turn inward to her own heart to decide what is best. Interestingly, even though her comment arose from the challenge Katie had in determining truth, at the end of this excerpt, Katie referred back to parental conflict. This could mean that her heart tells her to ignore her parents and love them despite their arguments.

Contrasting reports of children intervening into parental issues. Children gave contrasting information about the extent to which they became involved in their parents' conflict or relational dynamic. This contrast was most evident when children discussed involving themselves in their parents' conflict. For instance, Maggie spoke about when her parents fight:

J: ... What do you do when they [mom and stepdad] fight with each other?

M: Nothing. ...I hear them fighting, but I do not know what to do (2).

Maggie indicated she does "nothing" when her parents fight, but her sister gave a different account of what happened:

J: So what did you do when they yelled or argued with each other?

M: I used to go out there and yell at them to shut up and be quiet and all that stuff, but when I stopped doing that, Maggie started doing it. She would go bang on the door and be like “I wish everything was normal; I wish you’d stop fighting” and all that stuff. ... Yeah, so after I stopped doing it, Maggie started doing it (2).

Melissa and Maggie recounted different responses to parental conflict. Maggie stated she did “nothing” because she was not sure “what to do” whereas Melissa acknowledged that after she stopped intervening to stop the argument, Maggie started to intervene. It may be that Maggie and Melissa have different recollections about what took place during conflict, or this could indicate something about their meaning structure and the stories they each maintained in support of their views.

Another child recounted the inner ambivalence about intervening in parental conflict. This excerpt focused on how this child intervened in order to stop a conflictual incident.

I: Well when they argue, they just argue over little things that really shouldn’t be argued over, like the time [she] asked my dad to pick me up at my school ... And so they were just fighting ... [so,] guess what I did? They were both mad at each other and so I write this, [to my mother] “You go tell my dad this” and I put it on a paper I’m like, “You tell him you’re sorry and that you will you’ll do whatever he feels is right.” And she said, “Well let me change a few things to make it sound like me.” And so she did, I just let her do what she wanted, and they forgave each other. I never told my dad it was me that said it because he needs to think it was my mother changing. I want them to get along because nobody’s getting along right now (1).

Clearly, this child is invested in intervening in her parents’ arguments because “nobody’s getting along.” Later the child said the parents do not make up after their fights “unless I write something out” (2), which indicates the belief that the child is the only one who can make the parents come to a resolution; they cannot resolve an issue on their own, but the

child can make it occur. Thus, according to this child's perceptions, the parents will not get along without outside intervention. When asked about whether this child intervenes in parental arguments at other times, there were contradictory statements about the extent of intervention:

I: No, I just did it 'cause this time was really bad. It was really bad [when] they were arguing (1).

Then later:

J: Have you ever done anything other than that one time when you ... stepped in the middle ...?

I: Well I'd tried to do that and I try to get 'em not to fight... (1).

Based on these comments, some children can feel conflicted about helping their parents resolve or eliminate arguments. If children believe their parents are not able to handle such arguments on their own, and their efforts might help effect resolution, children might be inclined to intervene to be helpful and to reduce their own emotional distress. On the other hand, if children do not foresee a way to end the fighting, or if the conflict is not "bad enough" in their view, then they might be more inclined to stay away from the conflict for some self-preservation.

Melissa exemplified another way children provided contrasting information about their involvement in their parents' relational dynamic. Some children, like Melissa, may change their intervening behavior only to adopt another intervention strategy. Melissa recounted in her previous quote that she used to intervene in her parents' fights to get them to stop their arguments. After she stopped this, however, she employed other ways of intervening. She retold an incident where she listened to a tape-recorded incident

between Mary and Mark and said, “I was all nosy and stuff and so I went in and I listened to it” (2). She also recounted another way of intervening:

I had to write down things for court because Mark is wanting to get full custody of [Mary and Mark’s children]. So we’re trying to like prove that he can’t get [it], so my mom ... told me to write down a whole bunch of things that Mark had done to hurt me ... Since they won’t let me go into court, I had to write stuff (2).

Even though Melissa was asked by her mom to write to the court, she accepted the request. Melissa’s meaning that she “had to write stuff” stemmed from her efforts to help her mother and siblings remain living together. Together, these examples show a variety of ways children try to intervene in conflict and in parental issues. Children can sometimes present contradictory evidence about the extent to which they involve themselves in parental conflict. Further, children’s intervention strategies can change from one action to another.

Children’s dynamic views of parent-child relationships. In terms of how children viewed relationships within their families, children talked about their relationships with each parent and their views about parents’ relationship with one another. As with their parents’ reports of a good parent-child relationship with each of their children, every child reported positive sentiments about both parents. Although children described feeling closer to their mothers, they also conveyed at least some positive views about their fathers or about their relationships with their dads. Katie’s statements exemplified this:

J: So ...how would you say your relationship is with your dad right now?

K: Good. Even though he’s not home most of the time, because he has to work, it’s pretty good.

J: What do you think makes it good?

K: Being around him 'cause I don't get to see him a whole bunch when he's not there; so being around him makes it feel good.

J: When you're around him what do you guys do together?

K: ... Well sometimes we'll go out and we'll just like take a drive, sometimes we'll go get ice cream, last year some time before school started we went and got ice cream before I had to go back to school. We just like go out and do stuff together for while and then come back and then play games. ...

J: Describe your relationship with your mom.

K: Really good. 'Cause she's there most of the time, so I get to be around her a lot.

J: What makes your relationship with her really good?

K: Being around her, I guess. ... We play cards, we love horses and so have like all these horse games we love to do; we do like paint by number horses; we lots of horse stuff everywhere. ... I don't know why, but I've always felt close to my mother for some reason; it's always my mother. ... We have like a connection... Well, we take care of this one horse and this one horse had given birth like five months ago and then she died; she was one of my favorite horses. That really upset me. And it was a Wednesday night, and my mother was crying, and ... I don't know, I just felt really sick. We have connection where we can feel each other when we're upset or sad. So I guess that's why I feel more close with my mother (1).

Katie did not believe that there was an economy of affection such that feeling close to her mother was at the expense of her father. Katie, as with the other children, appeared to like each parent for different reasons and the children's feelings for each parent did not have to compete with feelings for the other parent. Katie enjoyed being around her dad "even though he's not home most of the time." I wonder if Karen's aforementioned comments to Katie influenced Katie's statements or beliefs about this. Although she mentioned doing different activities with each parent, Katie indicated being around each parent and enjoying fun activities together are what makes the relationships good. She clearly

enjoyed being with both parents, and yet she simply said she felt closer to her mother because they “have a connection where [they] can just feel” each other’s feelings. Perhaps Katie was referring to empathy here.

Others did not express such unlimited positive views about their relationships with a parent. Sam summarized it well by saying this about his dad:

... Some things, yeah, I do like about him. Some things I absolutely hate about him. (2) ... I mean, it’s like two halves of my heart are broken; ... dad was in one half and mom [in the other]. Dad’s half is, like, gone (1).

Sam’s poignant metaphor of his heart being broken in two pieces and missing one of the halves indicated his love for his dad, even though that feeling was missing currently. It was unclear if the broken heart and missing piece he described were a result of not having a *good relationship* with his dad or if his broken heart was due to *lacking a relationship* at this point, resulting from not seeing his dad very much.

Melissa also recognized her close relationship with her stepfather, calling it a “regular father-daughter relationship without the fights” (1). She also recounted how her relationship with him changed:

I was actually closer to Mark when they were married ... but then ever since his attitude started changing, I was closer to my mom. ... Before he used to be pretty good with the family. When [we] were younger he would jump on the trampoline with us and mess around with us. ... And then he started thinking that he was the man of the house, that he was the only one that mattered, and he felt sorry for himself all the time. So it was like he used to be a family man and it just stopped (1).

Melissa’s comments highlight how some parent-child relationships can change in connection with divorce. The way Melissa made meaning about Mark’s changing attitude and how “he used to be a family man” were closely associated with how she viewed their current relationship. The “regular father-daughter relationship”

she once had with Mark is now different as a result of his changes. It is difficult, and unnecessary, to determine if her meaning-making about Mark resulted in the diminished relationship or if their relationship changes influenced how she made meaning about him.

Finally, children noticed how relationships could be used as weapons to hurt others, perhaps because children viewed their parents' relationship as poor. Children viewed themselves as being used by one parent for vengeance on the other. Sam captured this eloquently when he described being used like a "pawn" in his metaphor about chess:

Mom doesn't want me to be used as pawn while they [Sarah and Sid] are the king and queen. Mom doesn't want me getting into his feelings 'cause he ... is trying to get me on his side so I hate mom. ... He only calls us if he wants us to come over, 'cause he really wants to get at my mom. And half the time I think he's just trying to hurt us, so that way he can get mom. Basically he's using us as pawns. ... Mom says that he's just trying to take us [children] out first so he can [hurt] mom. The pawns in a chess game usually get destroyed first. ... Mom says, "I'd rather have you as the rook instead of a pawn because I don't want you be getting within your dad's [trap] and then he'll just hurt you bad (1).

Based on this quote, Sam clearly knew a lot of information about his parents and has made meaning out of what happens between his parents and how he is involved. Sam appears to use this metaphor a lot to structure and organize how he thinks of his dad. This comment is the beginning of a developed metaphor that Sam maintained about himself, Sarah, and Sid. He made meaning, assisted by what Sarah has told Sam about Sid, from Sid's actions toward Sarah, and believed Sid used Sam like a pawn to take revenge on Sarah. The essence of this metaphor appears to be how Sid uses his relationships with the children to manipulate Sarah. Sam clearly established in this metaphor that pawns are easier to "destroy" than kings and queens, one of which represents his mom; therefore,

the pawns are “destroyed” first so that later getting to the king/queen is easier. Sam’s comment about being the “rook instead of the pawn” suggests he agreed with his mom’s meaning about this metaphor and conveys his own desire for more power. His comment about Sid “trying to hurt us” implied something about the relationship between Sid and the children, from Sam’s viewpoint.

Family-Level Findings

Parents and children each recounted many stories during their interviews and these stories conveyed the meanings parents and children created about their experiences. Parents shared some stories that children did not recount and, likewise, children described some incidents that parents did not mention. In the stories that were common to parents and children, they recognized the presence of loyalty conflicts for children and parents’ behaviors associated with parental alienation. Further, when family members’ stories were the same, the meanings associated with the stories were not necessarily similar.

Recognition of loyalty conflict and behaviors associated with parental alienation.

Interestingly, each family talked about loyalty conflicts and/or children hearing negative comments made by one parent about the other. Each one talked about slightly different ways this would happen in their respective families so that the loyalty conflicts and activities associated with parental alienation dynamics were present and recognized in each family, but the specifics of what was done looked different across families. Mary and Melissa recognized the damage Mark effected in trying to alienate Melissa from a close relationship with her mother:

J: [Have you] seen any evidence or any instances of Mark hurting your relationship with your kids?

Mary: Oh gosh, yeah! ... He took Melissa to his lawyer ... Poor Melissa! She sat there and she said, "Mom, I just put my head down on the desk pretending like I was asleep because I didn't want to hear the things he was saying." He was bashing me. I don't know what all he said and Melissa just can't bring herself to repeat it, but it was bad. It was bad. And of course, yeah, it damaged us [Mary and Melissa's relationship] *big time*, and if it weren't for *my* mom setting Melissa straight on everything, she sat Melissa down, she said, "Melissa, *this* is the way it is. You *know* your mom. She loves you. She would *not* hurt you. Mark has filled your head full of lies." ... And so he damaged our relationship just terrible! It was awful, she wouldn't look at me; she wouldn't talk to me. When she did talk to me it was very sarcastic—*very* disrespectful. ... Melissa threatened to call the police on me ... he tried to brainwash her (2).

The message Mary conveyed with this information characterized Mark as deliberate about destroying the relationship between Melissa and Mary. Mary attributed her relationships with Melissa being destroyed by Mark's brainwashing, lies, destructive comments, and taking advantage of opportunities where Melissa could hear negative information about Mary. Mary's statements insinuated that she alone could not change the relationship with Melissa; instead, her mother was the only one who effectively convinced Melissa about Mark's brainwashing. Perhaps this is because Mary's mother was outside the relationship and pattern Mary and Melissa experienced. Essentially, according to Mary's view, Mary's mom as an outsider to the relationship alienation dynamic, vouched for Mary and convinced Melissa of what Mark was doing.

Similar to Mary's story above, but with more detail about the badmouthing, Melissa recounted how her stepfather initially succeeded in distancing her from Mary and got her to align with him:

... I've given it a lot of thought as to why I was so close to Mark. I think it was because everyday he would come and pick me up from school. And then he would tell me a whole bunch of stuff and a lot of it was a lot bad stuff about my mom. ... He was always talking behind her back and I don't remember anything he said, really. I only remember this one thing because like it shocked me the most: He wouldn't want to be married to my mom

if it wasn't for [their children]. If it wasn't for [them], he would have already left (2).

The beginning of this excerpt provided information about Melissa being closer to Mark because he spent time with her after school and “always” told her “bad stuff” about her mom. With respect to Mary’s connotation of Mark being deliberate about destroying Melissa and Mary’s relationship, Melissa’s remarks indicated she viewed Mark as more than deliberate. By noting Mark would pick her up from school and used the opportunity to share damaging comments and by “always talking behind her back, Melissa portrayed her view of Mark as cunning and methodical. By doing routine acts, such as picking up children at school, Mark appeared to be doing something positive, but Melissa suggested that in these times Mark used the opportunity to alienate Melissa from Mary. Mark’s comment that “he would have already left” if he did not have his own biological children with Mary revealed Melissa’s feelings of shock and hurt about her relative lack of importance to Mark. Interestingly, this statement from Mark also implies that Mark’s destruction of the mother-daughter relationship was not coupled with ensuring Melissa felt close with and had a positive relationship with him. This is surprising because parental alienation literature suggests that one parent alienates a child from the other parent while securing his or her own overly close relationship with the child. Perhaps stepfamily parental alienation functions differently.

Another family provided a useful example of how parents could use methods to alienate their children from their other parent, even accidentally. In commenting about how Sid badmouthed Sarah to Sam, Sarah recounted how she, too, used parental alienation tactics with Sam, as in this instance when she unwittingly placed him in a loyalty conflict:

In fact I really screwed up. The last time that he [Sid] called here, Sam answered the phone and I knew it was his dad on the phone, but I didn't say anything because I figured I would let them talk. This was after a big, huge fight [Sid and I had], so I had determined at that point that I would no longer talk with him, because he and I could no longer talk. We were not at a point in our relationship where we could talk because it always turns into something explosive. The thing that I screwed up with was when Sam was going to hand me the phone I told Sam, "I'm not talking to your father. Tell him to write me." And I did to Sam what Sid did to him: I put him right in the middle. So Sam was extremely uncomfortable and of course that's when Sid started going off to Sam how I was horrible and how I was keeping him away and he wanted to be his dad and I wasn't allowing him to be a father. Later I told Sam, "You know what? I owe you a huge, *huge* apology." I said, "I really screwed up. I put you in a position you should not have been in." I said, "I should have taken the phone and told Sid if you want to communicate with me, you write it. And you send it and then we will communicate that way." I said, "But instead, I told you to do [something else] and then you had to hear a whole bunch of things from your father again" (2).

Sarah not only recognized how Sid acted inappropriately, in this instance by sharing with their son Sam his views on how "horrible" Sarah was, but she admitted that she has said inappropriate comments to Sam, too. In this example, Sarah recounted her error of placing Sam in the middle by having him communicate to Sid what Sarah would not. As a whole, parents' statements illustrated the ease in which parents notice their ex-spouse's faults. As in this instance recounted by Sarah, sometimes parents also recognize their foibles as well. However, as Mary and Sarah illustrated, some parents hold themselves accountable for inappropriate behavior and they also may implicate their former spouse for wrongdoing.

Sam also recognized his parents' contributions to the alienation dynamic. Sam said, "I think my dad tries to get me so I hate mom" (2) and in reference to what his mom has told him about Sid, Sam said he felt "... upset. I didn't even want to know those things ... She told me some stuff that I just wish she'd keep a secret, just wouldn't have

told me and I would be fine with that” (2). In talking about his dad’s efforts to get Sam to feel differently about Sarah, Sam’s message implied that he felt pressure to feel the same way about Sarah that Sid feels. Sam’s comments about not wanting to know what Sarah tells him about Sid suggest that he not only noticed the battles that his parents wage through him, but was upset by having access to their adult-oriented information. He went on to describe he believed he would be better off not knowing information about his dad because he noticed its affect on him.

Similar content, yet different meanings in family members’ stories. Families each maintained their own stories from which they made meaning and understood one another and family life events. Although family members recalled similar events and shared some commonality in reporting the incidents, family members interpreted the meanings of the events differently.

In Sarah and Sam’s family, the following stories about Sid’s involvement at Christmas and a Monster Truck Race illustrated how the same events can be viewed through markedly different lenses:

... Sid did nothing at Christmas for them. *Nothing*. He called up on the 23rd of December, and didn’t even want to talk to them [the kids]. ... In fact I *offered* to have him speak to the kids and he refused. And that’s when he was like, “So do the kids have Christmas presents?” And I said of course they have Christmas presents; I’m going to take care of them.” You know and he says, “Well good, because I’m leaving for Vegas and then I’m going California and then I’m going to the Caribbean and nobody can get me there and they can’t do anything to me so you’re on your own and you better hope they don’t need me for a blood transfusion or an organ or whatever because I won’t be reached” (1, 2). ... Whatever Sid’s and my problems are, are our problems. It’s not the kids’ problem. But then I also pointed out to Sam I said, “You know,” I said, “Yes, your dad did want to take you to a Monster Truck Race, *but* that was six weeks after Christmas. He did nothing for you for Christmas; he did nothing for your birthday; he hasn’t paid his child support; he hasn’t made sure that you guys have clothes, that you guys are being fed.” I said, “He doesn’t want any of that.

It's just, he calls up out of the clear blue after weeks and weeks and weeks of not giving a crap to say 'Hey, let's go out to a Monster Truck Race.'" I said, "That's not being a parent." I said [to Sam], "I'm sorry I can't afford to take you to those, but you're eating; you have a house; you have clothes; you're doing activities with your friends. I'm taking care of you day in and day out. So if I could come along every six weeks and go out to some grand event, hell yeah I'd do it, but then I wouldn't be your mother" (2).

Sarah's story communicated Sid's lack of care and concern for the children contrasted with her daily efforts to provide for them. Sarah insinuated that she did not allow the children to go to the Monster Truck Race because Sid's parenting efforts were limited to attending fun events. Sarah's sentiments illustrate Sid's no-win situation: Sid was trying to remain involved with his children, even though the involvement was limited to exciting activities, and was criticized for it. This dilemma would likely continue unless Sid participated in half of all of the parenting responsibility. In addition, this excerpt showed how Sarah can go overboard in telling Sam too much information about his dad's ineptitudes while also showing how Sarah rationalized why she tells her son this information: She pointed it out because Sid only wants to do the fun activities with the children and "doesn't want any of" the other more mundane duties that she does and, possibly, for which she wanted credit.

Compare Sarah's story to Sam's first account of Sid's involvement at Christmas and how he makes meaning from it:

S: And dad supposedly wanted to see us at Christmas and I said, [in a sarcastic tone] "Yeah, sure." 'Cause mom said he actually called during my birthday.

J: Oh, is your birthday close to Christmas?

S: Yeah, he didn't even call. He didn't even care (1).

In this excerpt Sam's account is confusing and contradictory. At first he said Sid did call for his birthday and later stated that Sid did not call, which Sam took to mean that his dad "doesn't care." Sam's meaning about Sid not caring is further implied at the outset of this statement when Sam's sarcastic comment belied his doubt that Sid wanted to see the children at Christmas. Notice how Sam's meaning shifted in his second interview when he brought up the subject of Christmas again:

J: So, tell me what you like and what you love about your dad.

S: He tries to help sometimes...

J: How does he try to help?

S: He tries to help us with – he tries to see us at Christmas. ...He gave us 30 bucks to spend and he let me get a dart gun. ... He wanted to take us to a Monster Truck Race, ... but we couldn't go, because the tickets were sold out (2).

This account characterized the changes in meaning one can make overtime. It might be that Sam's recollection about Christmas is different during his second interview; he may have forgotten what "really" happened, or his meaning may have shifted for another reason altogether. This second account also illustrated how different family members can create distinct meanings from one another. Sam believed the reason for missing the Monster Truck Race was due to the tickets being sold out, whereas Sarah suggested the show was missed because she would not allow Sid to take the children to the fun activities when he skipped all the mandatory parenting responsibilities.

Another example of family members reporting the "same" story and creating their own separate meanings came from Mary and Melissa. One of the hallmark stories Mary and Melissa shared was about a time when Mark purposefully misrepresented Mary. Like the stories Sarah and Sam told, Mary and Melissa's stories share overlapping content and

maintain separate meanings. Their stories also contained separate pieces of information, adding to their divergent meanings. Mary recounted her story this way:

...We had just had dinner and everything fell apart again because we started fighting and then I didn't want to fight in front of the kids because it's just so awful – hard on them. So I put myself in timeout, I went back to the bedroom. And I didn't even know Mark owned this [before this incident], but he had this little tape recorder and he had it [hidden] in his pocket and he turned it on and he came back to the bedroom and he started picking a fight with me again. I didn't want to fight. He started saying things like, "You are such a horrible mother," and lies, and this and that and the other thing. And I was trying to get out of the bedroom, I didn't want to look at him, I was mad, ... I was upset, and I was trying to get through. I was trying to get through the door to get away from him and he wouldn't let me through. And I made the mistake of hitting him. And he called 911 and had me arrested. I spent 2 nights and 2 days in jail ... and then I had to do I had to do 36 classes of domestic violence and he didn't have to do anything (1).

Mary's awareness of the children being exposed to parental conflict drove her to take a "timeout" away from the situation. Mary conveyed how Mark arranged this altercation: He hid a tape recorder in his pocket, "picked a fight" with Mary to get her to say and do things that he could use against her, and trapped her in the bedroom to egg her on even more. Mary suggested that despite all of Mark's set-up and lack of any consequences for him, that she held some responsibility for the outcome because she "made the mistake of hitting him." Mary's account of what occurred with Mark differed slightly from her daughter's account:

So my mom had put herself in timeout in the back room because they [Mary and Mark] had gotten into a fight. And then he [secretly] stuffed a tape recorder in his back pocket and went into the room. And my mom didn't want to talk to him and so she hit him. ... I was outside at the time with my friend and we were swinging on the porch swing and then we both saw Mark come out with the phone. I remember him saying, "911 come, my wife is beating me." And she wasn't. She didn't. I ... actually found the tape recorder while she was in jail and listened to it. ... I heard only four hits that she did. You know, like a hit on the back. And he made it sound like she was like *beating* him, but she was slapping to get away

because she was trying to calm down in the back room. And then he had to come in and just make things worse. I guess all that was running through her mind was that the only way to get away was to just hit (1).

Later, Melissa added:

M: And also [regarding] the tape recording, my mom had [realized after the fact], too, that he would put his hands in his pockets and turn on and off the tape recorder. When he was talking it'd be off; when my mom was talking it'd be on. I also remember he just kind of laid it on the kitchen table and I was all nosy and stuff and so I went in and I listened to it. I didn't hear his voice once.

J: Really, wow, I didn't know about that part of the story.

M: I didn't know it either until my mom and my grandma told me (2).

Melissa's stories about the tape recorder event were somewhat similar to her mom's.

Melissa used some of the same language in her description of Mary taking a "timeout."

Melissa's account further mirrored Mary's in that Melissa knew Mary did not want to talk with Mark when she was in the bedroom and was aware of why Mary hit Mark.

Nonetheless, Melissa's story conveyed very different perceptions than Mary's. Melissa's meanings involved supporting her mom and recognizing Mark's deceit and entrapment.

Melissa supported her mom, which is a major theme in her story. By saying she listened to the recording and knew Mary had not beat Mark, that she "only" heard "four hits," and that Mark made it out as if Mary was "beating" him, Melissa showed her support for her mom's side of the event. Melissa's account also implied that she intervened into the incident by being "nosy" and listening to the tape as a sign of additional support for Mary. Finally, from Melissa's story, it was clear that Mary and Mary's mom have spoken with Melissa about events related to Mark and have reminded her about some of the details. This suggests that one way children make meaning is by what their parents and other relatives tell them.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study of family members who experienced divorce, ongoing parental conflict, and activities associated with parental alienation was based in constructivism and narrative inquiry. Finding commonalities among the parents and children from these three families cannot be used to make generalizations about families who experience divorce and parental conflict, nor was this project aimed at doing so. The primary goal of this study was to explore family relationships and how family members created meaning in the context of divorce, interparental conflict, and parental alienation. Accessing multiple informants from each family uncovered the contradictions and complex meanings family members maintained. The stories family members shared provided information related to each of this study's guiding research questions and shed light on larger-level issues.

Research Question Findings

In relation to the first research question ("What stories do family members maintain and what meaning, including thoughts and feelings, do they derive from their experiences with conflict and parental alienation?"), parents expressed ambivalent,

though primarily negative, views of their former spouse. In addition, parents were generally aware of the difficulties and influences of parental conflict on their children, stating it was “hard on them” and caused them to “stress...out” and to leave the room, yet parents attributed their children with strength and understanding.

Children also noted the influence of parental conflict on them, but described their reactions to it in greater detail than their parents did. Children identified their feelings associated with parental conflict as “upset,” “mad,” and “scared.” More than merely labeling their feelings associated with parental conflict, children described *how* their parents’ conflict affected them. Of particular note is Katie’s statement about how her parents’ “fights” negatively affect her next day at school. This finding aligns with previous research (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Kelly, 2000) about the harmful influence parental conflict has upon children. Beyond the connection with previous research, this study offers a unique contribution because it suggests parents understand only part of their children’s experience. Despite the similarity of parents’ and children’s descriptions about the negative influence of conflict, which suggests parents generally understood the difficulty children had with conflict, the children’s gripping descriptions of how they viewed and were affected by such conflict indicates that these parents only had a superficial comprehension of how deeply their children were affected by these issues.

In answering the first research question, children also talked in detail about how they think and feel related to experiences associated with parental alienation (i.e., loyalty conflicts and badmouthing). The children in this project expressed concern about having to choose between their arguing parents, supporting previous research findings (Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Children commented about

their distress at being forced into choosing sides between arguing parents. Katie's comments about her feelings associated with to her parents' conflict are particularly illustrative. As is evident from Sam's pawn metaphor as well as his other statements, the children also expressed the meanings they created about loyalty conflicts and parental badmouthing. The fact that children created their own meanings reinforces earlier research findings (Cummings, 1998; Cummings & Davies, 2002; Cummings et al., 2004) and supports the assertion that

the various ways children attempt to cope with these core concerns, and defend against their fears, are likely to result in entrenched patterns of feelings, perceived reality, solving problems, relating to other people, and dealing with emotions (Johnston & Roseby, 1997, p. 54).

Moreover, because of children's awareness of conflict and activities associated with parental alienation, they were able to ascertain and create meaning about the emotional landscape in their families (Cummings; Cummings & Davies). Taken together, the information and meanings children provided about parental conflict and alienation behaviors is another important contribution of this study. It is noteworthy that children picked up as much as they did about their parents' conflict, parental alienation strategies, and family relationships. The fact that children were aware of their family's relational dynamics indicates they are invited or drawn into adult-adult conflict way beyond their developmental maturity levels. Their involvement encourages them to serve adult roles of intermediaries and confidants. Thus, even at the age of 9 or 10, children can be adultified, emotionally treated as adults. When this occurs, children straddle two worlds—they remain in childhood doing developmentally appropriate tasks while also knowing about and dealing with emotional dynamics like adults. Children's amazing insights become adaptive coping mechanisms to assist them in dealing with their families.

Children were not the only ones who created meaning about parental conflict and badmouthing; parents also noted the presence and created meaning about loyalty conflicts and parental alienation behaviors. Family members constructed different meanings about the same issues, which is consistent with prior research (Burns & Dunlop, 2002; Fauchier & Margolin, 2004; Pelton & Forehand, 2001) indicating family members maintain some divergent perspectives from one another. Furthermore, in analyzing meaning construction, family members used and relied on different stories. This suggests not all stories were shared between parents and their children. For instance, parents recounted some stories that children either did not know or did not incorporate into their meaning making. This is somewhat encouraging because it indicated parents in this project were not sharing every negative detail with their children. In other words, parents refrained from disclosing information children should not hear to *some* extent. Based on both parent and child reports, at times parents shared parental information with children with a specific intent to shape or influence their view. At other times, parents shared information with children to counterbalance what the other parent said and to help children interpret what they had heard or experienced. In general, good parenting practices involve helping children interpret meaning from the events they experience (Feuerstein, 1979), but how much meaning interpretation is too much? In other words, how much should parents structure meaning and helping their children make sense of their experiences? When one parent badmouths or tells children skewed information, should a parent refrain from saying anything at the risk of allowing children to make their own meaning from a skewed perspective? It might be too difficult for parents to wait until their children are

old enough to have their own cognitive capacities for meaning making to make full sense of what happened and to have a more nuanced, accurate understanding of their parents.

Overall, the findings related to the first research question illuminated how aware children were about their parents' actions and motivations and demonstrated that children create meaning about their family experiences. The findings also provided no indication these parents had a mental illness. The behaviors associated with parental alienation were likely due to stress and parents' lingering emotions (Johnston & Roseby, 1997). This shows how emotions in the context of grief and loss can affect one's behavior and that alienation may not necessarily stem from psychopathology. Parents' reports that their former spouse was mentally ill suggest that mental illness *may* co-occur with parental alienation; however, without any information from the other parents, it remains unclear whether they experienced mental illness or not.

The second research question ("What are family members' responses to parental conflict and parental alienation?") indicated the parents in this study responded to their former spouse with some measure of self-protection. These parents gave examples of limiting their communication and access to the child's other parent as protective measures. At least one parent also indicated some interactions between parents required reciprocity (i.e., playing "tit for tat") in order to reach agreement on requests, and so neither parent would lose face by giving in. According to children's reports, at times parents also responded to conflict by telling children information about the other parent. Both mothers and fathers acted in ways that could alienate children from their other parent, counter to previous reports that primarily blamed mothers for this.

Parents and children noticed the effect of parental discord and loyalty conflicts on children; thus, some of the findings related to the first research question are applicable to the second one as well. Children responded in idiosyncratic, diverse ways in order to create their own understanding. Children tried to access the “truth” of what really happened between parents by eavesdropping on recorded information and by asking both parents to recount particular events. Another way children responded to parental conflict was through intervening in parents’ arguments. Some children purposefully intervened when their parents fought so that the conflict would stop or reach a resolution. According to these parents, children were swayed by their other parent’s negative comments or behavior. For example, according to Ken, Katie shouted at her father the same words she heard her mother use with him. Also, Katie heard and was affected by Karen’s statements that when visiting her father she was to be with him only. This influenced her to follow him closely during her visits with her father.

Children in such high-conflict families straddle two worlds. In the world of innocence, children engage in play and hope to enjoy time with each parent. In the world of adults, children navigate dark emotions such as hate, conflicting loyalties, and complex family dynamics. The children who participated in this research sometimes responded to a parent acting based on fear and loyalty. They also acted like children, playing and forgetting to always live by the loyalty rules. For instance, Katie followed her dad around the house in accordance with her mother’s suggestions, and also played freely on the trampoline, acting in more authentic, developmentally appropriate ways. Loyalty conflicts become a developmental double-bind for children. Children want to have fun and play, yet in the presence of high interparental conflict and loyalty conflict

they become privy to parental dynamics, perhaps before they felt ready to enter into that realm. When a parent places emotional restrictions on children to maintain particular relationships and feelings for each parent, what pulls children further into the loyalty struggle is their developmental appropriateness to forget and enjoy the time spent and relationships with each parent.

The third research question (“How do parents and children view the relationships with one another in the context of divorce, interparental conflict, and parental alienation?”) indicated the family context generally affected family members’ relationships with one another. Parents recounted poor relationships with their former spouse. But, not surprisingly, parents reported having positive, even “strong” relationships with their children despite the divorce, conflict, and the presence of parental alienation strategies. Children, on the other hand, shared nuances with respect to the relationships with their parents.

Overall, children expressed the desire for close relationships with each parent. In reality, children had differential relationships with each parent. The children in this study expressed primarily positive relationships with their mothers, although in one instance the relationship had been restored after a period of distance and alienation. All children reported positive memories with their fathers, indicating they had a positive relationship with their fathers at one point in time, but some children indicated the relationship had changed, resulting in more negative reports of father-child relationships. Sam’s remarks about missing the half of his heart belonging to his dad highlight both the desire for a relationship and the lower quality of his relationship with his father. In one instance, however, a child reported no change in the relationship with her dad and said the

relationship was “good.” As a whole, children identified negative attributes about their fathers regardless of their relationship quality with their dad, although this was more evident in father-child relationships that experienced change and lower quality. It is likely that children’s perception of the family’s emotional landscape informed their views of their relationship with parents. Knowing that parental relationships were poor, the extent to which parents disliked one another, and knowing about parents’ hurtful behavior toward each other appeared to affect children’s relationship with their parents, particularly their fathers.

It is important to note these children did not attribute poor relationships with their fathers to unrealistic expectations nor did they claim that extraordinary measures were required for a good relationship. These children generally appeared to have somewhat realistic expectations for parent-child relationships. From their own reports, children clearly remembered small efforts such as getting ice cream, spending time with a parent, or feeling protected by a parent. These simple gestures emphasize the importance of the amount of time parents spend with children. The children in this project seemed to suggest that fun and memorable time spent with a parent were the biggest indicators of relationship quality.

Meta-Level Findings

The conclusions for this study would be incomplete only by showing how the data answered the three research questions. At a meta-level, there are additional ways to understand the data and what they mean. There are three such areas to highlight. First, a running theme throughout all of the findings was *dichotomy*. For instance, parents exhibited dichotomous views about their ex-spouse by describing their former mate in

primarily negative ways and yet each one tempered the negative image with some positive attributes. As an example, Mary described Mark as a “good person” despite his pattern of untrustworthiness. Later, she described him as evil. Each parent maintained these contrasting images of their former spouse. Even though some suggest parents who employ parental alienation have rigid thinking and lack introspection and perspective-taking (Ellis, 2000), this may not be entirely accurate. These findings indicate that parental alienation may even occur when parents do not completely hate one another or possess a singular goal of denigrating the other parent, as exemplified by Sarah’s prayers for Sid. Parents who maintain some positive or hopeful views of one another may still engage in parental alienation, even if unintentionally.

Children also maintained dichotomies in their thinking and meaning construction. For instance, Katie said she liked the honesty in her parents, but honesty that involved sharing stories and information about the other parent was excessive and unnecessary. Sam’s comments referring to liking some parts about his dad and hating other aspects provide further example of children’s dichotomous views.

The theme of dichotomy also reflects how children differentially viewed their parents’ negative statements about one another. Some children justified why their mothers expressed negative comments about their fathers. For instance, Katie said she is not bothered by her mother’s critical remarks about her father because they are “not as bad as what my dad says” and Sam rationalized that his mom told him the truth to warn him because his “dad can be very tricky sometimes.” In contrast, children tended to characterize their fathers more harshly for making negative remarks about mothers. Fathers were described as “using” children and having anger problems whereas mothers

were credited with legitimate reasons for sharing their critical remarks. Thus, negative comments were judged differently based on the gender of the parent who said the statements and the gender of the parent who was criticized. This provides additional support for other research implying parental alignment or alienation might be constructed differently depending on the gender of the instigating parent (Johnston, 2003; Moné & Biringen, 2006). Research shows effects of gender to the parent alienated matters (Johnston et al., 2005), which suggests the instigating parent's gender may also be a factor. Specifically, inaccurate perceptions, illogical reasoning, and a greater focus on others over one's self occurred when children feel alienated from their fathers (Johnston et al.). Mother-alienated children appeared to have "inflated" views of themselves and were more "self-preoccupied" (Johnston et al.). Due to the findings of previous research, it seems as if parental alienation might be influenced by stereotypical gender expectations due to the instigating/aligned parent rubbing off more traits on the child. In contrast, Kopetski et al. (2005) cited information indicating parental alienation is not gender-determined and that alienating parents' behavior were the same, regardless of parent gender. Skillful empirical work rather than clinical descriptions are needed to determine more about the "wide range" of parental alienation behaviors (Baker, 2005b) and whether parental alienation is constructed differently based on parent gender.

In addition to dichotomous ways of making meaning about parents' perceptions of one another, children's stories about their level of involvement in parental conflict also represented dichotomous thinking. At the same time children reported stories of how they got involved with parental conflict or other parental issues, they also recounted instances of not intervening. In total, children's vacillation about the extent of their intervention

behavior suggests they may maintain differing meaning constructions about when it is useful to step in to their parents' issues.

A second meta-finding involves *control*, often an underlying motivation for how family members' responded to conflict and parental alienation. Control was a way parents organized their meaning structures and desire for control informed how parents interacted with their former spouse. Sarah's statements about Sid's verbal manipulations to skew the original context and Ken's statements about his ex-wife's attempts to control his visitation time with their daughter illustrate how parents used the concept of control cognitively to create meaning. Moreover, parents' view that their former spouse experienced mental illness is a way to create understanding about what was occurring. When parents believed mental instability was an issue, it gave them more power and authority to behaviorally control their situation. In some instances, associating psychological illness with one's former spouse might be due to a familiarity with the existing parental alienation literature, which commonly views parents who alienate as mentally ill. In other cases, parents may not be aware of the parental alienation literature and simply created the label of mental illness into their meaning because it fit and served them well.

Parents did more than use control as a way to create cognitive understanding; they also acted in ways to control their situation by limiting their communication or physical presence with their former spouse. Some parents also used legal means as a way to control encounters with the former spouse. Ken used police reports when Karen hit Kristine with a car, and he employed the court system to hold Karen accountable for the changes she unilaterally made to the child visitation schedule. Another parent controlled

the other parent's access to children using legal means due to concerns of the children's safety with the other parent. In a few families, mothers and fathers required reciprocal gestures from the other parents as a behavioral control mechanism in order to agree to new requests or change the visitation schedule. Sometimes, parents' attempts to control a situation can create a catch-22 situation for them. For instance, when a child does not want to spend time with a nonresidential parent during regularly scheduled parenting time, a parent may attempt to control the circumstance by mandating the child come visit or by requesting additional time with the child in the future to make up for lost time together. If a parent inquires with the residential parent about either of these, the child can be pulled into a loyalty conflict by having to account for wanting to visit with one parent and not the other. On the other hand, if a parent asserts no control, passively accepts the request, and allows the child's wants to dictate visitation arrangements, the parent can lose out on spending important time with the child. Thus, while asserting control to manage one's situation is expected, mandating too much control or abdicating it completely are ineffective parenting strategies.

Children also employed behavioral and cognitive control tactics in order to manage their life circumstances and situations. Children's own reports of involving themselves in parental conflict were their way of trying to reduce or eliminate conflict. One child's comment about intervening as the only way to resolve interparental conflict illustrated the child's need to control the inevitable outcome so that the parents' fight reached resolution. The various ways children tried to ascertain the truth are also ways they tried to control their situations. Some children reported listening to private information and creating structured formulas for determining the truth. Their attempts to

determine truth were a way to control the chaos of life and to cognitively make sense of what was happening around them.

The third meta-message from the data indicates multiple family members become involved in parental alienation, creating a particular pattern or dynamic for how family members acted and interacted with one another. That multiple family members participate in a parental alienation dynamic supports previous suggestions that parental alienation is a systems dynamic to which many family members contribute (Baker, 2006; Johnston, Walters, & Friedlander, 2001; Johnston et al., 2005; Lee & Olesen, 2001). Essentially, the parental alienation dynamic is not the creation of only one parent, but it can involve the child's personal characteristics, the vulnerabilities in one parent, and the personality and behaviors of the other parent (Lee & Olesen). It can even involve extended family and friends. In some instances, this project's data showed mothers were accused of or admitted to gatekeeping by preventing visitation with the children's father. Fathers, on the other hand, admitted to or were attributed with pushing buttons and badmouthing mothers to their children. Children, in particular, served as useful indicators of their parents' involvement in parental alienation. Through their stories, children provided evidence that both parents contributed to parental alienation (e.g., Katie's comments about Ken and Karen making negative comments about one another; Sam's statements about Sarah telling him information he does not want to know about Sid using Sam to hurt Sarah; Melissa's words recounting how Mark picked her up from school and said mean things about Mary and about Mary making mean statements about Mark). The implication of both mothers and fathers in a hurtful relational dynamic aligns with

previous research (Johnston, 2003; Linder et al., 2002) noting both sexes participate in emotional aggression and parental alienation strategies.

Children's actions can further contribute to the parental alienation dynamic. Beyond children's attempts to intervene in parental conflicts to behaviorally control their situation, they can also intervene consciously or subconsciously in order to be involved in the family alienation pattern. For instance, another way to interpret Melissa's admission of "being nosy" by listening to the tape recording of her mother and stepfather fighting is to view her actions as an attempt to justify and further gather her support for her mom by noting Mark's inappropriateness to vindicate Mary. Another way multiple family members were involved in the parental alienation dynamic was when parent-child relationships were used as weapons for vengeance between the warring parents. Some of the children and parents remarked how one parent would use his or her relationship with the child to hurt the other parent, such as when Sam spoke about being used as a pawn by his dad in order to ultimately hurt Sarah. In sum, there is not simply one person responsible for causing parental alienation; through their interconnected family relationships, multiple family members contribute to the parental alienation dynamic. Moreover, family members' contributions to parental alienation may be deliberate (e.g., Melissa's reports of Mark picking her up and saying negative words about Mary) or unwitting (e.g., Sarah's realization of her mistake placing Sam in the middle of her communication difficulty with Sid without the intention of doing so) and self-initiated (e.g., when children purposefully choose to intervene in parental conflict) or other-initiated (e.g., when children are placed in loyalty conflicts by one parent sharing information and expecting the child to choose one parent over the other). It may be that

family members participate in varying roles within the parental alienation dynamic, too. Ken's stories of being victimized by Karen's words and actions and then later instigating conflict with Karen suggests parents may change roles within the dynamic from time to time.

Limitations

As with all types of research, there were some limiting factors to this project. First, the attorney, therapist, and personal referral resources did not generate as many potential participant referrals as I had hoped. I am unsure how many people lawyers and counselors told about the study. Regardless, it appears as though those referred by attorneys and therapists self-selected not to participate in the study, perhaps for emotional or other personal reasons, or for study-related reasons (e.g., unsure of what the research would involve, fear of being judged, disinterest in sharing experiences with an unknown researcher). Therefore, it remains unclear why attorneys and therapists were ineffective means for recruitment. It may be that a more personal connection, such as briefly meeting the potential participant in the therapist's or attorney's office, would have assisted in generating participants from these sources, but I am aware of the ethical and time constraints associated with this possibility.

In a similar vein, it was surprising that personal referral sources did not generate any potential participant calls. Several personal friends and colleagues said they knew someone who might qualify for the study and took my research flyer to distribute. I expected that the personal referral sources, who knew me, could help allay concerns of those to whom they presented the flyer by telling them about me and my nonjudgmental stance. Nonetheless, those who were invited by the personal referral sources to consider

participation might have felt concerned about the level of confidentiality in this research. In other words, the ineffectiveness of using personal referral sources might be due to concerns about the possibility of one's private information being shared with the person who invited the participation.

These limitations did not seem to reduce the quality of the data; it simply limited the quantity of potential participants. In terms of helping future research projects associated with parental alienation, what did appear to be a useful participant recruitment strategy was personally presenting the research invitation through divorced parenting workshops in order to have the opportunity to contact potential participants with whom there was no personal connection *and* to meet them in person to be able to answer their questions and ease any concerns. This method still generated few potential participant phone calls, but it generated more than the referral sources. Surprisingly, using the large distribution list and conducting the mass-mailing was also a somewhat effective way to recruit potential participants into the project. It may be that the parental alienation topic is limited to a small segment of the population and so emotionally difficult that participants may be difficult to secure regardless of recruitment strategy.

A second and unfortunate limitation of this study was that both mothers and fathers from each participating family did not participate. One original aim of this study was to collect perspectives from each family member, as had been suggested in previous literature. Knowing that research showed how family members, and perhaps especially former spouses, maintain different perspectives, this research is missing a critical perspective due to the absence of one parent's view. One of the primary reasons I secured the Certificate of Confidentiality was to protect and assure parents that their interview

data would remain private. Nonetheless, parents who were actively in conflict with one another may have thought the study too risky or may have been disinterested in talking if their former spouse was already involved. Despite the fact that only one parent from each family participated, accessing parents' and children's meanings constitutes a significant contribution of this research. Having multiple family members participating showed how children create their own meaning and adopt some meanings from parents. Using multiple informants also provided a picture of the family's dynamics. Having the second parent participating would have made the picture more complete.

The final limitation deals with the extent to which the participating families experienced parental alienation. At times I wondered if these children felt alienated from one or both parents. The fact that not all attempts to produce parental alienation are fruitful (Baker, 2006) and not all children are equally susceptible to and affected by adversity (Hetherington, 1999) assuage my concerns.¹ Even if these children were not experiencing the effects of parental alienation, alienating behaviors might still have occurred. Whether parents in my study, or their former spouse, were attempting to alienate children from one another, it is unproductive to discern when either/or criteria serve as the benchmarks for diagnosing parental alienation. The results from this study show diverse and nuanced understandings of the meaning of conflict and parental alienation behaviors. Regardless of the extent to which children experienced alienation from a parent, children expressed relationship dichotomies when they talked about the parental relationship they were less close to, viewing that parent with a mix of positive

¹ Another way of interpreting the sample I collected is by using Johnston et al.'s (2005) assertion that children who experience parental alienation are about 20% of those in custody-disputing families. Thus, I may have accessed participants from high conflict and custody-disputing families who were in the remaining 80%.

and negative attributes. As such, it is not possible to create concise categories and criteria related to people's meanings about parental alienation. Furthermore, this study's findings about the meanings, perceived intentions and family members' views indicate a systemic view free from rigid cutpoints is a more holistic and useful way to view, treat, report, think of these families. Thus, this research demonstrates a process-oriented and systemic approach to be useful.

Clinical Implications

The findings from this research have implications on clinical work with families who experience divorce, ongoing high parental conflict, and parental alienation. This section is not intended to provide comprehensive information for assessment and treatment of these families; more thorough information is detailed elsewhere (Ellis, 2000; Johnston, 2005; Johnston & Roseby, 1997). In addition, regardless of the interventions described in the literature, there is no "magic bullet" when it comes to working with families who experience parental alienation. No set of recommendations will suffice for every family; after all, it is clear that, as with many other issues, parental alienation is not a "homogeneous problem that can be treated by an algorithmic, step-by-step therapy program" (Schwartz, 1995, p. 24). Therapy is likely to provide some benefit, though. As evident from one child's successful interventions into her parents' conflict and from Mary's mother's success in readjusting the relationship between Mary and Melissa after Mark's attempts to destroy it, outsiders are important to changing the family dynamic. The findings from this research suggest *how* to conduct effective therapeutic interventions as well as *what content* to include for desired outcomes.

One of the obvious implications for clinical work based on this study's findings is the usefulness of including various family members in assessment and treatment due to their different perspectives. Professionals in the field have advocated for systemic clinical work (Johnston et al., 2001; Johnston & Roseby, 1997). Because family members have divergent perspectives, clinicians need to account for this by involving as many family members in treatment as possible.

Another suggestion for clinical work stemming from this research involves the use of strengths and positive resources in therapy. Previously I mentioned my plan to examine parental alienation in order to explore its drawbacks and potential usefulness. Although I do not see any redeeming outcomes associated with parental alienation itself, children who experience it are thrust into more adult roles by learning about family members' imperfections and disconnectedness at a young age. These children have intricate understandings of family relationships and, in the midst of various negative messages, possess amazing wisdom about how to cope with their family challenges. In a clinical sense, Katie's example of listening to her heart for guidance in handling her parents' conflict serves as a source of adaptive coping that can be used for dealing with other struggles. Incorporating children's positive coping mechanisms can assist them in managing the disparity between adultification and the everyday tasks of normal childhood. Using family strengths can similarly build effective ways of interacting and meaning construction.

A third implication from this research is about the need for assessing how family members think and construct meaning from their experiences. Accessing meaning structures through stories proved to be useful, especially with embedded meanings that

were less socially acceptable. Assessing for how children create and maintain their understandings is also important. For instance, when asked directly, children may report that neither parent tells them to think bad things about the other parent, but according to this research, children heard meaning-making suggestions from their parents and created meaning about why parents criticized one another. Altogether, using multiple family members, strengths, and accessing information through stories will aid in the process of treatment.

In terms of the specific interventions to employ in therapy, the findings from this research also provide some suggestions. Due to parents' awareness about the harm their conflict and behaviors associated with parental alienation had for children, it is insufficient to provide mere psychoeducation about the dangers of conflict and parental alienation. Parents already appear to know this, but seem unaware as to the extent of harm children feel. Instead, there is a greater need to work on behavioral interventions for reducing conflict and creating resolution. And because parents provided their various rationalizations for sharing damaging information with their children, parents would also benefit from learning how to restrain damaging comments when in front of children and expressing them in more productive, appropriate outlets, such as with counselors or adult friends. No matter how "good" the reasons seem for badmouthing the other parent, evidence from these children shows it is hurtful even when children do not say so. Further, in addition to behavioral interventions, clinical work should focus on emotional healing so that parents' wounds that keep them involved with one another do not continue to operate and dominate their interaction dynamic.

Along with behavioral and emotional interventions, based on children's reports of their relationships with their parents, therapy should address parent-child relationships. Other research supports the utility of incorporating work on parent-child relationships (Grych & Fincham, 1992). Children in this project demonstrated a strong desire to have positive relationships with their mothers and fathers. When a parent-child relationship diminished in quality, children felt the loss and expressed it through behavioral and emotional means.

Research Implications

Results from this research provide suggestions for future research, many of which are similar to the clinical implications. Future research on the topic of parental alienation would benefit from using multiple family members. Findings from this study show the importance of capturing multiple perspectives. Because this project only accessed one parent and one or two children from each family, additional research should include mothers, fathers, and children. Using both parents and their children will provide additional information on the family dynamic and will be able to access triadic relationships. Continuing to use children in this type of research is also critical. The voices of children have been absent heretofore. Children may be more cumbersome to include due to constraints on consent procedures and ethical dilemmas; however, the information they share is invaluable and cannot be accessed through other means. Moreover, because children are the silent and powerless victims of parental alienation, it is even more essential to provide a forum from which they can be heard. Ultimately, the field of parental alienation requires more solid empirical work. It primarily needs additional exploratory work to illuminate the patterns and intricacies associated with

parental alienation. Because parental alienation is such a taboo topic, employing stories to access socially undesirable information and people's meaning-making will continue to prove beneficial.

Considering the fact that empirical research on parental alienation has just begun, this project was aimed at exploring the dynamic and raising issues that necessitate further exploration. Stemming from the findings of this project, several issues merit additional study. Based on comments from these three parents, there is some evidence implying parents alter their narratives about their former spouse when divorce and lingering parental conflict occurs; this finding supports Johnston and Roseby's (1997) assertion. However, considering the fact that parents maintained some positive attributions for their ex-spouse, there is the possibility that at least some of their positive views remain unchanged. Thus, additional research on the extent to which parents in conflict alter their narratives would provide insight into facets of parental alienation and parents' meaning-making.

Another area needing additional clarity is whether parental alienation looks different depending on the gender of the parent who attempts to alienate. It was unclear from the varied relationships these children had with their parents if alienation was constructed differently for mothers than it was for fathers. Johnston et al. (2005) suggested parental alienation looks different based on the gender of the targeted parent. It may be that mothers employ different mechanisms of alienation than fathers, and if so, it would be interesting to learn more about parental alienation activities that are the most productive for women and for men. Furthermore, studying parental alienation in various

contexts, such as with blended families or low-level abuse, would yield useful information about how parental alienation varies in different contexts.

Additional research is also needed to explore how the presence of alienating behaviors affects parenting quality and family relationships. When referring to themselves, parents may not believe alienation activities influence parenting efficacy, but their reports about the other parent may shed light on this. Child reports of parents might also suggest if alienation attempts affects parenting. It would further be useful to look at how parents support or encourage children's relationship with their other parent and his or her and extended family. Sarah's comments about encouraging her children not to hate their father and pursuing a relationship with her former mother in-law are noteworthy, especially because they appear to contradict some of the existing parental alienation literature. In sum, when the parental alienation field views parents and their children as wounded *people* and not just those with mental illnesses, we will begin to do a better job of conceptualizing the facets of parental alienation and determining how to intervene effectively.

CHAPTER 6

POST SCRIPT

This chapter details my personal experience during this research project. As mentioned in the previous Reflective Statement section, my own upbringing included highly conflictual parents who made negative remarks about one another. Completing this project, I experienced my own emotional and meaning-making process.

In completing additional reading on divorce, high conflict, and parental alienation during the research interviews, I experienced strong reactions to some of what I read. Some of the material contained familiar information; other readings made me realize more about myself and my struggles based on my childhood experiences. One tough realization stemming from a chapter in Johnston and Roseby's (1997) book was that some of my own ways of interaction and meaning-making are rooted in my early experiences with interparental conflict and parental alienation behaviors. Another example from Johnston et al.'s (2005) article caused me consternation. Their results indicated, "With respect to information processing, there were a few indicators that father-alienated children tended to perceive somewhat inaccurately and reason illogically or loosely" (p. 52). This statement shocked me for several reasons, especially because I

am in a field in which my perceptions and accurate assessments are important. In general, I think I have learned to base my perceptions on solid evidence. The way I have made sense of this is to reassure myself that we all need to be aware of our perceptions, be deliberative in creating meaning, check out our assumptions, and remain open to different viewpoints.

Recently, a friend visited me and we talked about growing up in our respective families. She said something about going to therapy and without a second thought I remarked, “Why do you think I’m in school? School has been my therapy.” In some ways this was a true statement, even though I had never realized the truth until then when I stated it. School has been a way for me to pursue the career in which I am interested *and* a way for me to think about and process my family experiences related to divorce, conflict, and parental alienation.

One reason my work in this field remains so important to me goes beyond the therapeutic benefit I have received in school. This work feels so critical because I want to show the world that divorce does not necessarily destroy children; children can survive and thrive after experiencing divorce, conflict, and parental alienation. After all, there is established variability in outcomes associated with divorce (Hetherington, 2003). Children are resilient and are not bound by the gloomy outcomes or conclusions of divorce research. Results showing children as resilient and with emotional hurt to manage at each developmental milestone fits my own experience. Children with these life experiences do complete college, and even advanced degrees, and can create happy interpersonal relationships and marriages. For instance, I graduated from a top university and am finishing my second graduate degree. My husband and I have been married over

eight years, share a happy relationship—which survived even while we managed the stress of graduate school, and we look forward to having children. My sister, who also encountered the same kinds of experiences between our parents when she was young, provides another success story: She graduated college, is happily married, and has two wonderful children. My point is not that we live perfect or idealistic lives; in fact, we both face and manage life's challenges. However, from my own vantage point, the perspective and wisdom I gained as a child through my difficult family experiences continues to inform how to handle my current life circumstances. This is also possible for others with similar experiences related to divorce, ongoing parental conflict, and parental alienation: If one can use the difficult experiences as a resource to learn valuable lessons, or in such a way that creates wisdom, there is hope for positive outcomes.

As a side note, the process of completing this dissertation research offered some similarity to my childhood experience of triangulation between my parents. For this research, I selected two co-advisers. Having both a female and male adviser, who each represented a different academic department, was in some ways parallel to shuffling between my parents and could have resulted in the same tug-of-war I felt as a child (i.e., listening to and following the suggestions of one person, then feeling pulled in the opposite direction to satisfy the other person by doing something different). In contrast to the loyalty conflict I felt between my parents, my co-advisers communicated well together, deferred to one another when appropriate, and respected each other's expertise. Even though it felt comfortable to shuffle between my co-advisers to get each one's perspective and guidance, mainly because of the familiarity I had in this role while growing up, I am grateful my advisers refrained from, or maybe did not even consider,

using their differences to pursue an agenda. Although the arrangement of having two advisers could have created the same dynamic I experienced between my parents, the parallel ended with the structural similarities, which ultimately served as a huge relief for me.

Apart from my own personal insights from the readings and the structure of having co-advisers, the process of completing this research taught me a few important lessons. First, in reading and re-reading the transcripts it was evident I was not a careful enough listener throughout each interview. For me, it is hard to truly listen and think simultaneously, even with specialized training. Considering how commonplace it is for all of us to attempt to listen while also thinking of various things, I wondered how effective communication with one another ever occurs. My experience reviewing the transcripts indicates we really only capture a fraction of what is said or meant when we attempt to both think and listen simultaneously, and that what we capture is somehow relevant given our own context and meaning structures. Another lesson I learned is connected with Miller's (1996) assertion that ethical research provides an aid to self-reflection. This study challenged me to remain sensitive and listen to participants' own experiences and meanings. The utility of such sensitivity was commented on by one of the participants who said to effectively help hurting people one must remain sensitive and gentle, not harsh or impatient. This participant reminded me that assisting people through loss of relationships and helping them heal is most efficacious when care and concern come first. A third lesson I learned dealt with the difficulty in presenting the results. Each person I interviewed had endearing, positive attributes, yet I did not want my affection for each one to restrict the information I presented; I did not want to disguise some of the

harsh facets of what was said just because I was fond of the participants. So, I aimed to present the results honestly and tried to display participants positively and accurately. I believe I balanced my interest in presenting accurate results while also portraying the people who shared their lives in a kind, respectful manner. Finally, in seeing how some meanings changed for participants over time, I learned firsthand that meaning-making is a continual process that occurs throughout life. The meanings discussed in this study were snapshots of how these people felt and thought at one point in time. Their stories and meanings may have shifted since then, which makes their previous meanings no less significant or valuable.

I hope that parental alienation research as an entire field will continue to seek to identify the assumptions in the existing literature, identify agendas that are being pursued, and begin to systematically deconstruct them through solid qualitative and quantitative research. I think the parental alienation field is ripe for this shift and the families deserve this level of insight from us.

Arduum sane munus. Meum cerebrum nocet.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

If you have experienced divorce and ongoing conflict with your former spouse, will you consider participating in this research project?

- Are you divorced and is the conflict with your ex-spouse still occurring?
- Have you seen any signs that your former spouse is hurting your relationship with your kids by turning them against you?
- Do you find yourself venting thoughts or feelings about your ex-spouse in front of your child(ren)?
- Does your child seem to overly support or side with your former spouse to the point of rejecting you?
- Have you noticed your child(ren) making the same complaints about you that your ex-spouse has made in the past?

If you responded “yes” to any question above and are interested in participating in this research project, please call Jennifer Moné at 491-2794.

Information about the researchers and this study:

David MacPhee, Ph.D., and Jennifer Moné, M.S., are researchers from the Human Development and Family Studies department at Colorado State University. The researchers *do not have a pre-set agenda* or bias about what family relationships “should” look like. Furthermore, they *do not condemn divorce* and *the research is not meant to be shaming or to pass judgment*.

The research project is about how conflict and divorce influence family relationships, especially the relationships between children and their parents. The goal of this study is to explore what family relationships are like in the presence of ongoing conflict after divorce. Another goal is to understand how people make sense of these experiences. This research will involve interviewing family members (they strongly prefer both sets of parents and their child(ren) over 9 years old for participation). If you call with an interest in participating, you will be asked to discuss your responses to these questions to determine if you are eligible for the study. If you are, you will be given additional information about the study and a face-to-face interview will be arranged. Each person who participates will be interviewed twice and each interview will last approximately one hour. Each parent who participates will also complete a short survey about disagreements with their former spouse. To thank those who participate for the time they spend in the research interviews, each parent will receive a \$25 gift certificate to enjoy a special dinner together with his or her children at a family restaurant.

There may be no direct benefit, but reasons to consider participating include:

- The researchers will listen and be attentive to your experiences *without judging you or your situation*.
- You may gain new perspectives about your experiences.
- Your family relationships may become more positive as a result of talking with someone.
- Families who have similar experiences may be better understood by others in the future.

Thank you for your willingness to consider participating!

Appendix B: Telephone Screener and Protocol

I. Thanks and appreciation

“Thank you for calling/ I really appreciate you taking the time to call to find out more about this study.”

II. Data about the flyer/how learned of the research

“How did you hear about my research project?”

III. Ascertain eligibility for inclusion. Ask each of the flyer questions to hear potential participant’s responses.

“I am going to ask you the questions from the research flyer to determine if you qualify for this study. Please give me only as much information as you want to share because this is not meant to be intrusive.”

A. The research flyer questions:

“Are you divorced and is the conflict with your ex-spouse still occurring?”

“Have you seen any signs that your former spouse is hurting your relationship with your kids by turning them against you?”

“Do you find yourself venting thoughts or feelings about your ex-spouse in front of your child(ren)?”

“Does your child seem to overly support or side with your former spouse to the point of rejecting you?”

“Have you noticed your child(ren) making the same complaints about you that your ex-spouse has made in the past?”

B. Assess child(ren)’s age(s) to determine if he/she/they are eligible.

“How old are your children?”

C. There are 4 parts to the inclusion criteria, all of which need to be met:

1-Has there been divorce?

2-Is there ongoing conflict between parents after divorce?

3-Is there at least one child in the family who is at least 9 years old?

4-Does it seem from the phone conversation that there is a likely chance parental alienation is occurring (i.e., not just divorce and conflict, but parents’ overt attempts to distance children from the other parent)?

D. If the caller does not meet the inclusion criteria, thank them again for their openness to sharing their information. Politely inform the caller that in order to be included in study, need to meet specific inclusion criteria. Provide referral resources.

E. If the caller meets the inclusion criteria, tell the caller more about the study.

“Given what you have said to me, I would like to interview you and members of your family. In these interviews, I hope to gain information about how conflict and divorce affect family relationships and how these things are perceived by different family members. There is a lot of negative press out there about divorce, parents, and children. I am not doing this research with a

pre-set agenda about divorce, so the interviews will not be set up to shame or pass judgment on anyone's life circumstances. This is really important because, unfortunately, some of the research on these topics has a negative bias. There has been no study like this, so you will be helping me and others understand what it is like to be in your kind of situation. Also, because my purpose is to simply describe and explain family relationships, you can help me bring a different perspective to some of this research.

For this project, I plan to conduct one interview with you individually, lasting approximately 60 minutes and, several weeks later a follow-up interview just to make sure I accurately understood what you said and to ask any additional questions. I anticipate this second interview to be about 60 minutes or less. I would also like to interview your child(ren) in a developmentally appropriate interview about these topics. I will do one interview with your child and meet for a second time to make sure I got the information right and to ask any additional questions. Each interview should last one hour. For the interviews with your child, a therapist will be present—but not in the interview itself—in case you have questions or any intense emotions arise. The interviews with your child can occur in your home or in a private office. I also need to obtain a parent's permission to interview children. Are you legally allowed to give me this consent (i.e., does he/she have custody or parental responsibility to make that decision?)?"

I will then mention my background: "I am clinically trained, so I am comfortable with interviewing adults and children in appropriate ways. With your child(ren) the interview would not be typical sit-down interview. Instead that interview will be structured around an activity for your child(ren)'s developmental needs. So I will remain sensitive to you and your child and I will remain aware of the delicate nature of these issues. I will also watch for any signs of distress. I will also have referrals available if you decide you would like to talk to a counselor.

I will audio tape all interviews so I can analyze them later and then the tapes will be destroyed. Any information shared with me in an interview will remain confidential. I will not be able to confirm you or anyone else is in the study. [In anticipation of obtaining the Certificate of Confidentiality] I also have a special certificate, called a Certificate of Confidentiality, to protect the privacy of what you share with me. As a way to thank you for the time you devote to this project, I am planning to give each family a gift certificate to enjoy a special dinner with your children at a family restaurant. Would you be interested in participating in this project by completing an interview?" If the caller says yes, I will continue.

"As you know from my flyer, I am interested in conducting research on family relationships and especially including both mothers and fathers as well as their children in individual interviews. It is important that I try to get perspectives from mothers and fathers because they do have different ways of understanding and perceiving issues like divorce, conflict, and family relationships. Because I am trying to get mothers and fathers to participate, I will be sending a letter to your former spouse informing him/her of this study.

I will not be able to tell you if he/she agrees to participate, but regardless of his/her decision, I would like to interview you and your child(ren).

“Do you have any questions about what I have said? ... Would you be interested in arranging a time now to complete an interview with me?” (If so, I will arrange an interview, discuss directions, and discuss my contact information). “Any instances of physical abuse between former spouses prevent participation. Were there any instances of spousal abuse in your marriage that would cause you to be excluded from this study? I will be bringing a consent form to the interview for you to read and sign. I will also send a consent form to you now so you can read it ahead of time and think of any questions you want to ask me before the interview. As a reminder, your child’s participation in this project is voluntary up to him/her/them. Please do not pressure him/her/them to be in this study. Also, please do not tell your child what to say or do in the interviews he/she/they will have. Thank you for calling me. I am so appreciative and interested to talk with you more during our interview. Goodbye.”

- F. With the contact information I receive from the public records office, I will send a recruitment letter, research flyer, and complete a follow-up call with the initial caller’s former spouse.

Appendix C: Letter to Participant's Former Spouse Describing
the Research and Inviting Participation

Dr. David MacPhee, Principal Investigator
Ms. Jennifer Moné, M.S., co-Principal Investigator/Interviewer
Human Development and Families Department
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523

[Date letter is sent]

Dear Mr./Ms. _____:

We are researchers from Colorado State University and we are conducting a research project on how conflict and divorce affect family relationships. Your child may be taking part in this study, so your former spouse gave us your name and contact information so we could contact you. This letter describes the study. If you have questions about this study, you may contact us. Because we place high importance on hearing the perspectives of each family member, if you would like to participate, please contact us. Your participation in this research is completely voluntary.

This research project is about family relationships, especially about the relationships between children and their parents. The goal of this study is to explore the extent to which the divorce and any presence of parental conflict influence family relationships. Another goal is to understand how people make sense of these experiences. Because of the research goals, this project will involve interviewing family members, including children who are over age 9 and their parent(s). Each person who agrees to participate in this research will be interviewed twice and each interview will last approximately one hour. To make the interviews convenient for you, the interviews can take place at your home. If you want to do the interview at another place, you can tell the co-Principal Investigator/Interviewer and the interview will take place in a private office. The interview questions will help the interviewer get to know you. The interviewer will ask about divorce and your thoughts and feelings about it. She will also ask about the relationships in your family. She also wants to know your views about the meaning of conflict. In the second interview, the interviewer will review the main points from the first interview. She may also ask you extra questions to understand your point of view. Each parent who participates will also complete a short survey about disagreements with their former spouse. To thank those who participate for the time they spend in the research interviews, we will give each parent and his or her children a \$25 gift certificate to enjoy a special dinner together at a family restaurant.

We want to assure you that the interviewer *does not have a pre-set agenda* or bias about what family relationships “should” look like. Furthermore, we *do not condemn divorce* and *the research is not meant to be shaming or to pass judgment*.

The enclosed research flyer lists questions that help determine eligibility criteria. If you answer “yes” to any one question, you may qualify for this research. If you answer “yes” to any question and are interested in participating, you should call Jennifer Moné, the co-Principal Investigator, at 491-2794. She will discuss your responses to the

questions on the flyer to determine if you are eligible for the study. If you are, she will give you additional information about the study and will arrange a face-to-face interview with you.

In our experience, some people benefit from this type of research by having a rewarding feeling from helping with this kind of study, but there may be no direct benefits from participating. Other benefits to participating include having someone to talk to about your experiences, which may feel good. Someone who listens carefully without judging you or what has happened in your life can also feel rewarding. You might gain insight into your family relationships. With your help, we may better understand how people make meaning from events in their lives. We may also learn more about what affects family relationships to be the way they are. This information could help us help other families like yours in the future.

Even though it is not possible to identify all potential risks in these research procedures, the researchers have taken reasonable efforts to minimize any potential risks. Some people may feel concerned as a result of talking about divorce or conflict. The researchers realize that talking about divorce, family relationships, and conflict may be distressing for some people. If you choose to be in this study and feel emotional about what you share or about the way things are in your family, please let the researchers know. The researchers care about the emotions that arise as a result of the study and have referrals to counselors so that you can talk about how you feel and reduce any distress.

We appreciate the time you have taken to read this letter and to consider participating in this project. If you have any questions you may call Jennifer Moné at 491-2794. Your name and contact information will not be shared with anyone, as per standards of confidentiality. We will not retain your name or contact information or attempt to contact you beyond this written letter.

Sincerely,

Dr. David MacPhee
Principal Investigator

Ms. Jennifer Moné, M.S.
co-Principal Investigator
& Interviewer

Appendices D-F: Consent Forms for Participation in the Research Project

Adult Consent to Participate in a Research Study Colorado State University

TITLE OF STUDY: Family Members' Narratives on Divorce and Interparental Conflict

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: David MacPhee, Ph.D.

CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Jennifer Moné, M.S.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?

You are being asked to participate because your family has experienced divorce and ongoing conflict. We assure you that the researchers and interviewer do not have a bias about what family relationships “should” look like. Also, they do not condemn divorce. This research is not meant to be shaming or to pass judgment. We are simply interested in learning more about your thoughts, feelings, and actions about the people in your family. We also want to know about the relationships you have with them. We are interested in hearing the stories you tell about these issues.

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?

The researchers for this study are from CSU. The Principal Investigator works in the Human Development and Family Studies Department. The co-Principal Investigator is a student completing a doctoral degree from the School of Education and Human Development and Family Studies departments at CSU.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

This project is about family relationships, especially about the relationships between children and their mothers and fathers. It is also about how conflict and divorce influence family relationships. The goal of this study is to explore what family relationships are like in the presence of ongoing conflict after divorce. Another goal is to understand how people make sense of these experiences. The research questions explore what family relationships look like. The research questions are also about one's thoughts, feelings, and personal stories about divorce and conflict.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

The researchers plan to interview you. Your participation in this study will involve 2 interviews. Each interview will last about 1 hour. If you are the parent, we will be asking permission to interview your child, too. To aid you, the interviews can take place at your home. If you want to do the interview at another place, you can tell the researcher and the interview will be rescheduled for a private office.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?

Each person will be asked to complete 2 interviews. Parents will also complete a short survey about disagreements with each other. The interview questions will help the interviewer get to know you. The interviewer will ask about divorce and your thoughts and feelings about it. She will also ask about the relationships in your family. She also wants to know your views about the meaning of conflict. In the second interview, the interviewer will review the main points from the first interview. She may also ask you

Page 1 of 4 Participant's initials _____ Date _____

extra questions to understand your point of view. Once the results are written, you will be given a copy of the findings. If you disagree with these, you can add your own interpretations. These can be added next to the researcher's comments in the final research report.

ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

If no one in your family is in this study, you will not need to be either. This project is about family relationships, so only parents whose child(ren) over age 9 participate are needed. You may choose not to do the interviews at any time if you feel upset.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researchers have taken reasonable efforts to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks. Some people may feel concerned as a result of talking about divorce or conflict. The researchers realize that talking about divorce, family relationships, and conflict may distress some people. You could feel sad, cry, wish your situation was different than it is, or have other feelings. These feelings may surface in the interviews and might also last after the interviews are over. If you feel concerned or emotional about what you share or about the way things are in your family, please let the researchers know. The researchers care about the emotions that arise as a result of the study and have referrals to counselors so that you can talk about how you feel and reduce any distress.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There may be no direct benefits to participating in this project. However, our experience is that some people have a rewarding feeling from helping with this kind of study. Having someone to talk to about your experiences may feel good. Someone who listens carefully without judging you or what has happened in your life can also feel rewarding. Some studies show that it is possible to gain insight as a result of interview research. You might gain insight into your family relationships. Any insight could also benefit your family relationships. With your help, we may better understand how people make meaning from events in their lives. We may also learn more about what affects family relationships to be the way they are. This information could help us help other families like yours in the future.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

WHAT WILL IT COST ME TO PARTICIPATE?

Participating in this research project will not cost you any money. If you want to speak with a counselor as a result of any thoughts or feelings you have during or after the interviews, the interviewer can give you a list of counselors. The cost of seeing a counselor will be up to you. Some of the referrals will have a sliding fee scale for lower cost services.

Page 2 of 4 Participant's initials _____ Date _____

If you work with an attorney or counselor, you should know that we will not speak with them about the information you say. If we are contacted by someone not related to this project, we will not provide any information to them. We also will not be able to tell them if you have participated. If an attorney or court of law involves the researchers in any legal case, the costs associated with it will be the responsibility of those requesting the involvement.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?

We will keep confidential all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law. No one will know about your participation in this project. Only the researchers will know the answers you give us.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information and what that information is. For example, your name will be kept separate from your research records. Your name and research records will be stored in different locked areas. Also, your name and your family member's name(s) will not be used on any of the research materials. Instead, fake names (a.k.a. pseudonyms) will be assigned to the data for each person who participates. The list with your name and the fake name as well as the audio tape of the interview will be destroyed once the interviews are complete so that no one can identify the information you tell us in the interviews.

The information you give us will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. You will not be identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study. Even if we do this, we will keep your name and other identifying information private. You will have a chance to see the results before the project is completed. If you have different thoughts about any of the findings, you can ask the researcher to have your comments added alongside the researcher's to appear in the final report. Your name will not appear with these comments, so your identity will still remain private.

In order to protect the privacy of what you share, we have received a special certificate, called a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). According to the NIH, with a Certificate of Confidentiality researchers cannot be forced to disclose information that may identify you, even by a court subpoena, in any federal, state, or local civil, criminal, administrative, legislative, or other proceeding. We take this to mean that the Certificate of Confidentiality is like a legal firewall against a subpoena, protecting the information you tell the interviewer. This certificate greatly minimizes the chance we will have to share the information you give us. According to the Certificate of Confidentiality, no information can be shared with others that would identify you as a participant or that would link you to the information you share in the interviews. This means that we cannot share the information you or others provide during the interview with attorneys, family members (including your former spouse or parents/children), or counselors. You can choose to give information to others about your participation in this research if you want to. You can also choose to give written permission to the researchers to disclose your research information to others who you designate, in which case we

Page 3 of 4 Participant's initials _____ Date _____

cannot use the Certificate of Confidentiality to protect the information you share with us. If you consider having us release your information to others, please talk with us about this ahead of time so we can explain your rights and the limits of confidentiality with you. The information you share with us in the interviews is not to be used for custody or other litigation purposes.

You should know that even with a Certificate of Confidentiality there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to authorities if we believe you have physically or sexually abused a child, or if you pose a danger to yourself or someone else.

CAN MY TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY?

The researchers can stop your participation early for two reasons. First, if you do not show up more than three times for a scheduled interview or if you cancel a scheduled interview more than three times, you may be removed from the study. Second, the purpose of this research is to gather information to understand families who experience divorce and conflict. The purpose is not to use information in this study in legal issues or court cases. If an attorney requests any information about you, we will not identify you or what you said in the interviews. Because we want to protect you and the information you give to us, we have been given a Certificate of Confidentiality. This certificate can protect you if information about your participation is subpoenaed. Even with the protection from this certificate, if an attorney or member of a court contacts the researchers or requests the information you gave during an interview, you may be removed from the rest of the project to further protect you.

WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

As a way to thank you for the time you devote to this project, we will give each parent and his or her children a \$25 gift certificate to enjoy a special dinner together at a family restaurant.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I AM INJURED BECAUSE OF THE RESEARCH?

The Colorado Governmental Immunity Act determines and may limit Colorado State University's legal responsibility if an injury happens because of this study. Claims against the University must be filed within 180 days of the injury.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Jennifer Moné, at 491-2794. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Meldrem, Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

Please do not put any pressure on your child(ren) to participate or to say certain things to the interviewer. Your child(ren) will be asked if they want to participate and should be

Page 4 of 4 Participant's initials _____ Date _____

able to speak freely during the interviews, without any outside pressures. Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 4 pages. [The original was only 4 pages due to margin formatting.]

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

Name of person providing information to participant

Date

Signature of Research Staff

Adolescent Consent to Participate in a Research Study Colorado State University

TITLE OF STUDY: Family Members' Narratives on Divorce and Interparental Conflict

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: David MacPhee, Ph.D.

CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Jennifer Moné, M.S.

The researchers for this study are from CSU and have asked you to take part in this study because your parents have experienced divorce and ongoing conflict. This research is not meant to pass judgment on families who experience these things. We are simply interested in learning more about your thoughts, feelings, and actions about the people in your family. We also want to know about the relationships you have with them. The goal of this study is to explore what family relationships are like in the presence of ongoing conflict after divorce. Another goal is to understand how people make sense of these experiences.

In order to participate in this study, the researchers plan to interview you. Your participation in this study will involve 2 interviews. Each interview will last about 1 hour and will be at your house. If you want to do the interview at another place, you can tell the researcher and the interview will be rescheduled for a private office at CSU. During the interview, the interviewer will ask questions to get to know you. The interviewer will ask about divorce and your thoughts and feelings about it. She will also ask about the relationships in your family. She wants to know your views about what the conflict you hear means to you. In the second interview, the interviewer will review the main points from the first interview. She may also ask you extra questions to understand your point of view. Once the interviews are finished and the results are written, you will be given a copy of the findings. If you disagree with these, you can add your own perspective. These can be added next to the researcher's comments in the final research report.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may choose not to do the interviews at any time if you feel upset. If you decide to participate in the study, you may quit or leave the interview at any time if you wish. The researchers can also choose to stop your participation early. If you do not show up more than three times for a scheduled interview, if you cancel a scheduled interview more than three times, or if the interviewer is asked to go to court, you may be removed from the rest of the study. If no one in your family is in this study, you will not need to be either. This project is about family relationships, so only parents whose child(ren) over age 9 participate are needed.

It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researchers have taken reasonable efforts to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks. The

Page 1 of 3 Participant's initials _____ Date _____

researchers realize that talking about divorce, family relationships, and conflict may distress some people. You could feel sad, cry, wish your situation was different than it is, or have other feelings. These feelings may surface in the interviews and might also last after the interviews are over. If you feel concerned or emotional about what you share or about the way things are in your family, please let the researchers know. The researchers care about the emotions that arise as a result of the study and have referrals to counselors so that you can talk about how you feel and reduce any distress. There may be no direct benefits of doing this study. On the other hand, some people have a rewarding feeling from helping with this kind of study. Having someone to talk to about your experiences may feel good. Someone who listens carefully without judging what has happened in your life can also feel rewarding. You might also gain insight into your family relationships, which could benefit them. With your help, we may better understand how people make meaning from events in their lives. We may also learn more about what affects family relationships to be the way they are. This information could help us help other families like yours in the future.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information and what that information is. We will keep confidential (this means it is private) all information that identifies you, to the extent allowed by law. No one will know about your participation in this project. Only the researchers will know the answers you give us. We will not share the information you tell us with your mom or dad unless we have to by law. In order to protect the privacy of what you share with the interviewer, we have received a special certificate (called a Certificate of Confidentiality), which says we cannot identify you or what you said in the interviews. This certificate greatly minimizes the chance we will have to share the information you give us. However, you can choose to give information to others about your participation in this research if you want to. You can also choose to give written permission to the researchers to share your research information with others who you designate, in which case we cannot use the Certificate of Confidentiality to protect the information you share with us. If you consider doing this, please talk with us about this ahead of time so we can explain your rights and the limits of confidentiality with you. Even with this certificate, there are some reasons why we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to authorities if we believe you have been physically or sexually abused, or if you pose a danger to yourself or someone else. To help protect the privacy of what you tell us, your name and your family member's name(s) will not be used on any of the research materials. Instead, fake names will be assigned to the data for each person who participates. All interview tapes and other research information that could identify you will be destroyed when the interviews are done.

The information you give us will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. We may publish the results of this study, but you will not be identified in these written materials. You will have a chance to see the results before the project is completed. If you have different thoughts about any of the findings, you can

Page 2 of 3 Participant's initials _____ Date _____

ask the researcher to have your comments added alongside the researcher's to appear in the final report. Your name will not appear with these comments, so your identity will still remain private. As a way to thank you for the time you devote to this project, we will give each parent and his or her children a gift certificate to enjoy a special dinner together at a family restaurant.

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Jennifer Moné, at 491-2794. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Meldrem, Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655. The Colorado Governmental Immunity Act determines and may limit Colorado State University's legal responsibility if an injury happens because of this study. Claims against the University must be filed within 180 days of the injury. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 3 pages.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

Name of person providing information to participant

Date

Signature of Research Staff

PARENTAL SIGNATURE FOR MINOR

Use the box below to obtain your parent's permission ONLY if you are under 18 years of age. The permission must be from the parent whom the court has given legal decision-making responsibility for children.

As parent or guardian I authorize _____ (print minor's name) to become a participant for the described research. The nature and general purpose of the project have been satisfactorily explained to me by Jennifer Moné and I am satisfied that proper precautions will be observed.

Minor's date of birth

Today's date

Parent/Guardian name (printed)

Parent/Guardian signature

Page 3 of 3 Participant's initials _____ Date _____

Child Assent Form for Participation in the Research Project

Hi! I'm a teacher at Colorado State University. I study people and their families. This is called research. My research is about children and parents and their relationships. I am asking if it is OK that I ask you questions about your family.

If you say it is OK, I'll ask you some questions and we can talk while we color, draw, or play. The questions I ask you will be about your mom and dad, how you feel about them, about their divorce and what has happened since then, and what it means to you. There are not any right or wrong answers to my questions. I just want you to tell me how you think and feel. These questions will take about 1 hour. You can quit or leave at any time during my questions. Later, I'll meet with you again to make sure I understood what you said during our first interview. I might ask other questions to make sure I really understand all of what you think and feel. The second time we meet will last 1 hour also.

Saying yes to be in my research cannot hurt you. You might feel sad about talking about your family. If you do feel sad, I want you to tell me so that I can stop the questions. Being in my study might help you feel better by being able to talk to someone about feeling sad or scared. As a thank you, I will give your parent who participates in my study a gift certificate so you can go out to dinner together. You do not have to be in my research project if you do not want to. If you say "yes" to being in my study now but later change your mind, you can stop being in the research project any time just by telling me you changed your mind and don't want to answer any more questions. It won't make me mad or upset if you choose not to be in this study or if you decide to stop.

I will keep private what you tell me in your interviews. This means I will not share the information with your mom, dad, or anyone else unless I have to by law. I even have a special certificate which says I cannot tell others you were in this research and what you say in the interviews. If you want me to share what you say with anyone else, you can give me written permission to do this, but we should talk before you do this so I can explain your choices to you in more detail. You can tell others about being in this research if you want to. Even with the special certificate, there are some reasons why I may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require me to show your information to authorities if I believe you have been physically or sexually abused, or if you have been neglected.

I will ask your mom or dad if it is OK that you do this research, too. If you want to be in this research project, sign your name and write today's date on the line below.

_____ Child Interviewee	_____ Date
_____ Parent	_____ Date
_____ Parent	_____ Date
_____ Researcher	_____ Date

Appendix G: Interview Protocol

Children

I. Intro, assent, discussion of confidentiality and its limits, and discussion of my research project

“Do you know why I am here to interview you today?” Explain.

II. Introduce norms for interview and play (coloring, drawing, or other forms of play) mechanisms.

III. Interview questions

A. Getting to know each other

“Tell me about yourself.”

“What kinds of things do you like to do for fun?”

“What are you really good at?”

“What parts of school do you like the most? Like the least?”

“Tell me about your friends.”

B. Story of divorce and family relationships

“Tell me what you like and love about your mom.”

“How do you feel about her? Do you have any thoughts about her; what are they? Is it like/similar to how you remember it from before (the divorce)?”

“Tell me about the relationship with your mom.”

“I know that she and your dad are divorced, they sometimes fight with each other, and she says mean things about him. Does this change the way you feel about her?”

“Tell me what you like and love about your dad.”

“How do you feel about him? Do you have any thoughts about him; what are they? Is it like/similar to how you remember it from before (the divorce)?”

“Tell me about the relationship with your dad.”

“I know that he and your mom are divorced, they sometimes fight with each other, and he says mean things about her. Does this change the way you feel about him?”

“Tell me the story of your life since your mom and dad divorced.”

“How does that make you feel?”

“What do you think of when that happens?”

“What it has been like for you?”

“Do you feel less close/not as close to one of your parents (than before)? How come?”

C. Information about conflict and its meaning

“What happens when your dad and mom argue?”

“How often does this happen?”

“When your parents fight or say mean things about each other, how does it make you feel?”

“And what do you think about when this happens?”

“Does one of your parents start these fights more than the other?”

“Who?”

“What do you do when they yell/argue/fight with each other?”

“Do you have a sense of why/Why do you think your parents fight with each other?”

D. Information about parental alienation and its meaning

“What happens when your dad/mom says mean things about your mom/dad in front of you/to you?”

“How often does this happen?”

“Does one of them usually do it more or start it most often?”

“What do you do?/How do you respond?”

“Do you have a sense of why/Why do you think your mom/dad tells you bad things about your dad/mom?”

“Tell me about what it is like for you when your mom and/or dad says mean things (untrue?/ hurtful?) about the other one.”

“How do you make sense of it?/Why do you think it happens?”

IV. Wrap-up, schedule another time to meet

“Are you OK with how much you told me today?”

“Is there anything different you wish you would/would not have said?”

Adolescents

I. Intro, assent, discussion of confidentiality and its limits, and discussion of my research project

“Do you know why I am here to interview you?” Explain.

II. Introduce norms for interview and menu options for activities during the interview (coloring, drawing, engaging in other play activities, walking around the neighborhood, eating snacks, or no other activities).

III. Interview questions

A. Getting to know each other

“Tell me about yourself.”

“What kinds of things do you do for fun?”

“What are you really good at?”

“Tell me about your friends.”

“What are your biggest pet peeves?”

B. Story of divorce and family relationships

“Tell me what you like and love about your mom.”

“How do you feel about her? Do you have any thoughts about her; what are they? Is it like/similar to how you remember it from before (the divorce)?”

“Tell me about the relationship with your mom.”

“I know that she and your dad are divorced, they sometimes fight with each other, and she says mean things about him. Does this change the way you feel about her?”

“Tell me what you like and love about your dad.”

“How do you feel about him? Do you have any thoughts about him; what are they? Is it like/similar to how you remember it from before (the divorce)?”

“Tell me about the relationship with your dad.”

“I know that he and your mom are divorced, they sometimes fight with each other, and he says mean things about her. Does this change the way you feel about him?”

“Tell me the story of your life since your mom and dad divorced.”

“How does that make you feel?”

“What do you think of when that happens?”

“What it has been like for you?”

“Do you feel less close/not as close to one of your parents (than before)? How come?”

C. Information about conflict and its meaning

“What happens when your dad and mom argue?”

“How often does this happen?”

“When your parents fight or say mean things about each other, how does it make you feel?”

“And what do you think about when this happens?”

“Does one of your parents start these fights more than the other?”

“Who?”

“What do you do when they yell/argue/fight with each other?”

“Do you have a sense of why/Why do you think your parents fight with each other?”

D. Information about parental alienation and its meaning

“What happens when your dad/mom says mean things about your mom/dad in front of you/to you?”

“How often does this happen?”

“Does one of them usually do it more or start it most often?”

“What do you do?/How do you respond?”

“Do you have a sense of why/Why do you think your mom/dad tells you bad things about your dad/mom?”

“Tell me about what it is like for you when your mom and/or dad says mean things (untrue?/ hurtful?) about the other one.”

“How do you make sense of it?/Why do you think it happens?”

IV. Wrap-up, schedule another time to meet

“Do you feel OK with how much you told me today?”

“Is there anything different you wish you would/would not have said?”

Adults

I. Intro, assent, discussion of confidentiality and its limits, and discussion of my research project

II. Introduce norms for interview

III. Interview questions (interactive, collaborative, not one-sided)

A. Getting to know each other

“Tell me about yourself.”

B. Story of divorce and family relationships

“What was your relationship with your ex-husband/wife like when you were dating? Married?”

“Tell me the story of your divorce and what life is like now.”

“How does that make you feel?”

“What thoughts do you have about him/her?”

“What is your relationship like with him/her now?”

“What makes you think this (why do you think this?)?”

“How do you view the relationship with your ex-husband/wife now that you are divorced, in light of what is going on (re: conflict and p.a.)?”

“Did you ever think you would feel this way toward him/her?”

“Why/why not?”

“Describe your relationship with your children.”

“Have there been any changes to the relationship since the divorce?”

“How do you view the relationship with your child(ren) in light of the interactions with and about (other parent: their dad/mom)?”

C. Information about conflict and its meaning

“Describe the style or type of communication between you and your ex-husband/wife.”

“Tell me about the arguments you and your ex-husband/wife have.”

“How often do they occur?”

“What types of things do you disagree or fight about?”

“What happens when the two of you argue?”

“How do you respond?”

“Do your children react to this in any way?”

“What are the reasons for arguing/disagreements/ fights with your ex-husband/wife?”

“When you and your ex-husband/wife fight, argue, how does it make you feel?”

“What thoughts do you have about your ex-spouse in those times?”

D. Information about parental alienation and its meaning

“Tell me about the criticism you/your ex-husband/wife mention in front of the children.”

“How often does this occur?”

“What kind of things do you/he/she say?”

“When you/your ex-spouse criticize your ex-spouse/you in front of the children, what happens?”

“How do you respond?”

“When you/your ex-spouse say mean things about your ex-spouse/you, how does it make you feel?”

“What thoughts do you have about your ex-spouse in those times?”

“For what reasons do you think this happens?/Do you have a sense of why this could be happening?”

“What do you tell yourself/what reasons do you give to yourself when you say things about (name of ex-spouse) to your children?”

“When you make negative comments about your ex-spouse to/in front of your children, how do you make sense of it?”

“When you/your ex-spouse criticize your ex-spouse/you in front of the children, how do your children react?”

IV. Wrap-up, schedule another time to meet

“Do you feel comfortable with how much you told me today?”

“Is there anything different you wish you would/would not have said?”

Generic Prompts for Parents, Adolescents, and Children

“Say more about that (the conflict/fights/arguments between adults, etc.).”

“Tell me more about how that happens.”

“How much do you and your ex (your parents) argue now that you (they) are divorced.” “What kinds of conflict (topics?) do you have?”

“What types of experiences have you had (do you know of) in criticizing your ex-spouse in front of your children?”

“Give me an example or tell me about a time when that happened.”

“Describe that (some more).”

“How so?”

“What do you mean?”

“Go on...”

“Then what happened?”

Appendix H: Acrimony Scale

[The Acrimony Scale has been omitted due to copyright. Please contact the author, R. E. Emery, for information regarding this measure.]

Appendix I: Demographic Questionnaire

Your current age: _____

Mark an "X" to indicate your sex:

____ Female

____ Male

Mark an "X" to indicate your ethnicity:

____ Caucasian/ White

____ Native American/ American Indian

____ African American/ Black

____ Asian/ Pacific American

____ Hispanic/ Latino/ Chicano/Mexican American

____ Other—fill in _____

Years you were married to your former spouse: _____

Time since divorce: _____ years and _____ months

Current relationship status:

____ Separated

____ Divorced

____ Remarried

____ Other (please fill in _____)

How I heard of this research project: _____

Appendix J: Referral Resources

Counselors who have agreed to see families who participate in this project for further reflection, counseling, and support:

Brook Bretthauer, M.S.

[contact information from the original that was given to participants has been omitted for privacy reasons due to public distribution]

Jenn Matheson, Ph.D. (for graduate therapists in training)

Center for Couple and Family Therapy

[contact information from the original that was given to participants has been omitted for privacy reasons due to public distribution]

Charlene deSerte, M.A., LPC

[contact information from the original that was given to participants has been omitted for privacy reasons due to public distribution]

Kris Ullstrup, M.S.

[contact information from the original that was given to participants has been omitted for privacy reasons due to public distribution]

Appendix K: Debriefing Script for Parents After Child Interviews

If the child became distressed during the interview:

- Parent will be told about the child's distress and the child's emotional expression;
- Parent will be strongly encouraged to seek counseling referrals and will be given the referral resource list created for this project—If the parent and/or child is already in counseling with a therapist, the interviewer will strongly encourage them to discuss the issues that surfaced in the interviews with their personal counselor;
- The interviewer will invite a question-answer or discussion session with the therapist who is present;
- The interviewer will share brief and general observations about the child's understanding of the divorce and the family (e.g., if the child is confused, if the child seems angry, etc.); and
- The interviewer will invite any questions from the parent and will encourage further questions and answers between the therapist, parent, and child.

If the child did not experience distress during the interview:

- Parent will be told nothing distressing/no negative emotions surfaced during the interview;
- The interviewer will share brief and general observations about the child's understanding of the divorce and the family;
- The interviewer will invite any questions from the parent and will encourage questions and answers between the therapist, parent, and child; and
- The interviewer will offer a referral resource list if parents and children should have lingering thoughts or feelings now that the interview is over.

Revera linguam latinam vix cognovi.

Obesa cantavit.