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# Staying with the conflict – parenting work and the social organization of post-divorce conflict

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## Abstract

When addressed from the third-person perspective of professional and academic expertise, parents in high-conflict divorce are often described in polarized and individualized ways. This is at odds with the complex picture arising from studies exploring parents' own experience of high-conflict divorce. Inspired by the research strategy of institutional ethnography, this article explores how the work of parents in enduring post-divorce conflicts relates to particular socially organized ways of doing parenthood. It draws on interviews with 20 Norwegian mothers and fathers experiencing a high-conflict divorce situation. The analysis connects parents' experiences to dominant discourses about symmetrically shared parenting and the importance of parental devotion vis-a-vis their children. Through authoritative documents like laws, policies, and professional guidelines, these discourses are materially present in parents' everyday lives, contributing to the coordination of experience. The findings show how parents' struggles to care for their children in accordance with norms for good parenting can sometimes work to keep conflicts alive. It is suggested that organizing policy and professional responses around objectified understandings of post-divorce conflict as instances of parental neglect risks distancing policy and helping initiatives from the experiences of those parents they are meant to address.

## Introduction

Research on high-conflict divorce often begins in the large-scale effects that such conflicts have on children. This literature indicates that intensity of inter-parental conflict, the way the conflict is enacted, how conflict is resolved, and whether buffers to ameliorate impacts of conflict are present in children's lives are the most important predictors for child adjustment (see, e.g. Amato, 2001; 2010; Elam et al., 2019; Emery, 1999; Fincham et al., 1994; Grych, 2005; O'Hara et al., 2020). When addressed from the third-person perspective of professional and academic expertise, parents entangled in high-conflict divorce patterns are often described in polarized and individualized ways (Treloar, 2018; 2019), positioning them as distrustful, angry, full of contempt, and focused on their own desires instead of their children's needs (Kelly, 2003; McIntosh, 2003). This discursive positioning sets out a course of coordinated actions, specifying how divorced families and professionals working within various public institutions are to engage with each other to pursue conflict reduction or resolution.

A few studies have explored how parents themselves experience and articulate their understanding of being in conflict after divorce (e.g. Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011; Gulbrandsen et al., 2018; Jevne & Andenæs, 2017; Smart & Neale, 1997; Treloar, 2018; 2019). When seen through the lens of parents' experience, the parental subjects emerging from this literature come through as 'ordinary people' trying to construct a safe and rewarding everyday environment for themselves and their children in the face of irreconcilable and long-lasting disputes. Thus, there seems to be a mismatch between the image of the parental figure based on research motivated by the need for assessing the risk for detrimental psychosocial development in children experiencing high-conflict divorces, and the image of the parent that emerges from parents' own, first-person accounts of engaging with the same issues.

In this article, which is part of a qualitative study exploring high-conflict divorce as an institutional complex, I add to the small but growing body of research that explores post-divorce conflict from the perspective of parents' experience. The article builds on qualitative interviews with 20 Norwegian parents identified as part of a high-conflict divorce situation. Beginning in the standpoint of these parents, the aim is to explore how the work of parents in enduring post-divorce conflicts relates to particular socially organized ways of doing parenthood. Drawing on concepts from the sociological work of Dorothy Smith and the research strategy of institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005), I show how a disjuncture between parents' experience and the objectified understandings that provide the basis for institutional action make it necessary for parents to do this work. I argue that this opens up new vistas for understanding high-conflict divorce that are, to a certain extent, emancipatory. In the next section, I give a brief outline of some key trends in Norwegian family policy and parenting culture, against which the problematic of the study is articulated.

## Parenthood and divorce in the Nordic context

Since the 1990s, residence arrangements where childcare is shared more or less equally between parents after separation or divorce have become widespread throughout the West (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; McIntosh & Smyth, 2012; Pruett & DiFonzo, 2014; Steinbach, 2019). This development has been particularly evident in the Nordic countries (Berman & Daneback, 2020; Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011; Statistics Norway, 2015), where post-divorce solutions of shared residence with approximately equal time with both parents are now familiar (Berman & Daneback, 2020). Although national differences certainly exist (Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011), this development tangents a general normative tendency shared by family policy developments across the Nordic countries (Bendixsen et al., 2018; Gíslason & Símonardóttir, 2018). One recent example of this are several amendments to the Norwegian Children Act (1981) made effective in 2018, designed with the explicit purpose of strengthening the equality of parents' status as caregivers (Prop. 161 L [2015–2016]). Among the changes, the most hotly debated was naming shared residence first in a list of examples of available parenting schemes in the law's statutory provisions. In 2020, further amendments were asserted, strengthening inter-parental equality by granting legal parental responsibility to both parents in situations where the parents do not live together at the time of birth (Regjeringen, 2019). The Norwegian government's latest white paper on family policy (Barne- og likestillingsdepartementet, 2016) explicitly states that 'children shall experience their parents as equal, both when the family lives together and after a breakup' (p. 77, my translation).

Several studies have shown that the discourse of gender-equal parenting has had a significant impact on how parents relate to parenthood in the Nordic countries (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; Brandth & Kvande, 1998; 2018; Forsberg, 2007; Johansson & Klinth, 2008; Plantin et al., 2003).<sup>1</sup> Westerling (2016) refers to this as an ideal of symmetry between parents after divorce, expressing values of gender equality and fairness. In addition to this set of values, he identifies a second trend that he terms parental devotion. By this, he refers to what several social scientists observe to be a cultural preference in the West for child-centred forms of parenting, strongly informed by developmental psychology and a rights-based understanding of childhood (Andenæs, 2005; Bloch et al., 2006; Faircloth & Murray, 2015; Lee et al., 2014; Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012). Hays (1996) coined the term 'intensive mothering' to refer to a pattern of child-centred understandings of motherhood founded on the assumption that children need consistent nurturing and require their mothers to devote copious amounts of time and energy to their mothering tasks. Many argue that such a norm of devotion is currently an ideal affecting how both mothers and fathers negotiate their roles and experience (Faircloth, 2014; Forsberg, 2007; Johansson & Klinth, 2008). Although not necessarily consistently realized, such an ideal of devoted parenting is dominant within Norwegian child welfare (Skivenes, 2011) and family policy (Hennum, 2014).

In separation and divorce, the realization of the ideals of symmetrical and devoted parenting is sometimes challenged (Westerling, 2016), particularly in situations where parents find themselves caught in enduring conflict (Parkinson, 2011). Addressing post-divorce conflict as a situation that is potentially harmful for children, in 1993 the Norwegian Storting<sup>2</sup> established a mandatory mediation scheme for separating married (Marriage Act, 1991, §26) parents with children 16 years or younger, as well as for divorced parents in conflict who seek court litigation (Children Act, 1981, §51, first paragraph). In 2007, mediation was made mandatory also for non-married cohabiting parents moving apart (Children Act, 1981, §51, third paragraph). In addition to mediation services, which are primarily provided by the Norwegian public family counselling service, direct state involvement in particular instances of divorce-related conflicts is exerted through district courts and child welfare services. While mediation is purely consultative, the courts can directly regulate the domestic sphere (Ottosen, 2006). If parents exhibit a pattern of intense conflict over time, repeatedly engaging with mediation and litigation without seeming to reach an amicable solution, child welfare services are sometimes notified. This is because prolonged conflict is itself considered a reason for concern (Barne,- likestillings- og inkluderings- departementet, 2013). Although rarely implemented, an intense conflict between parents is considered a legitimate reason for promoting a care order if the conflict can be shown to seriously hamper the parents' capacity as caregivers (Child Welfare Act, 1991, §4–12).

## Parents' experience as a problematic for research

In this article, I seek to explore how the knowledge and experience of parents who are part of a high-conflict divorce situation exist in dialogue with these strands of discourse about parenting and divorce. As a research problematic, this gradually developed while I was interviewing parents who were identified as being in a pattern of high-conflict after divorce or separation, as I noticed similar disjunctures in their accounts of engagements with professionals mandated to assist or intervene in their situation. The concept of disjuncture is here used to refer to 'moments when people know something from experience but are told or taught something quite different' (DeVault, 2020, p. 84). Talking about their own situation, parents frequently communicated a sense that their struggles to be good parents in challenging circumstances were misunderstood or misrepresented when the particulars of their local situations were assessed through the abstract and general vocabulary of professionals. Attuning to such disjunctures between knowledge located in the experience of individuals and the formalized, impersonal knowledge articulated to, and constitutive of, the institutions of government led to defining the problematic as exploring the work and work knowledge of parents in post-divorce conflict, and how this relates to the social organization of post-divorce parenting.

## Analytical frame – institutional ethnography

The research strategy referred to as institutional ethnography, pioneered by Dorothy Smith (1987, 2005, 2006a, 2006b), offers a way to research the social world that begins in people's local experience. From this standpoint, it aims to discover the social relations and organization that coordinate people's activities across local sites and to explicate the workings of power – variously addressed as discourse, bureaucracy, or institutions – coordinating the local activities of different people with each other, trans-locally. Our everyday dealings with people and objects in our immediate surroundings, like family members, professionals we meet with, web pages we visit, or documents that we read, are local relations in the sense that they are always enacted at a particular time, at a particular place. Translocal relations connect local relations to each other. They include discourses and texts that give form to the local relations, coordinating our activities with the activities of others elsewhere (Smith, 2005, 2006b). Examples of such translocal relations are authoritative texts like laws, policies, or professional guidelines, often expressing dominant normative understandings held within a society

or group of people. To highlight their capacity for coordination, Smith (2005) refers to such translocal organization as ruling relations. Smith thus treats ‘the social’ not as an abstract realm of meanings or norms, but as what is actually happening among and between people going about their everyday lives.

In Smith’s usage of the term, experience refers to what people come to know through engaging with the world around them. For the ethnographer, traces of experience emerge as articulations in dialogue – in the interview setting, when reading transcripts or documents, or in the ethnographer’s inner self-reflective dialogue (Smith, 2005). Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Smith (1996, 2005) stresses that while subjective experience is infinitely varied and personal, the resources used for its verbal or symbolic expression are by necessity drawn from a particular discourse with definite conventions. As part of people’s everyday practices, it is empirically accessible as the concepts, theories, ideas, and terms they use to identify their own thoughts and actions and those of others. Hence, institutional ethnography represents ‘a social ontology not of meaning but of a concerting of activities’ (Smith, 1996, p. 172). The project of inquiry is to explore how the ruling relations, through their capacity for translocal coordination, provide the horizon against which a variety of experiences come to be lived.

The concept of work is a central analytical tool in institutional ethnography, generously understood as ‘anything that people do that takes time, effort and intent’ (Smith, 2005, p. 229). Pragmatically dissolving any clear distinction between paid work and other intentional activities, this helps us see how the actions of people positioned differently within an institutional complex are connected via a shared engagement with the same ruling relations. Examples of such work might be meeting with a lawyer to prepare for a possible custody trial or attending mediation or therapy services to pursue a workable parenting plan after divorce or separation. Much of what parents do can also be seen as invisible work (DeVault, 2014; Smith, 2005), which here might refer to the worrying, fearing, waiting, hoping, and despairing involved in parents’ struggles to realize an everyday for their children, their ex-partner, and themselves.

Relying on the experiential knowledge of people engaged in the work associated with the issues under investigation, the institutional ethnographer seeks to elicit their knowledge of what they do and why they do it – their work knowledge (Smith, 2005). Through assembling and mapping such work knowledge, the goal is to make visible how translocal ruling is produced locally, so as to ‘expand the scope of our knowledge of what we are part of’ (Smith, 2001, p. 161).

## Methods

### Participants and data production

The data material consists of qualitative, open-ended individual interviews with 20 parents (ten mothers, ten fathers) representing 12 co-parenting pairs from the Agder region of Southern Norway. Interviews were conducted over 18 months, beginning in January 2018. Participants’ age ranged from mid-twenties to early fifties. The level of education ranged from vocational training to master’s degree from university. Nine fathers and five mothers were in full-time employment, while five mothers and one father were not employed and were under some form of work assessment scheme via the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration. All parents were divorced or broken up from a heterosexual relationship with a partner with whom they had one or more dependent children under 16. All breakups had happened during the past one-and-a-half to five years before the interviews. All had been repeatedly to mandatory divorce or conflict mediation. Most had been through at least one round of court litigation concerning conflict about residence, custody, and visitation rights. In nine out of the 12 parenting pairs, some version of shared residence was practiced, referring to arrangements where the child spent at least 30% of the time with each parent and where the parents had joint decision-making authority (Pruett & DiFonzo, 2014). In two of the pairs, both legal and primary physical custody was with the mother, while in one, such custody was with the father. In these three cases, the parent with secondary physical custody had visitation every other weekend.

Parents were recruited through their participation in a multi-family group therapy programme for parents and children identified as part of a high-conflict divorce situation.<sup>3</sup> The programme was run by professionals from family counselling centres and hospital-based outpatient child and youth mental health services. These teams of practitioners worked closely with child welfare services and district courts. As an institutional sequence, the multi-family group intervention programme fitted into a line of parenting support services coordinated by the child welfare services.<sup>4</sup>

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All participants gave their informed signed consent to the use of the interview material for this research. The research project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD, project nr. 57881) and the ethical committee at the Faculty for Health and Sports Sciences, University of Agder.

## Data analysis

The parts of interviews used for the present analysis related to parents' history with family-breakup and post-divorce parenting. Exploring these accounts, I looked for traces of common discourse as well as for disjunctures between local work knowledge and a more formalized and impersonal understanding of post-divorce conflict integral to the jargon and governing structures of the various institutions of government engaged in issues of post-divorce conflict and parenting. In addition to interview transcripts, I kept memos of my impressions and reflections immediately after each interview, and memos containing questions or ideas that arose from parallel readings. Before each interview, I consulted these memos to help me keep focused on any analytic threads under development. I successively shared and discussed transcribed interviews with two of my research supervisors (a practicing mediator and family therapist and an associate professor in psychosocial health) to generate ideas, concerns, and themes to be explored in coming interviews.

In parallel with doing interviews, I started indexing accounts from interview transcripts to help keep analysis grounded in actual accounts (Rankin, 2017). As a first step, I used the concept of work as an analytical lens to start organizing the data material around parents' accounts of activities. One example of such an index heading was 'encounters with professionals,' under which I grouped accounts of parents' dealings with professionals as part of their engagement with post-divorce conflict issues. Another index heading was entitled 'parenting philosophies,' where I grouped parents' articulations of concerns about their children, as well as the reasons they gave for staying engaged in the work processes that had brought them to be identified as a high-conflict divorce case. As a second step, I recorded texts or other discursive material that were directly mentioned, or clearly implied in parents' accounts, under the same index headings. As a third step, I looked for possible links between parents' experience and work knowledge and the discursive material mentioned or implied. Rooted in the standpoint of parents, I thus sought to look with the research participants, to discover how their experiences related to the ruling relations they engaged with.

## Findings

Applying Smith's (2005) concept of work, I begin this section by establishing a subject position in parents' everyday activities as they engaged in post-divorce struggles. From this standpoint, I link their work to ruling relations (Smith, 2005) surrounding post-divorce parenting. Prioritizing the work knowledge that parents presented as reasons for staying with the conflicts (despite the burden this placed on them and their children), I first explore how parents engaged with the ideal of symmetrical gender equality. Second, I show how parents' accounts could be understood to draw on a general discourse about child development, and an ideal of intensive or devoted parenting. I argue that negotiating a workable middle ground accommodating these two ideals constituted a significant part of the background against which parents' experience and knowledge were formulated. Finally, I show



how parents were placed in a difficult situation when professionals addressed their struggles from a position within the discourse of post-divorce conflict as neglectful or harmful parenting.

## Parenting work

In the analysis of interviews with parents, the sheer volume of work related to post-divorce conflict – both within the relations of formalized interchanges with various professionals (e.g. family therapists, lawyers, mediators, expert psychologists, health nurses, child welfare caseworkers, teachers, etc.) and in their everyday exchanges with their children – was substantial. A critical aspect of this was logistics – setting up a meeting, travelling to and from it, preparing for it in advance, and balancing this vis-à-vis paid work, childcare, and other obligations. Several parents pointed out that what might appear as a 60-minute appointment in a professional's calendar could easily take four hours of the parent's time to realize. One father estimated that throughout the last three years, he had spent the equivalent of a third of his working hours on the domestic situation, engaged in meetings with professionals, face-to-face or on the phone, reading reports, or writing documents. Some of the parents were not in paid work at the time of the interviews. The explanations they provided for this were all partly linked to their struggles with being good parents in a difficult post-divorce situation. While some said that they currently prioritized doing their work as parents over finding paid work, others attributed the cause of their absence from the labour market directly to the toil, hardship, and sometimes trauma from being in a post-divorce conflict.

Equally consuming were the various kinds of emotional labour associated with accomplishing the formalized interchanges between the divorced family and representatives of the different professional institutions. One mother, talking about her experience of preparing for the multi-family group therapy meetings she had taken part in, said:

Mother: I sit there, constantly building myself up to go downtown for that meeting, to be in the same room as him. And when I get there I have to keep building even more, because I don't even know if [he] is coming or not. [...] That was awful. It was so painful. And I think about the others too, what must they think of me?

Interviewer: It sounds like it took you all day to build yourself up to those meetings?

Mother: Not day. Days.

Acknowledging as work the plethora of activities that parents did to realize an everyday life for their children and themselves, as best as they saw feasible, allows us to approach their actions as attempts at doing good parenthood under difficult conditions. This also lets us approach their encounters with professionals as something more than being recipients or users of welfare and other public services; through this work they contributed to realizing the institutional complex surrounding high-conflict divorce. This establishes a subject position from where to begin an exploration. From this standpoint, parents' experience and work knowledge appeared to draw on two textually organized discourses concerning the normative practice of parenting.

## The ideal of symmetry

When asked to describe their continued engagement in conflicts about custody and time with their children, all participants engaged with the vocabulary of gender-neutral parenting, equal rights for mothers and fathers, and the benefits for children from contact with both parents. Within the present analytical frame, they all could be said to locally activate the translocal political rationale for promoting inter-parental equality and shared residence, as expressed in Norwegian governmental policy. How they engaged with these relations of ruling differed somewhat according to gender and custody status.<sup>5</sup>

The fathers who were practicing shared residence all expressed strong convictions about the value of equality between parents. Some referred to how they had practiced family life before separation as 'modern' or 'gender equal,' describing how they and their partners had divided the work of childcare evenly. One father, explaining why he had sought court litigation to get shared residence for his daughter when the mother had denied him visitation, said that 'I wanted my daughter, fair and square. I love her, and I missed her.' When asked if he had ever considered the consequences of conflict to outweigh the benefits of father-child contact, he answered, 'no, not even one percent of the time. I will have my daughter. She's got no right to take her away from me. I'll stand ... and I'll fight.' Such statements can be seen as expressing a sense of natural entitlement to an equal share in one's children's upbringing. Unless guilty of transgressing the limits of what is considered appropriate parental behaviour (which, like this father, several mothers and fathers interviewed said that they had been accused of by the other parent), refraining from asserting one's rights to an equal presence could be seen as giving up on one's obligations as parent.

Many mothers and fathers described their work knowledge as in agreement with the advice that had been communicated to them by professionals. By some, this was expressed as concern about the possible negative consequences of their children spending more than half the time with the other parent. One father said that even though he acknowledged that his daughter both loved and needed her mother, he considered that he was providing a 'counterweight' to what he saw as harmful or irresponsible parenting from the mother. He said he had defined a 50/50 sharing of time as the lowest he would ever be willing to go: 'and that is what the expert psychologists have written in their reports, too. If things don't improve over there, then you leave. With the kid. That's what they say – with the kid.' Sensing a congruence between the legal system's norms, professional expertise, and his own experience, he said, gave him the confidence to stay the course. If the court's ruling had not been within the bounds of what he considered appropriate, he would have kept bringing the case to court once a year until they were assigned a 'real' expert psychologist.

As I interpret it, this father's experience and knowledge corresponds with what Westerling (2016) refers to as a framework for good parenthood as symmetry. As a relation of ruling, symmetry implies equality or a kind of alignment in parents' involvement with their children, which assumes a significant level of sameness between parents concerning their children (pp. 133–134). As mentioned in the introduction, according to Norwegian family policy, 'children shall experience their parents as equal, both when the family lives together and after a breakup' (Barne- og likestillingsdepartementet, 2016, p. 77, my translation). In a sense, fighting for inter-parental symmetrical alignment is thus a way to actively engage with, and realize, a particular parenting ideal embedded in the social organization of parenthood.

Mothers also related to the ideal of symmetry, responding to any claim that the children should be less than half the time with them as a wrong that should not be left unchallenged. To some mothers who experienced that their children were reluctant to be with their fathers, implementing any parenting scheme at all involved much deliberate work. One mother, who had sole legal and primary physical custody of her children, described how every week she would work to make her children agree to go for visitation with their father:

And that thing with spending the night has been ... gradually, the children started to dread it. Every night when they went to bed, they would cry and say 'do we have to go this weekend? Can't we stay home? Can we at least come home to sleep?' It became one of those daily things that were always on their minds. But then again, he is their father, and I want them to have contact with him and for there to be visitation.

For this mother, her concerns were related to upholding the children's contact with the father, following the parenting plan they had agreed on. As such, her experience, too, relates to the ideal of symmetry. For her, this involved disregarding her children's expressed wishes, finding ways of talking them into seeing their father, and keeping from the father the children's reluctance.



## The ideal of devotion

The other discursive domain of ruling that parents' experiences were related to was organized around ideas about parent-child attachment bonds and their importance for parenting quality and children's well-being. While the local and material links to the ruling discourse of inter-parental symmetry were primarily to be found in overt or implicit references to legal documents, policies, and dealings with professionals in mediation or the court, the links to this second discursive domain primarily came to expression in talk of child-rearing practices and parenting philosophies. Several parents reported previously attending parenting support programmes organized to promote healthy parent-child attachment. Some talked about attachment theory as being part of their vocational training. Others had familiarized themselves with it by interacting with healthcare and welfare professionals as part of their work in dealing with post-divorce parenthood. One mother referred to internet discussion forums for parents and to a general interest in research on parent-child relations that she would find online. However, most parents conveyed this knowledge simply as a natural state of affairs, that is, as general knowledge about 'what is good for children.' One of the fathers said:

'When it comes to the children, it is all about emotions, and about ... how can I put it, your place in life, kind of, if I can use such a strong term. Because, that's kind of what it's all about....So, when it comes to the children...if it had only been a feud, in a way, between us grown-ups ... but it is about what is in the child's best interest, it's about ... challenges that the children have, stuff ... like trauma, cognitive stuff ... things that make you truly worried about their well-being. And about their future, how it will turn out. You go around constantly thinking about that.'

As I interpret it, this father's work knowledge was informed by generalized knowledge about child development and trauma and the significance of parental presence and choice of parenting strategies. He traced his knowledge to meetings with therapists, child welfare professionals, and a specialist psychologist appointed by the court. He said engaging in these relations had provided opportunities to learn how to be a better parent.

Westerling (2016) argues that placing children's needs or 'best interests' at the centre of attention represents a normative framework of good parenting as exhibiting a continuous devotion towards the child. When parents identify themselves as a 'we' – either when living together or in some form of effective post-divorce co-parenting arrangement – the practices of devotion and symmetry might, to some degree, be thought to balance off each other, although they are, in principle, not immediately compatible. In situations of post-divorce conflict, however, this opposition might easily amplify. For many participants in the present study, negotiating a continual devotion towards their children within the confines of a strictly regulated parenting plan, often limiting their possibilities for connecting with the child when in the custody of the other parent, was experienced as incredibly difficult.

One mother, who practiced shared residence based on a court ruling, said that 'as a mother, my main job is to take care of my child. Make sure she has food, is clean, warm, safe. And I take it very seriously.' However, the fact that she was not in a position to practice these tasks on a daily basis made her feel like a 'failure [...]. It makes you feel so powerless.' Many participants said that the sense of being intermittently absent from their children's everyday lives was a primary concern and that their engaging in what was identified as the conflict had much to do with trying to establish a sense of constant emotional presence despite their partial physical absence. One father said:

Just to know that if there was something the matter, that [the mother] would have told me. ... I am a father all of the time. So ... just knowing that I'll be notified if something happens, or be allowed to be there for my daughter if something happens, that would have helped a lot.

Sparman et al. (2016) show how, when cohabiting families engage in child-centred activities, 'togetherness' is often done through a complex interdependence of proximity and distance. Thus, physical proximity and an experience of real-time cohesion are not always characteristic of how parents and children who are not part of a high-conflict divorce situation practice their lives. They also

show how parents and children often remain connected through the use of material objects such as mobile phones, or how parents occupy themselves to provide room for their children to enjoy activities on their own. The use of non-material entities such as patience and trust are also essential for maintaining what they refer to as ‘the ontological choreography of good parenthood.’ In post-divorce conflict situations, it could be argued that it is precisely the means for such a local, parent–child choreography that is sometimes lacking. The means for engaging with the translocal ruling norm of continuous devotion, in the sense of attending to what one takes to be the best interests of one’s child at all times, is made locally unfeasible.

## Conflicting ruling relations

Some parents described how negotiating the ideals of symmetry and devotion were particularly difficult in situations where their own sense of what was needed was brought into conflict with what professionals advised them to do. Many described the experience of interacting with different branches of the institutional complex as an uncoordinated assembly line where professionals would refer families on to the next service using standard formulations and referral forms, without parents having a sense that the front-line professionals would ever actually talk to each other. For many, seeing how the present situation was weighing on their children, and knowing that inter-parental conflict was itself considered a cause for concern by child welfare, gave rise to an experience of entrapment as well as to a constant self-reflective inner dialogue. A mother described this situation thus:

You constantly look for new solutions. Much more than you would think. When you find yourself in a situation ... with child welfare ... and you have been through two trials in court where no-one listened to you or understood anything. I was so frightened. Because I felt that ... when I can’t tell the truth ... what can I say? I have nothing more to say. There is nothing more I can do. I am powerless, then. And being powerless opposite the child that you have given birth to ...

One mother, who had lost legal and primary physical custody of her children to their father in court, said that it was particularly difficult if something happened at her children’s school. The other children’s parents would call her, and not the father, because, as she explained it, they knew that she would respond and that he would not. She said:

Child welfare tells me to stay away. ‘It is the father’s responsibility now. You need to back off and let him prove that he is capable.’ But it’s not that simple. You can’t just tell me to close my ears and don’t look. When I know that he won’t fix anything ... I just cannot do that. ... I can’t turn my back and tell my kids that ‘you know what, your father has to fix that for you.’

The knowledge that her intervention and presence were needed came into conflict with actions prescribed in the parenting plan from the court ruling, which said that it was the father (as custodial parent) who was to do what the mother was asked to do by the other parents but discouraged from doing by the child welfare caseworkers. When parents would find themselves in situations where their experience and work knowledge told them one thing, and representatives of the institutions of power told them the opposite, they were placed in a difficult situation. Understood as a disjuncture between what they knew and what they were told, these two mothers’ experience arose in a field of tension between their local work knowledge and the ruling relations, but also perhaps between the ruling relations of symmetry and devotion themselves. In both instances, from a standpoint in parents’ experience, staying with the conflict had to do with finding ways to remain engaged as responsible and devoted parents – to speak out about perceived injustice, or to help one’s children in a difficult situation at school. When enacted in a situation defined as high-conflict, such acts of devotion bumped up against both the ideal of symmetry and fairness, and against an objectified understanding of continued engagement with conflict as precisely a failure to devote to one’s children.

## Discussion

Starting from parents' experience allows for approaching high-conflict divorce not as an abstract clinical phenomenon or legal dilemma, but as biographical realities. The findings show how parents' work is intricately connected to texts and documents expressing ideas from dominant discourses of parenthood in present-day Norwegian society. They also show how, from the standpoint of parents, engaging in, and staying with, the issues that eventually result in them being labelled as high-conflict involved actively engaging with the ruling relations. This produces a picture that differs from the ones we get when starting in pre-existing scientific knowledge and categories. Mapping the landscape of high-conflict divorce from the standpoint of parents pulls the organization of the translocal ruling relations into the actual sites of people's living. Through regulations, concepts, theories, and ideologies, certain forms of social organization get replicated locally as parents, children, and professionals – at different locations and at different times – engage with the same ideas and concepts in their everyday work of dealing with dilemmas of post-divorce parenting.

The discourses of symmetry and devotion facilitate and bring forth something while simultaneously constraining what can be expressed and excluding what cannot. Through their itinerary from cohabitating co-parenting through separation and beyond, families frequently come into contact with various professionals in different institutional positions. In such interchanges, parents are repeatedly confronted with the demand to reflect upon their own parenting as they encounter the relations of ruling and the discourse surrounding parenthood and divorce. In the present study, parents' efforts to negotiate their own and their co-parent's presence in their children's upbringing, and their work to realize a permanent emotional availability vis-à-vis their children despite their own regularly recurring physical absence were found to constitute two gravitational points. What from the perspective of parents was experienced as a continuing work of negotiation between symmetry and devotion was likely what others – professionals, and perhaps also children – would experience as conflict. The findings show how authoritative discourse can be seen as entering into a circuit where the struggles of divorced or separated parents to care for their children under challenging circumstances, while also living up to norms for good parenting, can sometimes work to keep the conflict alive.

The principle that the child's best interest be considered the bedrock of all processes concerning parenting after divorce is pivotal in Norwegian family legislation (Children Act, 1981; Marriage Act, 1991) as it is in many other countries (Parkinson, 2011). While challenging to disagree with in principle, a paradoxical consequence of how this normative idea can be taken up as practice is that it polarizes and simplifies the experience and knowledge of the actual people engaging with it (Kjøs et al., 2015). Based on the findings from the present study, one could argue that classifying enduring post-divorce conflict as an instance of neglect obscures the field of tension that exists between different relations of ruling that work to coordinate divorce and parenthood across time and place. As with other abstract concepts used to make sense of people's doings for the sake of building theory, devising policy, or designing clinical interventions, there is perhaps a disjunction at the heart of the concept of high-conflict divorce itself. This tension is between the third person, translocal, and abstract view of scientific-political reasoning and the first-person view of experience that is always local, material, and temporal. Locating parents' concerns within the discourses of symmetry and devotion, as Westerling (2016) proposes, makes visible how, in the wake of family breakup, conflicts between parents about their children are dialogically situated within wider political discourses concerning gender and parenthood. This places parents' concerns and the preoccupations of legislators, bureaucrats, and professionals 'on the same side,' so to speak. They are users of the same language, engaging with the same ruling relations.

Although nowhere near exhaustive as an index of the present-day, normative matrix for parenting, I suggest that the ruling relations of symmetry and devotion discussed in this article seem to demarcate

part of the relational architecture within which Norwegian parents are currently called to orient themselves. Acknowledging what parents in high-conflict divorce situations do as the intentional work of engaging with a common set of translocal ruling relations, as opposed to seeing it as acts of negligence and self-centeredness, invites a communal – instead of a clinical – approach to the phenomena we commonly refer to as high-conflict divorces.

## Concluding remarks

What might the implications of this inquiry be for clinical and consultative practice? One lesson to draw is that treating what parents do in post-divorce conflict as deliberate parenting work, instead of seeing it as symptoms of parental failure or dysfunction, invites us to dissolve the ‘us-and-them’ ethos underlying the logic of much policy and intervention literature. Far from being an argument for a return to a ‘parent-centred’ set of priorities, I believe institutional ethnography offers a vocabulary for doing research that acknowledges the profoundly social, relational, and political nature of parenthood. This makes visible how the local and material relations between parents, children, and professionals are embedded in a larger web of social organization, and how what they all do is related to, and gather shape from, the ruling relations surrounding parenthood and divorce. Approaching high-conflict divorce in this way, as a problematic of everyday life instead of as a societal ill or a clinical problem, does not help explain underlying causal connections of particular patterns of behaviour. Neither does it offer clear suggestions for policy development or the invention of new intervention procedures. However, it might help us to better understand the actions of parents who find themselves in high-conflict divorce situations, by rendering visible some of the reasons why they might act as they do.

## Notes

1. While research on parenting values in the Nordic countries generally portray women and men as endorsing an ideal of gender equality, the studies referenced above also highlight a discrepancy between ideology and practice in these questions (i.e., parents do not necessarily behave in accordance with these values). For the purpose of the present study, however, it is the general ideological code (Smith, 1999) of inter-parental equality that is of primary interest.
2. The Norwegian Parliament.
3. The groups were run according to the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ model, which is a structured and time-limited (eight group meetings lasting for approximately two hours), multi-family group therapy model for families in post-divorce conflict, originally developed in the Netherlands. The program is based on ideas and practices from systemic and narrative family therapy, dialogical philosophy and trauma psychology (van Lawick & Visser, 2015).
4. In a separate article, currently in review, I explore the institutional circuit (Griffith & Smith, 2014) of concern and assessment leading up to the referral of families to these groups as itself a part of the ruling relations.
5. Many researchers have explicated gendered aspects of parenting and family policy (see e.g., Andenæs, 2005; Forsberg, 2007; Lee et al., 2014; Plantin et al., 2003). The present analysis aims at the social organization against which such gendered patterns are enacted. Thus, gender is not consistently applied as an analytical category.

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## Data availability statement

The interview transcripts for this study will not be made publicly available. They have been de-identified, but the content is still personal and cannot be made fully anonymous without changing the content.

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