Lina BUTKUTĖ

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

GROUNDED THEORY OF STRAINED LIMINALITY: SELF-TRANSITION OF INDIVIDUALS THROUGH THEIR ENDURING CONFLICTUAL DIVORCE

SOCIAL SCIENCES,
PSYCHOLOGY (S 006)

VILNIUS, 2024

MRU
Mykolas Romeris
University

University
of Antwerp

MYKOLAS ROMERIS UNIVERSITY

ANTWERP UNIVERSITY

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"All happy families are alike, but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."
Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, 1878

To all the unhappy families in their divorce journey.

INTRODUCTION

Relevance of the Study

Marital breakdown is a prevalent reality in modern societies, with a considerable number of marriages ending in divorce each year. In 2021 alone, approximately 1.7 million marriages and an estimated 0.7 million divorces occurred across the EU Member States (Eurostat, 2023). It is rare to come across a divorce that does not involve some level of conflict. Scholars emphasize that divorce is inherently conflictual, as conflict becomes an integral part of the process when a relationship ends and a couple emotionally separates (Jiménez-García et al., 2019). While divorcees must reach agreements on various issues, many couples find ways to manage the formal termination of their marriage and reduce the intensity of their conflicts (Amato, 2000).

However, some couples find themselves entangled in divorce or separation processes that can last for years (Lebow, 2019; Crabtree & Harris, 2020). A significant number of divorcing individuals face escalating levels of conflict, which is commonly referred to as "high-conflict" (Smyth & Moloney, 2017). Statistical data reveals that approximately 10% to 25% of divorces are characterized by enduring and pervasive disputes (Kelly, 2012; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015). The scientific literature has extensively studied the concept of high conflict between spouses, attracting interdisciplinary attention as it is seen as a growing and particularly challenging problem (Ferguson, 2021). In this study, our focus is on the self-transition of individuals amidst their enduring conflictual marital dissolution process before legal divorce has taken place and individuals are still legally married.

Conflictual divorce is often characterized by a high degree of anger, hostility, and distrust between the divorcing partner. It is marked by intensive custody litigation and ongoing difficulties in communicating about the care of their children (Polak & Saini, 2019). Some scholars have emphasized that divorce can be considered highly conflictual when spousal conflicts persist beyond the 2- to 3-year mark (Haddad et al., 2016; Hetherington, 2002; Lebow, 2019), highlighting the enduring intensity and tension experienced by the individuals involved in such divorces.

Divorce statistics provide valuable insights into the prevalence and duration of marriages, but they do not capture the complex dynamics of divorcees' inner change journey and the intricacies of the divorce process. Many individuals may live for extended periods in states of tension, either still cohabiting while divorcing or already living apart, and engaging in property and child custody negotiations. These situations are not typically reflected in the statistical reports. Therefore, divorce statistics primarily focus on the outcomes of relationship deterioration and may not fully capture the nuanced experiences and inner changes encountered by divorcees themselves.

Scientific research on the self-transition of divorcees through the enduring conflictual divorce process is limited. There is a scarcity of studies that delve into the psychological and emotional experiences of individuals enduring prolonged and contentious

divorces (Treloar, 2019; Francia, 2021). Understanding how divorcees navigate the process of divorce and cope with ongoing conflict can provide valuable insights into their inner changes and transformations. More research is needed to shed light on this aspect of divorce and to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in their divorce-related transition. Considering that divorcees are key informants for policy and practice developments, understanding their experiences can be invaluable in providing better support and resources to them and their children (Johnston, 1994; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Conflictual divorce indeed has significant adverse effects on both the individual and societal levels. Divorce and separation are consistently ranked among the most stressful life events (Bureau of the Census, 1997; Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Higher levels of conflict among divorcees have been linked to reduced well-being (Amato, 2000; Lamela et al., 2016; Symoens et al., 2014) and increased levels of depression and anxiety (Kalmijn & Monden, 2006; Liu & Chen, 2006; Symoens et al., 2014). In married couples, high levels of marital conflict are associated with cardiovascular risk and poor physical health (Choi & Marks, 2013; Iveniuk et al., 2014; H. Liu & Waite, 2014; Dupre et al., 2015). Separated but not yet divorced individuals experience ongoing separation as a highly ambiguous and stressful experience, according to Crabtree and Harris (2020). They often feel unsure about the future of the relationship and struggle with finding effective ways to communicate with their ex-partner.

The impact of high levels of conflict between parents on a child's psychological functioning and development has been extensively studied in the literature (Davies et al., 2016; Haddad et al., 2016; Harold & Sellers, 2018; Kelly, 2003). The risk of adverse effects on children is so significant and severe that the diagnostic condition "child affected by parental relationship distress" is included in the DSM-5 (Bernet et al., 2016). Children exposed to high levels of conflict between their parents and divorce experience various negative outcomes on their psychological well-being (Escapa, 2017; Lucas et al., 2013; Stadelmann et al., 2010; Vanassche et al., 2013; Schaan et al., 2019) and physical health (Davidson et al., 2014; Fabricius et al., 2012). They are more susceptible to trauma, stress, depression, social isolation, academic challenges, suicidal tendencies, aggressive behaviors, and self-harm (for an overview, see Hald et al., 2020; Polak & Saini, 2019). When faced with strong feelings of revenge and betrayal, divorcing parents are no longer able to act in the best interests of their child who becomes secondary and may be exploited in conflict (Stolnicu et al., 2022).

Enduring conflictual divorces not only have significant adverse effects on the individuals involved but also place a substantial financial burden on societies. While conflictual divorces may be in the statistical minority, they are the most costly in terms of litigation, resources, court time, and financial expenses. It has been found that conflictual divorces occupy up to 90% of family court resources, leading to inefficiencies in the judicial system (Smyth & Moloney, 2017).

The financial costs of conflictual divorces are substantial, with a single divorce case in the USA estimated to cost the government around $30,000 (O'Hagan, 2006). The total annual cost of divorce for taxpayers in the USA exceeds $30 billion, which

underscores the significant economic impact of conflictual divorces on society. Moreover, the financial resources and court time consumed by these high-conflict cases can result in delayed access to justice for other families waiting in the litigation queue (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011).

Ongoing conflictual divorce can be viewed as a psycho-social and health-related issue with significant adverse effects on individuals and society as a whole. Given the magnitude of its impact, it requires special attention from various professionals, including researchers, social support specialists, legal experts, and mental health professionals (Hald et al., 2020; Judge & Deutsch, 2016). Addressing the complexities and challenges associated with conflictual divorces is crucial to mitigate the potential harm caused by the enduring marital dissolution process.

Despite the adverse impact of conflictual divorce on divorcees and their children, some studies suggest that the negative effects may not always be long-lasting or severely detrimental. The ability of individuals to effectively adjust to the severity and duration of divorce-related stressors varies from person to person, influenced by various moderating or protective factors (Booth & Amato, 1991; Johnson & Wu, 2002; Kalmijn, 2017). Hetherington and Kelly (2002) argued that most individuals show functioning levels, symptoms, or happiness similar to non-divorced families after the first couple of years following the divorce.

In fact, a significant number of divorced individuals experience positive changes. They may achieve a more balanced view of reality, a clearer self-concept, and increased openness and extraversion (Costa et al., 2000), as well as greater conscientiousness (Specht et al., 2011). Traumatic life experiences, like divorce, can lead to personal growth and a greater appreciation of life (Prati & Pietrantoni, 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Zittoun, 2008). Many divorcees report gains in self-concept, psychological well-being, and personal growth (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2006; Treloar, 2019). Bonanno and Mancini (2012) showed that 72% of divorcees had minimal effects on their life satisfaction post-divorce, and negative effects were confined to a relatively small number of divorced persons. Furthermore, research indicates that neither the level of conflict nor the duration of the divorce is directly related to depressive feelings or life satisfaction (Symoens et al., 2013). Sclater (2017) argues that divorce can be a difficult and emotionally painful process, but it should not be regarded as a "pathological" one. It is about coming to terms with "loss", but it is also a process of the reconstruction of identity, and the pursuit of autonomy as a new and valued goal. Negative and destructive feelings are natural and need to find ways to be integrated, accepted, and owned instead of relegating them to the realms of the pathological. Consequently, the duality of the results on the divorce-related self-transition calls for clarifications on what inner changes occur and how, and the ways people deal with them before legal divorce takes place.

While much attention in divorce research is focused on the conflict between divorcing spouses, some studies point toward the adversarial legal system that perpetuates the conflict. The lack of appropriate professional support is a significant issue faced by divorcees, as it is often difficult to access and is perceived as insufficient in meeting

their needs (Bertelsen, 2021; Treloar, 2019). Professionals working with individuals involved in conflictual divorce report a lack of knowledge about this group of people, which hinders their ability to provide appropriate support (Saini, 2012). As a result, it becomes essential to understand the role of legal systems, professionals, and support networks on the dynamics of conflict as perceived by divorcees and the challenges faced during their divorce journey. By considering the broader context and multiple actors involved, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of the divorce process and develop more effective interventions and support mechanisms for those experiencing high-conflict divorces.

Lastly, the research on conflictual divorce in Lithuania is relatively underdeveloped. While the number of conflictual divorces involving child custody determinations has increased, there is a lack of available data on how adults experience this phenomenon (Gudaitė & Kalpokienė, 2004). Sociological perspectives have been applied to study conflictual divorce, but there is a significant gap in psychological research on the subject. The Institute of Family Relations (Šerkšnienė et al., 2016) has called for academic research to analyze families caught in the high-conflict divorce/separation process, explore its various aspects, and understand the challenges faced by those involved. The unique combination of high marital and divorce rates in Lithuania, along with the country's relatively traditional view on family and post-soviet socio-economic conditions, makes the Lithuanian context particularly interesting and relevant for a study (Kudinavičiūtė-Michailovienė & Maslauskaitė, 2017).

Given the potential adverse effects of conflictual divorce on individuals and society, it is imperative to conduct more research in this area, particularly from a psychological perspective. A deeper understanding of the transitional experiences and challenges faced by divorcees in highly conflicted divorce situations can provide valuable insights for policy development, support services, and interventions to improve the well-being and outcomes of those involved in such divorces.

Research Problem

Despite the significant adverse effects associated with high-conflict divorces, empirical research in this area is surprisingly scarce and it faces several challenges and limitations (Haddad et al., 2016). One major issue is the lack of a clear and universally accepted definition of what constitutes "high-conflict divorce" (Anderson et al., 2011). This ambiguity makes it challenging for researchers to establish consistent criteria for identifying and studying such cases. Despite this uncertainty, many studies still use the term "high-conflict divorce" without a precise definition or attempt to address the conceptual complexities it presents (Ferguson, 2021). While not the primary focus of this study, this issue significantly influences our understanding of this intricate phenomenon and keeps the unclarities surrounding it lingering.

Second, the literature has limited insights into how individuals navigate such divorces and how they perceive the difficulties and personal changes they encounter (Treloar, 2019; Crabtree & Harris, 2020; Huff et al., 2020; Lewandowski et al., 2006).

The voices of divorcees in conflictual divorces are often not heard or listened to, making it challenging to fully comprehend their experiences and provide appropriate interventions (Bertelsen, 2021). Instead, many present outsider-expert perspectives rather than empirical findings, describing divorcees from a third-person standpoint of professional and academic expertise. Such studies portray divorcees as distrustful, angry, and self-focused, rather than considering the complexities of their experiences and needs (Treloar, 2018; 2019). There is a tendency to focus on the pathological traits of individuals and their impact on children, often comparing highly conflictual partners to an abstract standard of a "normal" family (Haddad et al., 2016; Archer-Kuhn, 2019; Bertelsen, 2021).

This outsider approach often individualizes divorcees, simplifies their experiences, and overlooks the unique and complex nature of transition. The lack of attention to divorcees' voices and experiences makes it difficult to fully understand the changes they undergo and hinders efforts to effectively and efficiently address the complexities hidden behind the generalized term "conflictual divorce" (Ferguson, 2021; Bertelsen, 2021). Through our research, which examines the divorce transition from the perspective of the divorcees, we seek to further bridge the divide between external perceptions and internal understandings of this intricate phenomenon.

The view that divorcees in conflictual divorces are constantly embroiled in their disputes is challenged by some recent qualitative studies that explore how parents themselves experience and understand their conflicts related to divorce (e.g., Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011; Gulbrandsen et al., 2018; Jevne & Andenæs, 2017; Treloar, 2019). These studies present a different picture, revealing that individuals caught in high-conflict divorces are ordinary people striving to create a safe and fulfilling everyday environment despite facing long-lasting and irreconcilable disputes. A systematic review by Francia and colleagues (2019) found only eight qualitative studies from the last decade investigating parents in conflictual (usually post-divorce) relationships. These studies challenge the prevailing notion that divorcees in conflictual divorces are consumed by their disputes, which are often deemed pervasive, pointless, or centered on irrelevant issues. Instead, the research suggests that such a depiction might be a misinterpretation of these families' experiences.

Third, scholars emphasize the significance of how divorcing individuals redefine themselves during the conflictual divorce process (Hopper, 2001; Jimenez-Garsia et al., 2018). How they acquire new social rights and obligations or construct narratives that legitimize their divorces socially, thereby bringing order to an otherwise chaotic dissolution, are crucial but relatively underexplored aspects that underlie the divorce conflict. One of the limited studies (Treloar, 2019) that delved into post-divorce self-reflections highlighted that all divorcees argued about positive inner transitions and adaptations to their new circumstances after enduring conflictual divorce. Contrary to prevailing theoretical understandings of conflictual marital dissolution, the author argued that divorcees have varying needs, struggles, and perceptions at different times during the process, necessitating in-depth exploration to provide appropriate support. However, her research focuses on the post-divorce adaptation, leaving an important

unresolved question about how self-change unfolds during an ongoing and enduring conflictual divorce process, where an apparent end is not in sight and the situation remains unclear. Research is needed to better understand the in-between period of relational transition and to explore how individuals live within periods of relational instability for extended durations of time (Nuru, 2023). Understanding the perceived stressors that arise and how individuals overcome them in highly uncertain contexts is crucial to offering effective and relevant support to those experiencing this challenging transition.

Fourth, existing studies have primarily focused on spousal conflict and parenting concerns during the conflictual post-divorce period, largely overlooking the complex nature of stressors involved in this process (Tabor, 2019). The empirical understanding of the diverse forces that either facilitate or hinder self-transition amidst enduring conflictual divorce remains limited. In addition to the stressors arising from ongoing conflicts with former spouses regarding child custody and property division, other factors such as interactions with the legal system, courts, and involved professionals also intervene and influence the self-transition process. Consequently, it remains unclear what actors and how play a role in enduring divorce and how they support or prevent divorcees in their transitional process.

Adding to the above, Treloar (2019) suggests that resilience and transformative experiences resulting from conflictual divorce are not solely determined by individual efforts and processes but are significantly influenced by the availability of resources and the broader social context. There remains a need for further research to identify the perceived stressors and to understand if and in what ways individuals overcome them. The interplay between different layers of divorcees' self-change experiences and how they connect to either prolong or diminish the divorce process is not yet clear and requires investigation. Expanding the understanding of these complexities will help develop more effective interventions and support mechanisms for individuals going through this challenging transition.

Based on the literature review and the gaps identified in existing research on conflictual divorce and self-transition, the following **research questions** were formulated::
- How does the transition of the "self" through the enduring conflictual divorce occur and develop?
- What characteristics come forward in various dimensions of enduring conflictual divorce: process, attitudes, actions, interconnections, and social environment?
- What are the factors that support or prevent the timely self-transition of divorcees amidst the enduring conflictual divorce, their interconnection, and the coping resources and strategies they use to deal with these factors?

The object of the study - the transition of the "self" through the enduring conflictual divorce.

Study aim - to construct a grounded theory about the transition of the self amidst the enduring conflictual divorce, revealing the experiences of divorcees.

Study Significance

In this study, we adopt a processual perspective to examine conflictual divorce, with a specific focus on the moment the divorce is taking place. Divorce studies able to employ "real-time" research are scarce and there has been a call for such studies (e.g., Thuen, 2001; Cipric et al., 2020). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to explore this phenomenon from the divorcees' perspective during the ongoing marital separation before a juridical divorce is granted, uncovering the uncertainties and insecurities that emerge during the ongoing process. By studying the experiences of individuals enduring an ongoing divorce, we enhance the accuracy of their recall and minimize potential errors in reporting (Francia et al., 2019). Often studies struggle to depict the confusion and messiness experienced by divorcing individuals due to retrospective reports. Participants look back on their experiences, retrospectively smoothing out the confusion, and reporting with a level of certainty that may not have existed during the actual unfolding of events (Rollie & Duck, 2006). Data gathered after the divorce might be influenced by the "time heals effect," potentially leading to an underestimation of the various (adverse) impacts of divorce (Sander et al., 2020). While interviewing individuals before their juridical divorce takes place, we shed more light on divorcees' inner transitional experiences with minimal timelag. Employing a longitudinal approach in this study, meeting with divorcees on two separate occasions, enables us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the change (or static) process over time, providing a more accurate perspective on the transitions.

Our approach involves examining divorce from the perspective of the individuals themselves, thereby providing a different dimension to the study. By doing so, we shift the focus away from the externally constructed gaze that often negatively characterizes divorcees. Instead, we center our attention on the individuals' own inner experiences, and challenges they encounter throughout the process. This shift in perspective allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the subjective and individualized aspects of divorce-related self-change, shedding light on the unique journeys and transformations that individuals undergo during this significant life transition.

Our research unveils enduring divorce as a multifaceted phenomenon, extending beyond the conflicts between divorcing spouses. It is intertwined with conflicts involving institutions, professionals, and the country's legal system. Through our findings, we highlight the dual nature of self-strengthening strategies and support resources, which can either aid or hinder divorcees in their journey towards self-redefinition and conflict resolution. The complexities of the divorce experience are influenced not only by personal dynamics but also by external factors that shape the divorce process.

In this study, we intentionally included both women and men to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of divorcees from both genders. By examining the self-change of women, who have been historically more frequently studied in divorce research, and also that of male participants, we aim to present a more complete picture of the divorce transition process. Our findings demonstrate that both men and women undergo similar processes during divorce, although some differences may exist. Nevertheless, we argue that individual circumstances play a more significant role

than any gendered differences in shaping the divorce experience. This highlights the importance of considering each person's unique situation when studying and understanding divorce.

Through the lens of the liminality theory and the proposed concept of strained liminality, our study explores the enduring conflictual divorce self-transition experience from a fresh perspective, highlighting the transitional nature of divorce. We recognize that the divorce process is not only fraught with uncertainties and unknowns, but it also involves multiple dimensions of restrictions that hinder timely and effective self-redefinition. Self-transition during conflictual divorce occurs within the liminal space, where individuals navigate towards higher self-gains and self-redefinition, yet continuously encounter setbacks in the form of losses and enduring conflictuality.

Within this framework, we delve into various aspects that either impede or facilitate individuals in achieving their self-redefinition amidst the divorce process. We examine the strategies and resources they employ to cope with the challenges they face. Our findings emphasize that enduring divorce is not simply about experiencing losses or gains, but it also encompasses the feeling of being stuck in the status quo, residing in a state of uncertainty, and engaging in meaning-making as a coping mechanism to navigate the ongoing unknowns. In sum, our study uncovers the intricacies of the enduring conflictual divorce self-transition experience, with a focus on the dynamic process within the liminal space. Using the term of subjunctivity we underline multiple ways individuals engage with the uncertain and conflictual reality they face.

Methodology

In this study, a qualitative approach utilizing the constructivist grounded theory methodology was employed. Recognizing that participants bring their unique life experiences, qualitative research inherently captures diverse perspectives and compiles them into a collective and open-ended framework (Babbie, 2013; Creswell, 2014). Unlike quantitative research which often aims to measure the extent of a phenomenon, qualitative research delves into the depth of understanding. The qualitative researcher in this context becomes personally involved and invested in the subject matter, seeking to gather non-numerical data through various methods. Rather than aiming to test pre-existing theories or hypotheses, a qualitative study aims to develop new insights and theories by exploring the intricate nuances of the subject. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the multifaceted nature of the research topic, without limiting the variables under investigation.

Qualitative research is characterized by its inductive and subjective nature, often involving the analysis of tangible elements (Guest et al., 2013). This approach is geared towards evaluating values, experiences, processes, and contextual factors. It catalyzes sparking curiosity and inspiring further exploration among scholars, philosophers, and theorists across various disciplines. Additionally, qualitative field research is adept at observing and comprehending attitudes and behaviors within their natural settings, allowing for a deep understanding of subjective attributes. This approach aids in appreciating, challenging, and gaining a more profound understanding of the diversity

and commonalities that define the human experience.

In our research, we employed the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; 2008) to systematically gather data, analyze it, and conceptualize a theory about the transformation of the self amid enduring conflictual divorce. This method involved a comprehensive and systematic collection of data to develop insights. Although the resulting theory highlights shared experiences among divorcees, it acknowledges that each individual's journey is uniquely shaped by factors such as mindset, career decisions, living situation, relationships with family and friends, and more. Through semi-structured interviews, a wealth of informative and intricate material was gathered, providing a robust foundation to construct a meaningful theory rooted in the concept of liminality inspired by van Gennep's work (1909/1960).

The Structure of the Thesis

The structure of our thesis adheres to the established norms for psychology studies in Lithuania. It encompasses the following sections: introduction, theoretical framework, methodology, findings, discussion, conclusions, recommendations, and literature review. The approach aligns with the constructivist grounded theory strategy, involving a sequential process. Initially, an empirical study was conducted, during which categories and subcategories were constructed. Subsequently, the central category was developed based on these findings. Following this, the theoretical components of the thesis were formulated, drawing upon the insights gained from the empirical research.

In the *theoretical section* of the dissertation, we provide an overview of psychological theories on divorce and discuss process-oriented models. We explore various aspects of divorce from a transitional viewpoint, including self-reorganization, role changes, gender differences, and coping strategies. We also examine the complexities of conflicts that hinder self-transition and delve into coping resources. Finally, we link our empirical findings to the liminality theory and its rites of passage, discussing their relevance in the context of enduring conflictual divorce.

The *second chapter* of the dissertation outlines the methodological approach used. Both formal and subjective aspects of the chosen constructivist grounded theory research strategy are detailed. We explain the research process and address validity criteria, research ethics, and ethical challenges encountered during the study.

In the *third chapter* of the dissertation, the findings of the qualitative research are outlined. The focus is on describing the three distinct modes through which divorcees navigate the enduring divorce process, with a particular emphasis on constrained self-redefinition. The chapter delves into the multitude of factors that either hinder or facilitate self-transition and conflict resolution, resulting in divorcees remaining in a liminal space that oscillates between self-gains and losses. Finally, it presents the constructed grounded theory of strained liminality, which offers insights into the self-transition of divorcees as they navigate the enduring conflictual divorce process.

The *fourth chapter* of the thesis engages in a comprehensive discussion of the results. These findings are examined through the lens of liminality theory features (van

Gennep, 1909/2019), which are applied within the social science context. Furthermore, a comparison with similar study results in the field is also undertaken to provide a broader perspective.

The dissertation concludes with a presentation of conclusions, followed by recommendations and a comprehensive list of references.

Dissemination of Results

The research findings were disseminated through participation in scientific conferences and articles in scholarly journals.

List of Scientific Publications Related to Dissertation

Butkutė, L., Mortelmans, D., & Sondaitė, J. (2023). Exploring Self-Concepts of Longer-Term Divorcees in Lithuania. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *64*(1), 1-30. https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2023.2179833

Butkutė, L., Mortelmans, D., & Sondaitė, J. (2023). Entangled in the Web of Conflicts: Prolonged Divorce from the Divorcees' Perspective. *European Journal of Psychology Open.* https://doi.org/10.1024/2673-8627/a000042

Butkutė, L., Mortelmans, D., & Sondaitė, J. (2023). Restricted Self-Transition: a Journey of Divorcees through Lasting Marital Dissolution in Eastern European Society. *Europe's Journal of Psychology, 19*(3). https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.9619

Presentations at Conferences on the Dissertation Topic

Butkutė, L., Mortelmans, D., & Sondaitė, J. (July, 2021). *Understanding of self during a longer lasting divorce process: a grounded theory study.* [Poster presentation]. 32nd International Congress of Psychology (Virtual), Prague, Chech Republic.

Butkutė, L., Mortelmans, D., & Sondaitė, J. (October, 2021). *Understanding and evaluating self during the ongoing divorce process: a grounded theory study.* [Poster presentation]. European Network for the Sociological and Demographic Study of Divorce, 19th Annual Meeting (Virtual).

Butkutė, L., Mortelmans, D., & Sondaitė, J. (July, 2022). *Entrenched in the Warzone: The Multiple Levels of High-Conflict Divorce From the Divorcees' Perspective.* [Poster presentation]. 17th European Congress of Psychology, Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Butkutė, L., Sondaitė, J., & Mortelmans, D. (April, 2023). *Apsunkintas tapsmas: besiskiriančiųjų kelionė per konfliktiškas skyrybas Lietuvoje.* [Presentation]. Žiebiame psichologijos kibirkštį: Lietuvos psichologų kongresas: pranešimų santraukų leidinys. Vilnius: Mykolo Romerio universitetas. ISBN 9786094880551. p. 36.

Definitions of Terms

Conflictual divorce - conflicts between divorcing spouses that have continued past at least six months and are characterized by ongoing litigation or threats of litigation, access sabotage, acrimony, denigration, involvement of related family law services, withholding of financial resources, or other difficulties arising from sharing the care of a child or property (Mortelmans, 2020; Francia, 2021).

Coping resources - aids which an individual (can) draw upon to attenuate stress to achieve successful coping. They may include self-esteem, health, skills, knowledge, social support or other factors and may decrease individuals' stress (Weber et al., 2019).

Coping strategies - the thoughts and behaviors that people use to manage stressful

internal and external demands of situations either by changing the relationship with the environment with coping actions (problem-focused coping), or by changing the interpretation of the environment (emotion-focused coping) (Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Budimir et al., 2021).

Divorce - is the process of the (legal) dissolution of marriage and the relationship between husband and wife, which transforms the structure and relational dynamics of the people who experience it and their broader social network, and requires adjustment to the changes on multiple levels (Cano et al., 2009; Cabilar & Yilmaz, 2022).

Liminality - an uncomfortable and often evaded transitional process characterized by disturbances or irritations in the established order, which entails moving from one clearly defined position to another equally well-defined one, and results in a state of ambiguity and uncertainty – a state of being between and betwixt (Bergmann, 2018; Horvath, 2013; van Gennep, 1960).

Self - intra-psychological structure concerned with one's self-perception that is continually reinforced by evaluative inferences, which reflect cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses (Arens et al., 2011; Kohut, 2013; Hattie, 2008).

Self-coherence - the degree to which a person feels that the various parts of oneself fit together, and are stable and clear (Slotter & Walsh, 2006; Michikyan, 2020).

Stressor - a stress-inducing agent, such as a significant life change or everyday transaction with the environment that is associated with a negative emotion and requires adjustment and adaptation (McIntyre et al., 2019).

Subjunctivity - a mood, attitude, or practice characterized by doubt and hope, self-questioning, contemplating, and provisionally constructing different aspects of self in a changeful situation (Whyte, 2005; Beech, 2010; Turner, 1969/2017).

Transition - a process following the experienced crisis, allowing the elaboration of a new environmental adjustment (Zittoun, 2015).

A new definition was created based on our research:

Strained Liminality - a process of reconstructing identity, wherein the transition towards a new clearly defined self remains unfinished or significantly prolonged as individuals find themselves caught in an ambiguous highly conflictual space perceived as needing resolution and closure.

1. UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONFLICTUAL DIVORCE IN SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

In this section, we provide an overview of psychological theories on divorce and discuss process-oriented models. We explore various aspects of divorce from a transitional viewpoint, including self-reorganization, role changes, gender differences, and coping strategies. We also examine the complexities of conflicts that hinder self-transition and delve into coping resources. Finally, we present the liminality theory and its rites of passage, discussing their relevance in the context of enduring conflictual divorce.

1.1. Overview of Psychological Theories Explaining Divorce

The word "divorce" has its origin in the Latin word divortioum. It means "separation," and it is also derived from divertere, which means "to go in opposite ways" (de Rezende & Bianchet, 2014). In this context of meaning, divorce transforms the structure and relational dynamics of the people who experience it. Divorce marks the dissolution of marriage and the relationship between husband and wife (Cano et al., 2009). While the core definition of divorce as the legal dissolution of marriage remains consistent across different perspectives, the multifaceted nature of this life event elicits diverse interests and investigations within various subfields of psychology. Each subfield approaches divorce with a unique lens, delving into specific aspects and implications that align with its theoretical framework and research objectives.

Researchers have adopted diverse conceptual perspectives to elucidate the impact of divorce on adults and children. These perspectives are often grounded in various psychological theories that guide their respective viewpoints, particularly concerning the focus on divorce. We aim to highlight four key aspects related to this focus: the paradigm's understanding of divorce, its conceptual emphasis, and whether it primarily centers on individual dynamics or involves multiple actors. Additionally, we examine whether the predominant lens for viewing divorce is through the prism of an event or a process. To organize and present these perspectives, we have compiled a table summarizing the main tenets of each theory and provided a tentative description of divorce according to each theoretical approach (see Table 1).

The overview of existing theoretical assumptions concerning divorce reveals a prevailing individualistic perspective, which places significant emphasis on the experiences of the divorcing individual as they navigate the challenges of divorce. This approach contrasts with a more holistic view that acknowledges the involvement of multiple actors and factors and their influence on the stress and adjustment process during divorce. The individualistic perspective primarily focuses on understanding the psychological and emotional journey of the divorcing individual. It delves into their cognitive and emotional responses to the dissolution of the marital relationship, exploring how they cope with the loss, manage their emotions, and adapt to their new circumstances throughout the divorce process.

Table 1

Main Conceptual Perspectives of Divorce

Theories	Authors	Divorce Concept	Concept Focus	Focus Unit	Temporal focus
General stress theory	Pearlin et al., 1981; Thoits, 2013; Carney & Bradburry, 1995	Divorce is a significant traumatic life event that necessitates extensive behavioral readjustments, often overburdening individuals' coping abilities and making them vulnerable to physical and psychological issues such as guilt, depression, distress, and intimacy concerns.	Emotional and psychological rumification of divorce, including distress, grief, etc.	Individual Post-crisis effects	Event
Selection theory	Davies et al., 1997; Hope et al., 1999; Kitson, 1992;	Divorce is a situation often entered by individuals with problematic personal and social characteristics, which not only predispose them to divorce but also result in lower scores on indicators of well-being after the marriage ends.	Personal and social characteristics	Individual Pre-crisis determinants	Event
Attachment theory	Hazan & Shaver, 1992 Feeney & Monin, 2008; Sbarra & Borelli, 2018	Divorce is a event of disrupted attachment rooted in previous attachment relationships, with significant implications for future relationships. Continued feelings of attachment for an ex-spouse are a primary cause of the emotional and adjustment problems that follow divorce.	Attachment orientations	Individual Pre-crisis determinants & post-crisis effects	Event & Process
Identity theory	Bonanno et al., 2001; Papa & Lancaster, 2015	Divorce is an event that triggers the experience of identity disruption, leading to the loss of the ability to fulfill roles central to one's day-to-day sense of self.	Social roles	Individual Post-crisis effects	Event
Family stress and coping theory	Hill, 1949; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Plunkett, Sanchez, & Robinson, 1997; Walsh, 2016	Divorce is an process that bring about changes in the family social system and its dynamics to the degree depending on the interaction between the divorce event, the family's resources, and the family's definition of the situation.	The ways divorce alters family roles, relationships, and communication patterns.	Individual & family Crisis coping	Process
Systems theory	Emery, 1994; Walch, 2003, 2010; Nichols & Schwartz, 2004	Divorce is a serious crisis and ongoing adversity that profoundly impacts the functioning of a family system and causing ripple effects to all members and their relationships.	The process of interaction within the various systems	Individual & family Crisis coping	Process
Distributive justice theory	Carbonne,1994	Divorce is a process in which individuals assess whether the distribution of resources, rewards, or outcomes in social interactions and relationships is perceived as fair and equitable.	Perceptions of justice	Individual Pre-crisis determinants & post-crisis effects	Event & process
Social exchange theory	Teachman, Paasch & Carver, 1996; Levinger, 1979; Cook & Rice, 2006	Divorce is the outcome of a series of sequential transactions between two or more parties, where the perceived rewards from the relationship fall below expectations, leading to a situation where the costs exceed the rewards.	Perceived costs and benefits of the relationship	Individual Pre-crisis & crisis determinants	Event
Social network theory	Afifi & Davies, 2013; Toth & Kemmelmeier, 2009; Komarraju & Cokley, 2008	Divorce is a dynamic process influenced by the interplay between cultural norms, social networks, and individual experiences and decisions. Cultural beliefs and attitudes, as well as the support or strain from social connections, play significant roles in shaping divorce decisions and outcomes.	Cultural norms and social networks	Individual, family, & society Crisis coping	Process
Risk and resilience theory	Cowan, Cowan & Schultz, 1996; Hetherington, 1999; Lewandowski & Bizocco, 2007	Divorce is a significant life transition that may involve potential risk factors challenging individuals' well-being, but it can also serve as a catalyst for post-traumatic growth and resilience, leading to positive outcomes.	Risk and resilience factors	Individual, family, & society Crisis coping & post-crisis effects	Process

The central emphasis lies on internal mechanisms and personal attributes that shape the individual's resilience, coping strategies, and emotional well-being amidst divorce-related stressors. Examples of theoretical frameworks aligned with this perspective include Selection Theory, Identity Theory, and Attachment Theory, which greatly emphasize the individual's experiences and responses. However, despite presenting valuable insights, the individualistic approach tends to overlook crucial aspects, such as the broader social context in which divorce occurs, the interconnectedness of various factors, and the profound impact of systemic influences and similar factors.

The more holistic multi-factor approach recognizes that divorce is a complex and interconnected process involving multiple actors and factors beyond the individual. It goes beyond the isolated experiences of the divorcing individual and takes into consideration the broader social context and the intricate network of relationships and interactions surrounding the divorce experience. In this perspective, the roles and influences of family members, friends, and the wider social support system are acknowledged as crucial determinants of the stress and coping process during divorce.

The cultural norms, societal expectations, and the legal system are also recognized as significant factors that can shape individuals' adjustment to divorce.

The multi-factor approach emphasizes that the stress and coping process during divorce are not isolated events but rather interconnected and influenced by the dynamics and interactions of multiple actors. It considers how various elements in an individual's social environment can either support or hinder their ability to navigate the challenges of divorce successfully. Examples of theoretical frameworks aligned with this holistic view include Systems Theory and Social Network Theory, both of which recognize the interplay between various elements in an individual's social environment and their impact on the divorce experience and adjustment outcomes.

The distinction between viewing divorce as an event versus a process is a crucial one in understanding its implications and outcomes. Some researchers focus on identifying the singular cause or trigger of divorce, treating the breakdown as a discrete event. This perspective (e.g., Selection Theory), seeks to establish that divorce has occurred based on specific factors or reasons. On the other hand, for those who adopt a process-oriented approach, divorce is seen as a complex and extended experience. This perspective, aligned with theories like Family Systems Theory and Resilience Theory, acknowledges that divorce can be a long and painful journey, marked by ambiguity and uncertainty.

Taking a process-oriented view implies recognizing that divorce can involve multiple components that come into play at different stages or may be simultaneously operative. It suggests that the dissolution of a marriage is not a linear or uniform process, and its duration and complexities can vary widely depending on individual circumstances. While it may be true that poor conflict management styles can contribute to divorce, a process-oriented approach considers how individuals navigate through the dissolution and adjustment phase. It emphasizes the abilities of people to cope, adapt, and build their individuality following divorce.

Overall, considering divorce as a multifaceted phenomenon that involves multiple

aspects, players, and factors is essential for a comprehensive understanding of its complexities. Divorce is a process that encompasses various transitions, not only at the individual level, such as identity and meaning but also at the family systems level, including interaction patterns and roles. While attempting to include all these aspects in research may be overwhelming, focusing solely on one aspect would lead to oversimplification and incomplete explanations of divorce and its aftermath. A holistic approach that considers the interplay of individual and systemic factors is crucial for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of divorce.

In our research, even though we primarily focus on the experiences of divorcees themselves, acknowledging the multifaceted character of divorce and the various influencing actors provides a broader context and depth to your findings. Recognizing divorce as a multiple transitions process with multiple actors emphasizes the dynamic and interconnected nature of this life transition and its impact on individuals and families. We have chosen to adopt the perspective of liminality theory, which we present in the last chapter of the literature review. It is important to note that this theory is not widely used in divorce research at present, which is why it was not included in the overall overview presented here. By incorporating liminality theory into our research, we shed light on the transformative nature of divorce and its potential for personal growth and self-reconstruction. It allows for a more nuanced exploration of how divorcees experience this transitional phase and how they navigate the complexities of rebuilding their lives after divorce.

1.2. Divorce as a Process of Multiple Transitions

To outline the various aspects of divorce, we emphasize that divorce is a process involving multiple transitions, and we discuss it by highlighting the various aspects of it. To do this, we provide an overview of psycho-social models that explain divorce, followed by a focus on the reorganization of self as the central aspect of the divorce transition process. We also explore changes in parental and spousal roles, as well as the uncertainty individuals may experience about their own identity. Additionally, we discuss the diverse changes that occur from a gendered perspective as part of the multifaceted self-transition process during divorce.

1.2.1. Overview of Divorce Models Explaining Processual Aspects of Divorce

Although a couple's break-up is often perceived as a separate and distinct life event, the conclusion of a long-term relationship is typically not confined to a singular moment. Scholars emphasize that divorce involves traversing distinct paths, making it more aptly viewed as a process or transition. Acknowledging divorce as a protracted process allows for a comprehensive exploration of its complexities and nuances, researchers have proposed multiple approaches to better grasp the intricacies and dynamics of divorce. This perspective forms the foundation of our study, as we adopt a prolonged and evolving viewpoint of divorce.

Approaches to understanding divorce and postdivorce adjustment can be broadly categorized into two main perspectives: stage-oriented and stress and resilience. Scholars have explored divorce and its aftermath from these distinct viewpoints, each providing valuable insights into the process of divorce and how individuals adapt to postdivorce life. The stage-oriented perspective has been studied by various researchers, including Bohannan (1970), Kessler (1975), Wiseman (1975), Froiland and Hozman (1977), Levy and Joffe (1977), Pais and White (1979), Ahrons (1980), Kressel (1980), and Hackney and Bernard (1990). This approach views divorce as unfolding through distinct stages or phases, each with its unique challenges and adjustments.

On the other hand, the stress and resilience perspective has been explored by researchers such as Hill (1949), McCubbin and Patterson (1983), Patterson (1988, 2002), and Walsh (2016). This viewpoint emphasizes the stressors that divorce introduces and the ways individuals cope and build resilience to navigate post-divorce life effectively. A comprehensive overview of these models can be found in Table 2. By considering these two primary perspectives, researchers gain a multifaceted understanding of divorce processes and the factors that influence postdivorce adjustment.

Table 2

An Overview of Divorce Models

Model	Authors	Relationship dissolution perspective
The five-stages model	Wiseman, 1975; Kressel, 1980	1) Denial; 2) Loss & depression; 3) Anger & ambivalence; 4) Reorientation of lifestyle and identity; 5) Acceptance.
The Six Stations model	Bohannan, 1968; Pais & White, 1979	1) Emotional divorce; 2) Legal divorce; 3) Economic divorce; 4) Coparental divorce; 5) Community divorce; 6) Psychic divorce.
The seven-stages model	Kessler, 1975	1) Dissilutionment; 2) Erosion; 3) Detachment; 4) Physical separation; 5) Mourning; 6) Second adolescence; 7) Hard work.
The relational dissolution model	Duck, 1982	1) Intrapsychic stage; 2) Dyadic phase; 3) Social phase; 4) Grave-dressing phase.
Dyadic divorce adjustment model	Hackney & Bernard, 1990	1) Problem realisation; 2) Reaction; 3) Escape to phantasy; 4) Physical separation; 5) Termination of the relationship; 6) Legal divorce; 7) Psychic divorce; 8) Autonomy.
Seven stages model	Lawler, 2002	1) shock and disorganization, 2) denial, 3) anger, 4) loneliness, 5) guilt and shame, and 6) evaluation, ending with 7) acceptance.
Six-stages model	Matarazzo, 1992	1) emotional divorce; 2) physical separation; 3) geographical separation; 4) family separation; 5) social separation; 6) legal separation.

Family adjustment and adaptation response (FARR) model	Patterson, 1988	Adaptation and adjustment that the family will experience after a crisis-event emerge with mutual interaction of demands, capabilities and meanings.
The Double ABCX Model	McCubbin & Petterson, 1983	This model combines various factors contributing to divorce and its aftermath, including the initial stressor (A), the family's resources and coping strategies (B), their perception and definition of the stressor (C), and the family's adaptation and resolution of the crisis (X). It focuses on variables which account for differences in family vulnerability to a stressful event.
The Stress-Adjustment Model	Booth & Amato, 1991; Johnson & Wu, 2002; Kalmijn, 2017	Marital break-up leads to a temporary decrease in wellbeing. However, these practical and emotional changes are followed by adjustment, through which the wellbeing of divorcees returns to previous baseline levels.
Cyclical model	Emery, 1994	A divorcee experiences one core emotion (love, anger, or sadness) at a time, cycling back and forth between these (often contradictory) feelings until, eventually, the intensity of each is reduced and all three can be experienced concnrrenily.
The Relational Depenetration model	Altman & Taylor, 1973	The relationship moves gradually and systemticly to less intimate levels by decreasing the breadth, volume, and intimacy of verbal and nonverbal exchange.
The chronic strain model	Amato, 2010; Monden et al., 2015; Johnson and Wu, 2002	Marital break-up produces a persistent decline in subjective wellbeing and mental health. Impaired mental health becomes a permanent feature of divorced adults.

Stage approaches to understanding divorce propose that individuals who have gone through divorce undergo a series of phases, with the order and intensity of these phases varying among individuals. These models highlight that (post-)divorce adjustment is a natural part of this process. Within the stage models, two main differences can be observed. Some stage models concentrate on the internal psychological and emotional changes and adaptations of the individual (e.g., Wiseman, 1975; Kressel, 1980; Lawler, 2002). These models explore the individual's internal journey and how they cope with the emotional challenges brought about by divorce. Other stage models emphasize the multiplicity of transitional trajectories encountered during marital dissolution (e.g., Bohannan, 1968; Pais & White, 1979; Matarazzo, 1992). These models underline the multiplicity of transitional trajectories that encounter marital dissolution. Despite these differences in focus, all stage models share common critical

components that occur during the dissolution of a marriage, and they attempt to place these components in a certain timely order.

For example, Lawler (2002) addressed the mourning process that many individuals experience in grieving the loss of their marriage. He describes seven phases: 1) shock and disorganization, 2) denial, 3) anger, 4) loneliness, 5) guilt and shame, and 6) evaluation, ending with 7) acceptance. Through this progression, we can see that although love may have been fading over time in a troubled marriage, the attachment can persist for a long time. Matarazzo (1992) described six stages, as follows: 1) emotional divorce, as the start of the divorce process, refers to an emotional remoteness, revealing feelings such as anxiety, sadness, guilt, and detachment; 2) physical separation, which is described as no physical contact between the couple; 3) geographical separation, wherein the spouses live in different residences; 4) family separation, when the relationship has reached the moment of weakness in which the only way out is divorce; 5) social separation, in which some friends are removed from the social environment; and finally, 6) legal separation, in which the couple determine the division of assets and custody of children (as cited in Araújo & de Oliveira Lima, 2016). Other stage models may offer slightly different perspectives, but generally, they present a similar pattern to describe the divorce process. These stage-oriented approaches provide valuable insights into the emotional and psychological journey individuals undergo during the dissolution of their marriage, shedding light on the varied experiences and challenges they encounter throughout this transformative life event.

Despite the valuable contributions of stage models in understanding divorce processes, they do have some limitations. By focusing on common experiences, these models tend to overlook many of the nuanced details that can be essential in individual divorce experiences. They also provide limited insights into the social context, network effects, daily routines, rituals, social performances, communications, and the inherent ambiguity of the divorce process at the time it is happening.

One of the weaknesses of current stage models is their struggle to depict the confusion and messiness experienced by individuals during divorce. This limitation can be attributed, in part, to the methodological emphasis on retrospective reports. Respondents often look back on their experiences, retrospectively smoothing out the confusion, polishing their insights, and reporting with a level of certainty that may not have existed during the actual unfolding of events (Rollie & Duck, 2006). As a result, the perceived inexorability of movement from one stage to another may have been overestimated. In reality, divorce processes can be dynamic and non-linear, with individuals experiencing varying degrees of movement and fluidity between stages.

The concept of relational dissolution and divorce is often associated with finality and the complete termination of a relationship. However, in reality, many relationships do not fully dissolve, but rather undergo significant changes and are redefined under different relational rules and expectations. Relationships can transform and evolve over time, and they may not necessarily end just because they are labeled as defunct (Cottyn, 2022). People may continue to maintain some level of connection, even if the nature of the relationship has shifted. This recognition of ongoing relational dynamics

and adaptability is crucial in understanding the complexities of human interactions and the diverse ways people navigate their relationships.

The stress-resilience models in understanding divorce focus on the adjustment processes individuals or families undergo when facing the life crisis of divorce. These models emphasize the multifaceted nature of divorce trajectories, which can vary depending on certain factors that predispose individuals to crisis, adjustment, or resilience during this challenging time (Cabilar & Yilmaz, 2022).

Since the 1990s, there has been a shift in research from the dominant pathogenic paradigm to the salutogenic paradigm. The salutogenic perspective highlights the diversity in adaptation patterns, changes in adaptation over time, and the complex interaction between individual, family, and environmental factors that either promote or hinder adaptation (Smith, 1999). Rather than focusing on weaknesses and dysfunctions, this approach emphasizes positive characteristics and strengths that contribute to the growth and development of individuals and families. By viewing and describing families as resilient, researchers emphasize their potential and ability to recover on their own (Greeff & van der Merwe, 2004).

In general, stress and resilience models highlight the less obvious divorce-adjustment process. They acknowledge the variety of possibilities and outcomes in the individual and family adjustment to divorce. Each person experiences divorce differently, and it is also influenced by multiple actors or systems in which the person functions. Even individuals from the same family may experience divorce differently (Hetherington, 1994; Symoens et al., 2012; Vanassche et al., 2015; Vanassche et al., 2017; Cottyn, 2022). This recognition of individual uniqueness and contextual factors enriches our understanding of the diverse ways people navigate divorce and cope with the challenges it presents.

The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, adopted by many scholars (Booth & Amato, 1991; Johnson & Wu, 2002; Kalmijn, 2017), views divorce as a stress-inducing event, leading to significant changes in one's assumptions, behaviors, and ways of being (Sakraida, 2008; Welfel & Ingersoll, 2001; Schlossberg, 1981). Divorce is not a single moment but a process that can take various paths and result in different outcomes (Amato, 2010).

When the "taken-for-granted" aspects of life disappear due to divorce, individuals experience what scholars refer to as ruptures or crises (Zittoun, 2006; Erikson, 1959; Dewey, 1949). Such events are perceived as ruptures, and what follows is a process of change and adjustment to find a new balance. Transitions occur as people navigate through the changes following experienced ruptures, allowing for the elaboration of a new environmental adjustment (Zittoun, 2015). The stress is particularly pronounced during transition points, as families and individuals work to rebalance, redefine, and realign their relationships (McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012). The divorce experience brings about significant changes that necessitate coping, adaptation, and finding new ways of living and relating to others.

Successful adjustment after divorce is characterized by experiencing few divorce-related symptoms and being able to function effectively in new family, work, or school

roles. It also involves developing a new identity and lifestyle that is not tied to the former marriage (Amato, 2000). The transition process is accompanied by a variety of cognitive, behavioral, and physiological reactions. The severity and duration of negative outcomes vary among individuals, depending on the presence of certain moderating or protective factors that help them cope with the challenges. These factors can influence how well individuals navigate through the divorce experience and how they ultimately adapt to their new circumstances.

The stages and stress-adjustment models emphasize the transition of divorcees towards greater adjustment, suggesting that divorce could be viewed as a crisis – a temporary phenomenon to which most people eventually adapt. However, some researchers argue that divorce represents chronic strain – a phenomenon that persists more or less indefinitely. Given the ongoing support for both the crisis and chronic strain models, it appears that each holds some truth (Amato, 2000). Evidently, divorce can lead to either short-term or long-term consequences, depending on various moderating factors. This conclusion aligns with the findings of longitudinal research conducted by Hetherington (2003), who reported that divorce was generally followed by short-term declines in the psychological, social, and physical well-being of parents. However, after a few years, most individuals had successfully adapted to their new lives, although a significant minority continued to experience serious difficulties. Bonanno and Mancini (2012) conducted research that demonstrated that divorce is unquestionably a potentially challenging stressor event, with 19% of divorcees experiencing a trajectory of steadily declining well-being over time. However, despite this potential negative impact, the vast majority of the sample (72%) followed a trajectory of stable high well-being.

In our research, we primarily adhere to the crisis approach, emphasizing the temporary crisis and longer-term adjustment experienced by divorcing individuals. We acknowledge some alignment with the stages model, as it partially depicts three stages of transition through divorce. However, our main focus is on the processual aspects of the divorce experience rather than the stages themselves. We emphasize the shapeless and uncertain nature of the self-development during dissolution process, which follows a certain order but can appear interchangeable and circular. Our attention is particularly drawn to the resilience of divorcees during highly disruptive and stressful transitional periods in their lives, which require specific resources and strategies to cope effectively.

In the next chapter, we will delve deeper into the self-transition of divorcees, exploring its main areas and aspects. We will examine how changes in the self occur during this process and what psychological studies have revealed thus far. We aim to gain a comprehensive understanding of the psychological dynamics involved in divorce and how individuals navigate through the transformative journey of self-change and adjustment.

1.2.2. Reorganization of the Self at the Heart of the Divorce Transition

Social constructionists argue that people mainly construct their self-understanding through interaction with others (Lavis, 2010). It is a process of stitching one's parts together and is highly influenced by others, as we become aware of ourselves mainly through others (Haraway, 2013). The self-expansion model by Aron et al. (2001) argue that people naturally seek self-expansion and end up with a merged identity. People tend to fuse with their partners by including resources, perspectives, and identities. Burke (2006), for example, examined how identities shift for members of newly married couples, noting that performing everyday activities with a partner changes the way we think about ourselves—as does possessing the identity of "spouse." Individuals also fuse with thoughts, ideas, roles, and physical objects, communicating valued aspects of the self to others (Hatvany et al., 2018). The more the person values a particular life domain, the more aspects of it define the self-concept (Tabri et al., 2017).

The self is healthy when it experiences self-continuity (Bluck & Habermas, 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013). People want their self-governing mental representations of expected relations with self, the world, and others to be internally consistent, free of contradiction, and devoid of dissonance. Therefore, people strive to maintain stability through time and place and are usually reluctant to change (Lodi-Smith et al., 2017). The continuity of self is at the center of finding meaning (Singer & Bluck, 2001) and is also a vital issue for one's psychological well-being (McAdams, 2015). Stability and clarity of the self are related to low levels of distress, high self-esteem, active coping styles, and low neuroticism levels (Smith et al., 1996).

When people can construct a coherent life story, they maintain a unity of self through stressful times (McAdams, 1996). However, a stable self is temporary and illusionary since it can be altered or destroyed by circumstances such as divorce (Van Deurzen & Adams, 2016). Long-term stress often stands in the way of individuals' ability to narrate themselves effectively (Sedikides et al., 2010; Stephens, 2011) and leads to inner confusion about oneself (Schiller, Hammen, & Shahar, 2016), which is linked with psychological distress (Boelen et al., 2012; Slotter et al., 2010) and susceptibility to depressive symptoms (Drew et al., 2004).

The notion that changes in marital status foster changes in identity is not new. Mattingly et al. (2014) underline that in connection with relational dissolution the self changes along two dimensions: diversity (increased or decreased) and experienced emotional response (positivity or negativity) regarding the change. The more the person values particular self-aspects related to the relationship, the more aspects of it define him or her (Tabri et al., 2017). Despite the prevalence of divorce and changing societal norms, individuals still believe marriage to be a highly valued, sacred union intended to last until death parts the couple (Bernhardt et al., 2007; Hopper, 2001). People often find parting with valued self-aspects particularly difficult because they feel like losing a valued piece of self (Maddux et al., 2010). For example, the extent to which divorced women experience psychological distress is dependent on whether being a wife was a predominant aspect of her identity at the time of separation from the spouse

(DeGarmo & Kitson, 1996). In that case, losing valued self-aspects is particularly difficult because doing so feels like losing significant parts of oneself.

However, in some relationships, individuals might experience the loss of positive self-attributes or the addition of negative ones by, for example, developing new bad habits. Consequently, such a bond's dissolution would provide a sense of relief when it ended, allowing the rediscovery of neglected self-parts and the experience of growth (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). The study by Mnyango and Alpaslan (Mnyango & Alpaslan, 2018) indicated that divorce triggered feelings of failure in individuals. The authors argued that this was mainly fuelled by the inability to solve marital problems or to make the marriage work. The marriage was expected to last. When this did not happen, the participants were likely to feel like they failed, not only themselves but also in their inability to meet societal expectations. However, after the finalization of the divorce, some of them felt primarily relieved and free, especially those who felt undermined during their marital life (Mnyango & Alpaslan, 2018). In their study, Hetherington and Kelly (2002) showed that self-changes for divorced individuals vary. For some, it is a journey of positive self-rediscovery, while for others, it reveals hidden dependencies and personal vulnerabilities they never knew existed and did not wish to know.

1.2.3. Redefining Spousal and Parental Roles During the Divorce Transition

The literature suggests that self-transformation is intricately linked to changes in roles established during marriage, with the most significant ones being the transition out of the partner role and the role of together parenting. De-coupling and co-parenting can be viewed as complementary processes. De-coupling involves not only the legal termination of the spousal relationship but also a psychological disentanglement. This process of separation is achieved only after individuals navigate through several tasks (Baum and Shnit, 2003). These tasks include mourning the losses brought about by the divorce (Schwartz & Kaslow, 1997), overcoming the feelings of rejection triggered by the divorce (Rice & Rice, 1986), and, most importantly, redefining one's identity in a way that distinguishes it from both the former couple and the former spouse's identities (Bohannan, 1971).

Facing divorce, individuals are confronted with the task of reshaping their sense of self in a way that distinguishes it from the identities of their former partner and spouse (Bohannan, 1971). Anthony Giddens (1991) asserts that divorce represents an intensified version of the process of self-discovery compelled by the conditions of modern society—a process requiring active intervention and transformation to establish a new sense of identity. Divorce, as a significant life change, can induce stress even in cases where the marriage was unhappy and the divorce was sought after (Waite et al., 2009).

In his qualitative study, Hopper (2001) conceptualized that divorce often evolves from being merely the loss of a partner to the loss of a future built on the dream of unity and self-completeness. Particularly among Lithuanians, marriage is still perceived as a cherished and sacred union meant to endure until death (Kanopienė et al,, 2015). Dissolving this revered bond brings forth numerous internal moral conflicts.

This transition can be emotionally arduous and elicit various feelings, such as hatred, anger, desire for revenge, and fear (Mattheeuws, 1983; Emery, 2004).

Being parents complicates this transition and the process of letting go of the former partner. Parents who have divorced continue to some extent to be interdependent while simultaneously bearing the weight of their relationship (Siskind, 2008). Emery (2016) asserts that divorced parents never truly sever their ties; their relationship remains ambivalent, characterized by physical separation yet ongoing involvement. The presence of minor children is recognized to amplify the adverse impact of separation on the well-being of parents (Leopold & Kalmijn, 2016). The post-divorce adjustment tends to be swifter for childless adults in comparison to parents (Tosi & van den Broek, 2020).

Divorce also necessitates changes in the parental role, as individuals strive to establish a new parental identity. This undertaking involves transforming the emotional attachment between parents into a functional attachment that centers solely on parenting responsibilities (Emery, 2011). Cottyn (2022) refers to this transition as parental reorganization and asserts that divorce marks not only the end of the romantic partnership but also the definitive conclusion of the nuclear family structure. The post-divorce dynamics of two one-parent families can vary widely, shaped by numerous factors and taking diverse forms (Bastaits et al., 2013; Buysse & Ackaert, 2006). A significant yet often overlooked aspect of divorce is the shift from co-parenting to solo parenting (Cottyn, 2022). Throughout this process, tensions frequently arise between autonomy and connectedness, openness and closeness, and stability and change (Baitar et al., 2013).

Furthermore, it's worth noting that some parents thrive as solo parents, while others find it challenging (Janssen, 2016; Vanassche et al., 2017; Emery, 2016). Parents often feel vulnerable due to how their children perceive them, as children's perceptions can impact their sense of self-worth (Dowling & Gorell Barnes, 2000). For parents who, for various reasons, have limited interaction with their children after divorce, the transition is even more difficult (Balmer et al., 2018). Considering that children typically remain with their mothers post-divorce, gendered differences in self-transition might be anticipated.

1.2.4. Gender Differences in Divorce Transitions

Gendered differences in self-transition following divorce have elicited various viewpoints, with differing research offering contrasting perspectives. Lund (1990) contends that the shift from being a married individual to a divorced one is particularly challenging for women. This is because traditional gender roles assigned to women as nurturers and caregivers often lead to a dilution of their distinct personal identities. Consequently, divorce precipitates the loss of their primary role, compelling them to embark on a process of self-redefinition. A notable challenge arises from the fact that this new role remains ambiguously defined within society, mirroring a broader lack of acceptance for this role.

However, the majority of studies point towards positive gains of women following the divorce. Van Schalkwyk (2005) examined how women in South Africa draw on existing cultural scripts to find their identity after divorce. She posits that women have a "natural resilience" that allows them to reconstruct their identities in the wake of divorce—a process she finds necessary because "through a divorce, previous constructions of self, particularly self as a relational being, is largely lost." Similarly, Baum et al.'s (2005) research with divorced Jewish women from Israel revealed that most women reported having changed significantly and in important ways since their divorce and regarded these changes as positive. Gregson and Ceynar (2009) showed that the post-divorce transformation of women was mainly retrospective rediscovering and reclaiming their past identity that had been lost during the marriage, starting their lives over again and doing those things they had not had the opportunity to do during their marriage. It was achieved through two parallel identity-transformation processes: separating from the marriage while distancing from ex-partners and marriage, as well as creating a new, postdivorce identity. Furthermore, many women in Egypt developed a greater sense of resilience as a result of their post-divorce process and gained a sense of freedom, which allowed them to return to their forgotten self-identity and allowed for personal growth (Mendoza et al., 2020). Results from various countries around the world point to similar results, therefore claiming it to be a rather global phenomenon.

In contrast to the roles available to divorcing men, the roles available to, and often required of, postdivorce women are roles that increase self-esteem (Diedrick, 1991)—such as being "head of household" (Kohen, 1981) or highly affiliated with one's work identity (Bisagni & Eckenrode, 1995). Conversely, men are less likely to add socially valued roles and skills as a result of a divorce; as such, they are less likely to make long-term positive adjustments to divorce (Diedrick, 1991). Moreover, as Diedrick (1991) notes in comparing women's and men's postdivorce adjustment, the skills postdivorce men add to their knowledge base are typically socially devalued activities associated with the feminine role.

Some researchers argue that one key trend that has contributed to how men experience divorce differently than women pertains to who traditionally gets custody of the children. Considering that custody has often been granted to the mother, whereas divorced females were primarily focused on the end of their marital relationship, divorced males are somewhat more likely to feel pain from the losses of the absence of their children and family (Frieman, 2002; Mnyango & Alpaslan, 2018). Consistent with those findings, research asserts that the divorce-related identity losses for men with children are more costly than for men who are not yet fathers (Kalmijn, 1999; Lye, 1996; Seltzer, 1991, as cited in De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006).

With changing gender identities, men are increasingly dedicating time and effort to caring for their children and the idea of a 'new' emotionally involved father has been established in the literature (Stevens, 2015; Campo et al., 2021), which plays a role in the identity development after divorce (Autonen-Vaaraniemi, 2010; Andreasson & Johansson, 2016) and has increased the expectations, complexity, and pressure

of co-parenthood (Sclater & Piper, 2019). Post-separation fathering is thus "a complex relational and moral process, shaped deeply but not straightforwardly by gendered patterns of caring for children" (Philip, 2014). Despite legal regulations and gender ideology that associated men solely with economic providers, recent research showed that Lithuanian men attempt to negotiate their nurturing fatherhood after divorce (Tereškinas & Maslauskaitė, 2019). Although constrained by gender norms and stereotypes, they found resources to subvert them and create new fathering strategies. For many of them, divorce was not only a challenge but also a new opportunity and possibility for new kinds of fathering and self-development (Tereškinas & Maslauskaitė, 2019). Sorokinaite and Sondaite (2023), based on the results of their qualitative study on co-parenting after divorce, argue that co-parenting is predominantly initiated by fathers, providing further insights into the changing needs of males in the current Lithuanian society.

Although the effects of divorce on mental health for men and women appear to be comparable, the relationship between divorce and various measures of physical and mental health, and death is less favorable for men, even after remarriage (Hiyoshi et al., 2015). Additionally, it is argued that men mourn the losses of their marriages differently than women, yet they are less likely to pursue psychological help (Baum, 2003).

Much research point out about economic challenges of women following divorce. Women experience a 45% decline in their standard of living, whereas men's dropp by just 21%. These declines persist over time for men, and only reverse for women following repartnering (Fen-Lin & Brown, 2021). Some authors point to the conodrum in the literature, which does not have an answer yet: If women suffer the most profound economic disruptions after divorce, and minority women are already at a disadvantaged financial position, why do men persistently have the greatest mortality risk? (Sbarra & Whisman, 2022).

Although our research is not developed to answer the above question, we would like to point out, that despite a rather positive view of the self-changes following divorce for women, general research provides more questions than answers. There is less agreement— among society in general and researchers in particular—about the long-term effects of divorce on women and men and how desirable those changes might be for them (Baum et al., 2005). Some argue that various aspects play a role in the process and the variety of transitional paths is more dependent on a personal context than gender (Hetherington, 2003). Moreover, recent research showed that there is little evidence that adjustment after divorce is slower for older men than for women (Tosi & van den Broek, 2020).

While our research does not intentionally aim to compare men and women, it underscores the presence of more differences in individual divorce trajectories than those solely based on gender. One more significant aspect of self-development throughout the divorce process than gender is the custody of children and the capacity to engage with them freely. Specifically, the considerable uncertainty surrounding questions about children during the divorce process keeps divorcing individuals in a state of enduring ambiguity and instability, which we tackle in the next chapter.

1.2.5. Self Unclarity as One of the Ways Transiting through the Marital Separation

Despite changes in their close relationships, individuals also experience alterations in the content and clarity of their sense of self (Slotter & Walsh, 2017). This lack of clarity is evident through a general uncertainty about the expectations linked to specific roles and the presence of certain relational statuses (Tabor, 2019). Divorce is often perceived as a "legal event" rather than a life experience with broader implications for relationships and emotions (Haffey & Cohen, 1992). Consequently, divorcees lack societal guidance on how to navigate their self-concept and behavior. The decreased clarity in self-concept following a role change predicts negative impacts on various well-being aspects (Blackburn et al., 2014). Remaining in an ambiguous situation for an extended period can hinder effective and timely self-redefinition, leading to heightened internal confusion.

While it is unusual in our society to discuss the difficulty of obtaining a divorce or the deceleration of the divorce process as problematic, experiencing oneself as unable to act upon one's needs and desires due to divorce-related challenges can exacerbate various negative emotions (Lebow, 2020). The absence of a mechanism for timely disengagement can trap many individuals in a state of developmental pause and uncertain time, which is not conducive to progress for anyone involved.

Qualitative research looking into lasting separation without clear intent to divorce indicated that finding oneself in lasting and unclear settings was related to higher stress levels and a more significant role in unclarity (Crabtree & Harris, 2020). Individuals needed to figure out what was expected from them and how long such settings would last. Some researchers experienced uncertainty about the expectations associated with particular roles and the existence of certain relational statuses due to the so-called role-relational ambiguity phenomenon (Tabor, 2019). It points to the unclarity of the self in ambiguous and not finalized life situations, such as an ongoing divorce process. Longer-lasting divorces might involve various unclear settings where a partner is physically absent but psychologically present or vice versa. The more extended such settings last, the higher the anxiety and stress levels and the greater the role unclarity (Crabtree & Harris, 2020).

Kohen (1981) discovered that recently divorced women often expressed a sense of being like "nonpeople" or "non-wives," terms that highlight their vague and socially ambiguous status. Similarly, Haffey and Cohen (1992) observed that divorced women in therapy described feelings akin to having undergone a death or an amputation—a sensation of losing their sense of identity and struggling to regain a feeling of wholeness. Essentially, divorced women grapple with a conflict between the role they were socialized to fulfill (that of a wife) and their current role—a role that lacks anticipatory socialization, a clear cultural script, role models, and societal support. Women navigate this process predominantly on their own.

Keirse (2017) argues that finding self in enduring life situations related to ongoing loss is related to the mourning-without-end phenomenon. Individuals are locked in

the process, which does not allow for the definite integration of material and immaterial losses. He argues that this mourning-without-end process is paired with enduring losses of hopes and ideals of what the reality could have been or should have been, as well as uncertainty about what can still happen. In those circumstances, individuals feel ongoing helplessness and powerlessness to do something about the situation and the need to find balance in one's life without losing their grip on it. This type of mourning is not resolvable as long as the source of (potential) loss continues to exist, provoking permanent emerging internal crises (Keirse, 2017).

Uncertainty can designate a person's experience of blurred personal reality relative to a previous state of apprehension. Experiencing uncertainty might be paralyzing or stimulating, but in most cases, it questions previous understanding and might call for exploring possibilities and elaborating new conduct (Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivinson, & Psaltis, 2003). Divorce allows people to reinvent themselves, an experience that can have positive consequences (Bisagni & Eckenrode, 1995; Rahav & Baum, 2002). The role ambiguity that comes with divorce both precipitates a change in identity and makes change possible (Rahav & Baum, 2002); lacking clear societal expectations for how people should respond to divorce, people must define their priorities and sense of self. It is the very fact that a cultural script is lacking that makes divorce a catalyst for change—and these changes are often positive. It is because of the need to reorganize roles and examine their identity that divorcees can grow (Lund, 1990). Role ambiguity and a lack of anticipatory socialization for the new role as a divorced person present opportunities for change (Baum et al., 2005).

Looking at the above, we can see that finding self in the uncertainty and not being able to properly define self leaves people in the transitional space, which is experienced as difficult and full of painful emotions. However, this also points towards the possibility of the creation of a new self and by that growth. Important to point out that research pointing to divorce-related unclarity is highly lacking. This could be related to the fact that looking from the post-divorce perspective, there is much more clarity and unclarity has passed away therefore it is not that actual anymore. Furthermore, we hypothesize that unclarity is highly influenced by the high conflictuality of the divorce and the inability to influence the situation. Various conflicts surrounding divorce keep people stuck in the uncertainty and unknown and prevent them from a timely and effective transition. Below we present the various levels of divorce-related (external) conflicts that play a role in the conflitual divorce.

1.3. Multifacetedness of Divorce-Related Conflicts Preventing Timely Self-Transition

Conflicts are a universal, intrinsic characteristic of human nature and are generally perceived as a stressor in a person's life. Divorce without some conflict is rarely found. Logically, the conflict between the former spouse stands at the center of the divorce attention. However, this conflict is not the only one taking place. With our research, we would like to underline that conflictual divorce entails more levels of conflict,

including conflicts with children, professionals, and the legal system as a whole. Moreover, the conflictuality with these external sources can differ and could be placed on the continuum from reactive to entrenched conflicts (Pinzón & Midgley, 2000; Smyth et al., 2020) and not talk di-chotomiously, as either high-conflict is present or not. We think of it more as more or less conflict, or even more with the changing intensity.

Former spouse. Scholars argue that divorce-related conflicts with the spouse usually stem from perceived or experienced resources or power differentials. Conflict is often regarded as the struggle for material resources and agency or power (Pruitt & Kim, 2004). The most common and apparent targets for divorce-related conflicts are the distribution of assets, children's residence, care and custody, visiting arrangements, and alimony (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011; Gulbrandsen et al., 2018). Bergman and Rejmer (2017) reported that concern over a lack of ability to care for the child was the most common theme evident in high-conflict (post-divorce) cases, followed by co-parenting difficulties, violence, and abuse. Francia et al. (2019) found in a systematic review of parents in a high conflict that pervasive mistrust is evident within these co-parent relationships. Apart from material resources, some resources are much harder to identify, yet they play a substantial role in divorce. For example, we could talk about agency or power to manipulate expertise or information or the ability to take away something material or do something to another (Bollen et al., 2013). Positional inequality of power where "the empowered" takes up a position as a "the only legitimate child representative" or a "knowledgeable/expert parent" versus "the isolated/unskilled" parent is apparent in post-divorce conflictual relationships (Jevne, 2017; Stokkebekk et al., 2020).

Although divorce conflicts (between former spouses) support establishing better boundaries and quicker emotional separation, prolonged (or entrenched) conflicts play a more negative role and prevent individuals from timely conflict dissolution and self-transition (Lobow, 2019). Anderson and colleagues (2010) argued that a couple's conflict can be classified as low-conflict when partners can negotiate and solve the problems at hand with a shared trust and environment consisting of hope for the future. When couples begin to focus more on the partner rather than the specific problem, the level of conflict is likely to increase. As the level of conflict increases, partners have more difficulty reaching a negotiation or solution to the problem.

During highly conflictual divorce, there is much blame, resentment, anger, and negative emotional reactions toward the former partner. Some see their ex-spouse as irrational and inflexible; others - manipulative, controlling, and deceitful. Most see their former spouse as mentally ill (Moné et al., 2011). In other research, individuals argue that their ex-partner has a narcissistic, psychopathic, or borderline personality, is delusional, autistic, and so on. He or she is seen as a pathological human being who fails relationally and does all bad things, of which the other is a victim (Van Lawick & Visser, 2015). Consequently, the accused partner can become defensive when frustrations are experienced as a personal attack and engage in a counterattack. This repetition of attack and defense can escalate so that a destructive dynamic colors the whole relationship (Van Lawick & Bom, 2008).

Children. Parent-child conflicts are less of the focus in divorce-related literature. However, we could expect that such conflicts play an important part in the divorce process as well. Such a notion is particularly underlined in the studies that focus on a so-called parental alienation when a child refuses to see one of the parents. Scholars argue that ongoing parental conflicts often damage parent-child relationships, resulting in children feeling "obsessive hatred" towards one of the parents (Erel & Burman, 1995). Children might make this choice as it can become too difficult to live for a long time caught between two different truths. All the networks may feel pushed to choose, so grandparents, family, friends, and often professionals also choose between fighting parents (Van Lawick & Visser, 2015). Parents who experience rejection from their children perceive this situation as a threat to a risk of harm to a child and themselves. Consequently, they might experience heightened levels of depression, anxiety, stress, anger, and blame toward the other parent and potentially the offspring. Experienced threats and disturbing emotions could reduce the energy and motivation needed in custody disputes (Baker, 2010). It could also contribute to conflict escalation and its endurance (Balmer et al., 2018).

Adversarial Legal System. Conflict in divorce may stem from the adversarial nature of the legal system. The legal process dictates positional and dichotomous thinking about parental deficiencies, which does not always align with the views of parents, and it discourages communication and cooperation between them (Joyce, 2016; Keet et al., 2017; Kelly & Emery, 2003). For many people, litigation is a profoundly frustrating and emotionally disturbing experience. Individuals usually enter divorce litigation already feeling suspicious, hurt, frightened, and confused. Divorce proceedings occur at times of psychological disorientation and vulnerability for litigants – increasing the chance that the process itself can contribute to lingering psychological harm (Keet et al., 2017). Lawsuits often come too late in the life of the conflict, and the remedies available under the law do not always address the underlying root cause of the problem. The adversarial legal process typically does not change perspectives or strengthen human relationships - but tends to worsen them. This phenomenon was even coined "critogenic" or law-caused harm to capture the negative impact on individuals from the litigation process (Eisenberg, 2019). Despite its prevalence, until very recently, literature centered only on actual legal costs and direct financial outcomes, with less consideration for the social and psychological dimensions of the process (Keet et al., 2017).

Various studies reveal that the experiences of divorcees with professionals are somewhat mixed (Smithson & Gibson, 2017; Studsrød et al., 2014). Divorcing individuals with a positive experience with involved professionals have more trust in the system and are more eager to collaborate. However, many feel unheard, labeled as ''high-conflict couples," and misunderstood or misrepresented. A recent empirical study in high-conflict post-divorce settings (Bertelsen, 2021) reveals that in many cases, former spouses sense a substantial disagreement between what they need and what representatives of involved institutions of power tell them to do. They feel that their understanding of the ongoing conflict differs as well. According to divorcees, what they experience as continuing negotiation work, professionals view it as conflict

and act accordingly. Another study (Treloar, 2019) of Australian individuals looking back at their divorce showed that divorcees experienced being often labeled as "high-conflict couples" and therefore seen as incapable of speaking authoritatively about the needs and interests of their children. When parents feel that the involvement of the professionals does not help them or their families, they seem to experience mistrust and are less likely to cooperate with them in the future (Bouma et al., 2020).

Another study showed that fathers in Spain experienced the justice system, in terms of divorce proceedings and child maintenance matters, to be female-dominated and biased. It resulted in negative experiences, and they felt mistreated (Jabbaz Churba, 2021). The participants expressed similar sentiments in Troilo and Coleman's study (2012), where the nine "part-time, full-time fathers" declared that the legal system was biased against non-residential fathers. They were angry with the court system for what they perceived as unequal treatment because they were men. Similar to the court system, social work itself is a female-dominated profession, which turned out to be a threatening factor for participants in that it is gender biased and does not serve the child's best interest. The participants who felt that the justice system had mistreated them concerning the divorce and child maintenance matters, in that they were gender biased, did not give the men a fair hearing, and did not serve the child's interests, were very upset and angry. It led them to doubt and mistrust the justice system's decisions (Troilo & Coleman, 2012).

In Lithuania, the legal system supports the traditional discourses of fatherhood or motherhood. Therefore, implementing the practices dictated by "new parenthood" in divorced families is unfavorable (Maslauskaitė & Kuconytė, 2016). The institution of shared residence is not established in Lithuanian legislation. The statistical data provided by the national courts' administration proves that in 95 percent of all cases, the child's place of residence is determined by the mother (Kudinavičiūtė-Michailovienė, 2013), which conflicts with the desires of many fathers.

Opposing the above statement, a study involving Canadian women argued that the country's legislation intends to support fathers' involvement in post-separation conflictual arrangements (Archer-Kuhn, 2018). It requires that mothers ensure fathers see their children not taking into account domestic violence situations. When violence occurred in the relationship, shared decision-making was not the goal of child custody decisions for these women. Instead, the goal was to keep themselves and their children safe. However, the determination of the legal professionals to insist on shared parenthood, in those cases, led not only to accepting the coercive power of the ex-partner but coercive power by professionals who were demanding survivors to ensure ongoing contact. Women said they felt threatened by their lawyers to follow legislation rather than being supported (Archer-Kuhn, 2018).

Wider social discourses. While often overlooked, family legislation and the prevailing political views on family and divorce within a specific country have significant implications for resolving divorce-related conflicts. Societal norms and discourses, often institutionalized, shape individuals' behaviors (Amin & Thrift, 2002). This influence is particularly evident in cases of separations involving couples with children. When

individuals deviate from these prescribed norms, tensions and conflicts arise. Such situations may require divorcing individuals to adopt an irreverent stance or challenge established social beliefs (Gecchin et al., 1994).

Cottyn (2022) highlights prevalent societal assumptions about divorce that influence individuals' perceptions and behaviors. One such assumption involves assigning blame to divorcing individuals for perpetuating ongoing conflicts. This assumption suggests that individuals intentionally engage in conflict and are at fault for being unable to halt it. Consequently, this leads to a cycle of mutual blame, as each party seeks to establish their innocence. Another assumption is the belief that divorce should occur without harm, with parents continuing to communicate and forgive each other. This pursuit of harmony can undermine society's capacity to collectively endure difficulties (van Oenen, 2019), posing challenges for parents in conflictual divorces.

Finally, one of the most powerful cultural norms promoted by professionals suggests that successful parenthood post-divorce requires effective communication between parents (Cottyn, 2022; Sclater & Piper, 2019). However, by advocating the ideal of cooperative relationships, practitioners inadvertently assume a dominating stance within former couples experiencing prolonged conflicts (Rober & Seltzer, 2010). This position entails using one's professional authority to introduce concepts that might be unfamiliar or insensitive to the family's traditions, resources, and capabilities (Rober & Seltzer, 2010). Paradoxically, the promotion of cooperative engagement could potentially impede the transition from being a couple to being ex-partners, exacerbate conflicts rather than resolve them, creating a situation where the solution itself becomes the problem (Watzlawick et al., 1967; Cottyn, 2022). Some scholars suggest that professionals should shift their focus away from solely addressing co-parenting issues and instead emphasize parallel parenting with minimal communication or other forms of caring for children, aiming to help individuals in prolonged conflicts mitigate risks and foster resilience in their children (Stokkebekk et al., 2020; Jabbaz-Churba, 2021).

Overall, it is evident that authors theorize about the varying levels of conflict within the divorce process. Our research emphasizes that the stressors in the enduring divorce process go beyond conflicts solely with the former spouse and encompass a broader range of actors and aspects. This significantly prolongs the divorce process and hinders the self-transition of divorcees, keeping them in a state of ongoing uncertainty and preventing them from progressing toward greater self-clarity and stability. To navigate through enduring conflicts and uncertainty, divorcees employ various strategies and rely on resources that are believed to assist them in navigating through these challenging times. Below, we provide an overview of the main research findings related to these strategies and resources.

1.4. Employing Coping Strategies to Support Self through the Conflictual Divorce

The process of divorce initiates a transition, demanding the divorcee to engage in a comprehensive evaluation of the stressor itself, i.e., divorce, while also undertaking a review of the coping resources and strategies essential for adapting to divorce and its associated challenges (Sakraida, 2008). Hattie (2008) posits that internal coping strategies can be perceived as integral constituents of the self, facilitating its strengthening. Thus, in comprehending the functioning of the self and the principles that shape it, particular attention should be directed towards these dynamic internal strategies and choices (Hattie, 2008).

Individuals employ coping strategies to safeguard, preserve, and advance their sense of self (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Hepper et al., 2010). These strategies are harnessed to amplify or shield valued dimensions of the self (Sherman & Hartson, 2011). Coping encompasses the thoughts and behaviors individuals employ to navigate the taxing internal and external demands of situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Broadly, coping is examined from two principal viewpoints: altering the interaction with the environment through coping actions (problem-focused or active coping) or reshaping the interpretation of the environment (emotion-focused or passive coping) (Lazarus, 1993). While coping strategies are often dichotomized into adaptive or maladaptive, such categorization hinges on three factors: long-term developmental effects, subjective experience, and current attributes (Skinner et al., 2003). Essentially, categorizing a specific coping strategy as advantageous or detrimental to an individual rests on their capacity to manage the demands at hand or be overwhelmed by them (Skinner et al., 2003).

Previous research indicates that problem-focused coping is generally more effective than emotion-focused coping in reducing distress. Active coping strategies, such as logical analysis and positive thinking, have been associated with better adaptation in various situations (Rodrıguez-Rey et al., 2019; Sim et al., 2010). Nelson (1989) found that individuals experiencing relatively mild distress benefited more from active coping strategies. However, while problem-focused coping strategies have shown effectiveness in managing distress, there is growing evidence that emotion-focused coping can serve as a potent buffer against distress specifically related to loss.

Passive coping may offer short-term benefits by providing emotional relief, but it is important to strike a balance with active coping strategies in the long term. Dreman et al. (1990) found that in the initial year following divorce, denial as a passive coping mechanism may alleviate distress temporarily but could lead to long-term issues. In another research, divorced mothers reporting higher distress tended to rely more on passive coping strategies, such as disclosing feelings to others, compared to those with lower distress (Holloway & Machida, 1991; Tein et al., 2000). Sakraida (2008) found that women who did not initiate divorce often used acceptance or resignation, categorized as passive coping, which may indicate a lack of control in the situation and is likely associated with continued psychological distress.

While some coping strategies may initially serve to increase self-protection or self-enhancement, they can inadvertently prolong conflict and hinder the process of self-transition. As a result, these strategies possess a dual nature, which, on one hand, may contribute to subjective well-being and self-transition, but on the other hand, may work in the opposite direction. For instance, a study conducted by Mone et al. (2011) revealed that individuals utilized control as a means of self-protection during interactions with their former partners and in organizing their meaning structures. For example, if parents believed that their ex-spouse had a mental illness, this belief provided them with a sense of understanding about the situation and empowered them to exert more control over their circumstances.

Similarly, Gulbrandsen and colleagues (2018) examined the interactions between 38 Norwegian couples with children during their mediation sessions to study the dialogue amid divorce conflicts. They found that the dialogue was characterized by frequent topic changes, interruptions, escalating emotional expressions both verbally and nonverbally, and a lack of mutual validation. Such patterns of interaction amid conflict may be seen as active coping strategies aimed at protecting one's position and perspective, but they can exacerbate the conflict and impede effective communication and resolution.

According to Willen (2015), adopting a perspective where one attributes all problems to others, typically the former partner, may initially help reduce divorce-related pain. This coping strategy can offer short-term relief. However, over time, such negative filtering of events and attributions can lead to deep-seated mistrust and intense animosity (Lebow, 2019), which are considered potential sources of ongoing conflictual divorce (Smyth & Moloney, 2017). While these coping strategies may seem beneficial in supporting oneself during divorce conflicts and achieving personal validation, they can hinder conflict de-escalation and prevent the pursuit of effective solutions, thereby impeding timely and effective self-transition.

Smyth and colleagues (2020) demonstrated that certain communication methods in conflicted post-divorce settings, such as using asynchronous written modes like e-mail, text, or messenger, can assist divorcees in effectively managing their emotions and maintaining a certain level of distance, which could be considered a passive coping strategy. However, it is important to acknowledge that from the perspective of the other partner, this communication approach may also be seen as avoidance and an attempt to exert control over the communication dynamics.

Meaning-making is another valuable coping strategy that offers protection against the deleterious effects of divorce for individuals (Koen et al., 2011). The concept of meaning refers to an individual's ability to perceive order, coherence, and purpose in life and to establish, pursue, and achieve meaningful goals, leading to a sense of fulfillment (Steger, 2012). When individuals experience perceived breakdowns in their mental representations of relationships due to divorce, they are strongly motivated to reconstruct meaningful associations. The motivation for seeking meaning is generally considered adaptive, as it helps individuals find coherence and purpose even in circumstances where it may seem lacking (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Heintzelman et al.,

2013). Vohs and colleagues (2019) even argue that negative experiences serve to boost meaning because they stimulate an understanding of how the event fits into a broader narrative of the self, relationships, and the world.

However, it is important to note that while meaning-making can be beneficial, some research suggests that it may also have a negative side, particularly when applied during conflicts. Once individuals find meaning in the conflict, it becomes challenging for them to let go of the dispute, which can contribute to the perpetuation of the conflict itself (Rovenpor et al., 2019). In such cases, meaning-making may hinder conflict resolution and prolong the emotional distress associated with divorce. In his research, Hopper (2001) highlighted the significance of retrospective meaning-making as a crucial step in the process of divorce. Throughout their divorce, individuals sought to preserve the significance of their marriage while also explaining their role in its failure. Initiators of the divorce tended to view their marriages as false or unfulfilling, while non-initiators often saw their spouses as deceitful or duplicitous. As time passed, partners began to perceive each other in increasingly negative ways. The process of attending to their world of meaning ultimately led to heightened conflict between them (Hopper, 2001).

Overall, the existing literature emphasizes that divorcees employ various coping strategies to navigate their journey of self-transition, aiming to protect and enhance their self-concept. These coping strategies may fall on a continuum of being more active or passive, and their maturity level may vary. Some strategies may be supportive in facilitating timely and effective conflict resolution, while others might hinder this process.

In our research, we aim to shed light on the dual nature of supporting coping strategies, which may not always be evident to the individuals experiencing divorce. These strategies may offer short-term relief and emotional support, but they could also inadvertently prolong conflict or prevent long-term healing and resolution. By doing that, we will underline that the way people engage with their reality influences their ways of self-transition and partially reveals their self. Similar duality can be observed with coping resources as well.

1.5. Complexity and Selectivity of Coping Resources

Coping resources serve as crucial support mechanisms for individuals experiencing divorce, offering material, emotional, and psychological assistance during this highly stressful process. However, it is essential to recognize that this notion is not universally applicable to all resources. Only certain resources are suitable for all individuals and situations. It becomes imperative to identify which elements positively impact divorce-related transitions and which ones do not, as not all types of social relations and interactions yield comparable effects or ensure improved outcomes (Cohen, 2004; Nurullah, 2012). Close relationships, for example, may possess both beneficial and challenging qualities (Uchino, 2009). While they can be helpful for divorcees in coping with the stressors of divorce, they may also become directly involved in escalating

or perpetuating the conflict, leading to further losses and hindering progress. Consequently, understanding the selectivity and complexity of supportive relationships becomes critical in comprehending their impact on the outcomes of divorce-related experiences.

Social resources. Social support is recognized as a crucial relational factor influencing post-divorce adjustment and overall well-being (Amato, 2000; Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Demo & Fine, 2010; Symoens et al., 2014). Individuals who receive support from family and friends following divorce demonstrate better psychological functioning and experience fewer health issues (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Gaffal, 2010). Financial support from own parents, ensured housing, assistance in taking care of children, and coping with loneliness or isolation during or after divorce act as a powerful supporting resource (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006). Recent research has shown that perceived social support is a critical resource for divorced individuals, significantly influencing their psychological well-being post-divorce by mitigating the negative impact of the sense of loss associated with the dissolution of marriage (Kołodziej-Zaleska & Przybyła-Basista, 2016). Another study by Treloar (2019) reinforces these findings, as divorcees emphasized the invaluable role of support from family and friends while reflecting on their experiences with conflictual divorces.

Indeed, while support from parents and friends can be beneficial, it can also have unintended negative consequences. In conflictual divorces, these individuals often become actively involved in the conflicts, taking sides and defining one of the divorcees as the victim. Despite their intentions to be supportive allies, their involvement may not improve the situation and can even exacerbate tensions. Research and social support providers in the Netherlands have observed that sustaining positive changes in communication dynamics between conflictual divorcees is particularly challenging due to the influence of their social networks (Van Lawick & Visser, 2015). The social network surrounding the divorcees may not expect or understand the changes in communication, leading them to react in a manner that reverts the situation to familiar and contentious interactions.

Furthermore, social support from the close ones in not always available. Studies have shown that divorce can lead to a deterioration in the availability of social support (Kaniasty & Norris, 1993). Compared to married individuals, divorced individuals tend to perceive lower levels of social support (Soulsby & Bennett, 2015). After the divorce, many divorcees experience network losses, especially in the immediate aftermath, with half of them unable to compensate for these losses in later years (Terhell et al., 2004).

The impact of divorce extends beyond the immediate aftermath, affecting the parent-child relationship. Parental divorce is associated with less frequent parent-child contact and a poorer quality of the relationship between parents and adult children, even when divorced parents are older and the children have already reached adulthood (Kaufman and Uhlenberg, 1998; Kalmijn, 2007; Shapiro, 2003; Tosi and Gähler, 2016; Ward et al., 2014). The actual and perceived loss of friends and family members adds further stress to the already challenging divorce experience. Instead of serving

as a supportive resource, the absence of social connections can become a source of additional stress and pain for divorcees.

After divorce, a new intimate relationship has been identified as one of the most potent supportive resources (Amato, 2000; Demo & Fine, 2010). It is considered a crucial factor in adjusting to post-divorce stress and facilitating self-redefinition (Langlais, Anderson, & Greene, 2016). However, it is essential to acknowledge that a new intimate relationship may not be suitable for everyone due to various reasons (Anderson & Greene, 2011; Bzostek et al., 2012). Some divorcees may benefit from not dating and focusing on other aspects of their lives (Langlais et al., 2016).

Financial resources. Money plays a dual role in the lives of individuals going through divorce. On one hand, it serves as a means to meet basic human needs such as food and shelter, making it crucial for survival. However, money also plays a significant role in shaping one's sense of self-value and self-esteem. The loss or the threat of losing a stable income due to factors like job loss, housing instability, health issues, or similar circumstances can be a considerable setback and a source of stress for divorcees. Conversely, financial stability and the ability to provide for oneself and one's children are seen as essential aspects of self-efficacy. This boost in financial security contributes to a divorcee's self-esteem and enhances their valued dimensions of self-concept (Bandura, 1977; Maddux & Gosselin, 2003).

Statistical data reveals that the average cost of divorce for American families falls within the range of $15,000 to $20,000. However, in the case of conflictual divorces, the expenses tend to be even higher (Crail, 2022). The financial resources allocated during divorce are utilized for legal fees, childcare arrangements, and the reorganization of assets. In many instances, parents must adjust to supporting two households instead of one, leading to increased financial burdens. As a consequence, the entire family experiences a substantial decline in their standard of living, resulting in feelings of financial insecurity. This financial strain impacts both adults and children, with some research indicating that approximately half of the adjustment problems observed in children during divorce can be linked to this sense of financial insecurity (Lamb et al., 1997).

As mentioned earlier, numerous studies highlight the economic challenges faced by women after divorce. Women often experience a more significant drop in their standard of living compared to men (Fen-Lin & Brown, 2021). Consequently, financial aspects play a crucial role in the adjustment process for women, especially when they are the primary caregivers of the children. In Lithuania, mothers face additional financial pressure when living with children (Maslauskaitė, 2017). This is because the low frequency of fathers seeing their children and paying alimony means that mothers are left with the sole responsibility of childcare and financial support. The presence of children is a significant factor contributing to family poverty. Statistical data reveals that families raising children experience significantly worse material conditions compared to those without children (Jančaitytė, 2011).

Treloar's (2018) research highlighted the contrasting views of divorced mothers and fathers regarding financial responsibility. For mothers, financial responsibility was a significant aspect of care for their children, impacting their autonomy and

well-being. For fathers, financial autonomy was linked to their identity as men, and they sought to find a balance between financial responsibilities and childcare. The financial aspect was particularly important in the legal process following divorce, as it determined a parent's ability to access the services of lawyers and other professionals. This led to the perception that the parent with greater material resources had an unfair advantage in the legal proceedings.

Religious belief systems have been recognized as significant sources of meaning (Wissing, 2014). Positive spiritual coping is known to promote growth and is associated with seeking control or relief by collaborating with God to manage the challenges of divorce. This can involve engaging in prayer, private rituals, or public worship to overcome negative emotions (Krumrei et al., 2009; Simonic & Klobucar, 2016). Divorce-related studies have demonstrated that spiritual coping plays a crucial role in the process of adjusting to divorce (Steiner et al., 2011; Steiner et al., 2015). Research indicates that in Christian faiths, spiritual well-being is integral to an individual's ability to maintain a quality of life that aligns with their personal needs and expectations, making it a potent coping resource (Riklikiene et al., 2019). In Lithuania, where approximately 74.2% of the population identifies as Roman Catholics (osp.stat.gov.lt, 2021), religious resources could play a crucial role in the self-transition process during divorce.

While positive spiritual coping can be a valuable resource for divorcees, negative spiritual coping may have the opposite effect. Negative spiritual coping can involve perceiving divorce as a punishment from God or experiencing tension within one's religious community. This negative perspective can lead to difficulties in adjusting to the divorce and higher levels of depression (Krumrei et al., 2011; Simonic, 2015). Religious ideals and cultural attitudes toward divorce can also exert significant influence on families' views of divorce and acceptance. In some religious communities, there may be considerable pressure for couples to remain married (Afifi et al., 2013). Furthermore, certain religious congregations may stigmatize divorce, leading to heightened feelings of aloneness and silence for individuals who have gone through divorce (Jenkins, 2010). While positive spiritual coping can aid divorcees in their adjustment process, negative spiritual coping may exacerbate challenges and negative emotions. How an individual perceives divorce in light of their religious beliefs can significantly influence the role of religion as a coping resource during this difficult life transition.

Initiator status. Research has demonstrated that the role of being the initiator or noninitiator in a divorce can have significant psychological consequences for both partners. The decision to separate from a spouse leads to different emotional outcomes (Sweeny & Horwitz, 2001). Previous studies have suggested that the person who initiates the end of the marriage may experience less distress and self-doubt (Locker et al., 2010) and have a sense of control over the dissolution process (Sweeny & Horwitz, 2001). The spouse who takes the initiative in the divorce might also exhibit greater emotional stability, which can contribute to better mental health after the separation or divorce (Sweeny & Horwitz, 2001). Researchers have found that, following a divorce or breakup, the initiator tends to recover faster than the noninitiator (Locker et al.,

2010).

There is a general consensus among researchers that the divorce experience is typically more challenging for non-initiators than for initiators. Non-initiators often feel a sense of rejection and lack of control over the change, leading to higher overall stress levels (Strizzi et al., 2021). They may struggle to accept the divorce and undergo the process of redefining their identity (Baum, 2007). One of the factors contributing to the difficulty for non-initiators is their significantly higher attachment levels compared to initiators (Kitson, 1982; Brown et al., 1980). Couples with high attachment disparity are more likely to experience an imbalance in problem-solving during mediation, making it challenging to reach agreements (Bickerdike & Littlefield, 2000). The aggrieved spouses, in this case, the non-initiators, might exhibit feelings of rejection and regret, making it especially challenging for them to come to terms with the divorce and adjust to their new circumstances.

However, the categories of initiator and non-initiator in divorce can be more complex and nuanced than simply who legally files for divorce. Research has shown that the partner perceived as responsible for the dissolution of the marriage may not always align with the one who initiates the legal process of divorce (Diamond & Parker, 2018). In many cases, the decision to initiate divorce is driven by essential reasons such as infidelity, violence, or alcohol problems, and it may not reflect a desire to end the relationship but rather a response to intolerable circumstances. Some might not actively pursue divorce but may provoke their partner to initiate it (Lebow, 2019). Furthermore, although the partner perceived as the offending one may have an emotional advantage in terminating the relationship, they may also experience feelings of guilt and remorse over the decision to divorce (Locker et al., 2010; Baum, 2007). Research has indicated that there may be little difference in the psychological health of individuals based on initiator status or spousal infidelity (Locker et al., 2010; Steiner et al., 2015).

Overall, while the name of these resources might suggest coping features, it is crucial to recognize that not all of them play a supporting role in the divorce process. Some resources might even hinder divorcees from effectively moving towards a higher level of adjustment and self-redefinition. To truly understand the supporting functions of these resources, it is essential to investigate them from the perspective of the divorcees themselves. Their perceptions and experiences with these resources will provide valuable insights into how they can aid or hinder their self-transition during and after divorce. In our work, by investigating the resources from the divorcees' perspective, we will gain a deeper understanding of how these resources impact their self-transition during and after divorce.

1.6. Using the Liminality Concept to Explain Restricted Self-Transition of Individuals Going through the Enduring Conflictual Divorce

In the process of constructing a grounded theory of self-transition within the context of enduring conflictual divorce, a significant category explaining self-transition emerged, referred to as "restricted self-transition." Consequently, in the theoretical

section of this dissertation, we expound on the concept of liminality and its application in understanding self-transition in the realm of social science research, as well as its specific application in this study. We view uncertainty as a phenomenon that can be better comprehended through the lens of liminality and subjunctivity. Liminality refers to the ambiguous and fluid state experienced by individuals, while subjunctivity highlights how uncertainty can catalyze creating space for multiple possibilities. Uncertainty, in and of itself, becomes a meaningful process wherein individuals actively and productively engage with the events they encounter, leading to a multifaceted exploration of potential outcomes.

1.6.1. The Origins of Liminality in Social Science

Liminality, defined as a state of ambiguity or being in-between, has garnered increasing interest among researchers studying processes, phases, and iterations of change and transition. The concept of liminality was initially introduced by van Gennep (1909/2019) and later expanded upon by Turner (1969/2017) to describe significant life events such as marriage or divorce, which serve as rites of passage. During these rites of passage, individuals move from one social state to another, acquiring a new social identity, status, and rank.

Rites of passage generally consist of three components. The first is the "separation phase," during which individuals detach themselves from the routines of everyday life, often accompanied by symbols of detachment and anxiety (Turner, 1969/2017). The following "liminal phase" corresponds to a transitional period characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty for the individual experiencing the transition. Liminality is imposed on the individual or collective in conjunction with specific evolutionary and natural cues. Lastly, the "incorporation phase" marks the integration of the individual into a new and relatively stable state with different obligations and norms compared to the initial state. Liminality represents a temporary midpoint between the starting and ending points of a transition, culminating when the individual is reincorporated into the social structure (La Shure, 2005). Researchers find the concept of liminality valuable in understanding the transformative nature of various life events, including divorce, and its application offers insights into the complexities of navigating through transitional periods.

In the state of liminality, individuals find themselves on the threshold between the old and the new, existing in an interim state that positions them in a state of ambiguity. They do not fully belong to either the old or the new categories, and as a result, they do not fully identify with the associated identities, social norms, and practices. Turner (1969/2017) refers to these individuals as "liminal people" or entities, as they are "neither here nor there," existing in a betwixt and between state, beyond the positions assigned by law, custom, convention, and ceremony.

The liminal person experiences a twofold character of structural invisibility, being "no longer classified" in the old state and "not yet classified" in the new state (Hong, 2012). Turner (1969/2017) describes the liminal phase as a form of "social limbo,"

sharing few attributes with either the preceding or subsequent state but being central to developing a more nuanced understanding of both states – where the individual comes from and where they are heading. The liminal phase provides a crucial space for self-reflection, transformation, and growth, allowing individuals to navigate the complexities of change and transition with greater depth and understanding.

According to Noble and Walker (1997), liminality brings about a significant disruption in one's internal sense of self and their place within a social system. In this context, liminality can be understood as a process of reconstructing identity, wherein the sense of self undergoes substantial disruption, leading to the emergence of a new, meaningful identity for both the individual and their community (Beech, 2010). Nuru (2023) discusses the concept of relational liminality, highlighting that extended periods of relational transitions lead to prolonged states of uncertainty for the partners involved. During these lingering transitions, individuals experience significant disruptions to their identities, finding themselves in a state where they are no longer the selves they once were and not yet the selves they aim to become. Within this ambiguous phase, individuals grapple with comprehending and (re)constructing their emerging liminal selves within a shifting relational context while moving away from their previously known selves.

Van Gennep (1909/2019) briefly mentioned divorce as a counterpart to marriage in his work on Rites of Passage, stating that the ceremonies of divorce and widowhood among various cultures appear to be of the simplest kind. However, he acknowledged that further research and understanding were needed to explore the specifics of this unique experience:

> It is my impression, however, that if divorce seems so simple in ethnographic literature it is because observers either have not been interested in them or have not understood the meaning of certain acts, and, in particular, because they have seen separation and divorce only in their legal and economic aspects. When an individual and collective bond has been established with such care and so many complications, one would not expect that it could be broken in one day by a single gesture (van Gennep, 1909/2019).

While divorce is recognized as a liminal experience, studies are scarce from this perspective. Some studies have utilized liminality as a framework to comprehend and describe the post-divorce parenting experiences and parental identity shifts (Bergman, 2018; Schaefer, 2021) or identity shifts during relational transitions, including romantic breakups (Hartman, 2021; Nuru, 2023), the use of the liminality theory in the divorce research is only emerging. This highlights the need for further exploration of the liminality aspect in the context of divorce to gain a more comprehensive understanding of its impact on individuals and their transition process.

1.6.2. Strained in Liminality as the Main Position for Individuals in Enduring Divorce

Despite the extensive research on liminal spaces, liminal times as contexts for transformation, and liminality as a dialogue in identity construction, there is a noticeable

gap in the utilization of liminal conceptualizations for understanding conflict transitions (Winkler & Christensen, 2022). Turner's (1969/2017) proposition that certain environments can lead to the "institutionalization of liminality" has spurred exploration, suggesting that liminality can gradually evolve into a permanent state (Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015; Szakolczai, 2000; Thomassen, 2012; Gordon et al., 2020). Conceptions of liminality have much to offer in environments where boundaries become blurred, and there exists the potential for these environments to "reconfigure" the concept from a temporary state to a permanent one, akin to Agamben's notion of the "zone of indistinction" (1998) (in Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015). This highlights the relevance of liminality in contexts where transitional phases persist, and boundaries between states remain ambiguous or blurred, offering a unique perspective on understanding enduring and transformative experiences.

Recognizing that liminal spaces can become more permanent constructions, characterized by a continuous emphasis on transformation and transgression (Thomassen, 2012), offers a different perspective on how these spaces operate within the complexities of peacebuilding (Murphy & McDowell, 2018). In situations where the reintegration process fails to occur, and individuals are not fully recognized as part of the social order with a new role, liminality can become a permanent state. As Arpad Szakolczai suggests, liminality becomes a lasting condition when any of the phases in the liminal sequence becomes frozen, akin to a film stopping at a specific frame (Szakolczai, 2000). This notion of permanent liminality sheds light on the significance of transitions that do not fully resolve, resulting in individuals existing in a prolonged state of ambiguity and in-betweenness. As the uncertainty and powerlessness of being in a prolonged liminal state can have far-reaching implications not only for the individual but wider society (Schaefer, 2021), understanding and addressing the implications of such permanent liminality become critical in the context of social transformations.

D'Souza (2016) introduced the concept of undesired (perpetual) liminality, which highlights the experiences of individuals who have little control over events that profoundly affect them. In her research on women in Kashmir who were uncertain about the fate of their missing husbands and remained in a state of limbo, referred to as "half-widows," she observed that their roles during this prolonged period became confusing and unclear, as they struggled to respond to the ongoing uncertainty. The lingering hope for their missing husbands' return and the unending waiting at the threshold distinguished these half-widows from other widows, and they found themselves trapped in an undesired in-between space, unable to transition permanently from their current state. This concept sheds light on the unique and challenging experiences of those who remain in a perpetual state of liminality, where transformative change is elusive and their lives are marked by ongoing uncertainty and ambiguity.

Recently, Greco and Stenner (2017) and Kofoed and Stenner (2017) have introduced the concept of the "liminal hotspot," describing situations where the liminal transition remains unfinished or significantly prolonged. In a liminal hotspot, the emotional state associated with the pre-transition condition persists and remains salient,

unlike traditional liminal rites where such affectivity is expected to fade away. This concept presents a "both/and" and "neither/nor" formulation. Divorcing individuals are both married and divorced, yet neither fully married nor divorced, encapsulating the coexistence of positive and negative qualities in a state of "confusion of all the customary categories." However, this position is not socially tolerated by the surrounding society and is perceived as needing resolution and closure. The liminal hotspot represents a challenging and complex experience, where individuals find themselves caught in an ambiguous space that defies conventional categorization and societal expectations, highlighting the need for understanding and support in navigating such extended liminal phases.

Little et al. (1998) distinguished between two types of liminality: acute and sustained liminality. Acute liminality refers to the period before entering a phase of sustained liminality, during which individuals are primarily focused on regaining control and constructing a new identity that brings meaning to their experiences. On the other hand, sustained liminality is an indefinite phase that typically lacks a perceived end. During this phase, recurrent and unpredictable events and activities contribute to fluctuating feelings of uncertainty, making it a challenging and ongoing process for individuals to navigate.

Turner (1969/2017) highlighted that the process of change is inherently characterized by conflictual transitions. Consequently, it becomes essential to examine the roles of conflict and conflict resolution in shaping how social reality is violated, developed, crafted, transformed, and ultimately reconstituted through such conflicts (Schechner, 2002). The change process unfolds through recurring and discontinuous sequences of conflict and confrontation (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Thus, change can be understood as a dynamic struggle between colliding forces, wherein multiple entities engage in conflict and confrontation to revise and shape reality. Change, therefore, emerges from and advances through the existence of conflicting goals, competing interests, and opposing entities.

According to Turner (1969/2017), conflict plays a dual role in the process of dynamic change. Firstly, it acts as a trigger, setting the change in motion. Secondly, it remains at the center of the change process as it is actively worked out in social action. The course of this transition is shaped by how the involved actors enact opposing viewpoints and interpretive frameworks, envisioning alternative realities and establishing a new social order as the basis for future social life (McFarland, 2004; Kamsteeg, 2011).

Building on the above perspective, it is argued that the existence of conflict and the diverse attempts to address it are essential for initiating change. Without conflict, change would unlikely occur in the first place. However, it is noteworthy that in certain cases, such as complex divorce-related conflicts, the multifaceted nature of the conflicts can become driving forces that sustain the ongoing dispute. Consequently, individuals may find themselves trapped (frozen) in a liminal space, unable to progress toward greater clarity and stability. The literature suggests that this long-lasting sense of liminality can lead to negative emotional consequences as a result of ongoing feelings

of uncertainty and in-betweenness (Swan et al., 2016; Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003).

1.6.3. Subjunctivity as a Way to Engage Liminality

Certain literature suggests that individuals' engagement with liminality can be described as "subjunctivity." Turner's (1969/2017) anthropological concept of being in a liminal state, on a threshold, or in-between, can be interpreted as existing in a subjunctive mode. This mode is characterized by a focus on potential, the "what if," and the "maybe," which allows for the consideration of various possibilities. This relates to the relationship between the current divorce process and the envisioned future.

In the context of constant change during divorce, individuals face challenges in imagining and planning for their future. The state of being in a permanently temporary situation disrupts the ability to envision a clear future trajectory, leading to uncertainties about life planning (Turner, 1969/2017). Similarly, in enduring divorce situations, long-term planning becomes limited, and individuals tend to focus on day-by-day planning in the present, leaving little room for looking ahead into the future.

Susan Whyte has introduced the term "subjunctive mode" (Whyte, 2005) to describe how individuals respond to an unknown future by actively engaging with their uncertainties. This concept was explored in Whyte's previous works (1997, 2002, 2005) where she examined how people in Eastern Uganda cope with misfortune and health problems. The subjunctive mode refers to a mood or attitude characterized by doubt, hope, will, and potential. It is "the mood of doubt, hope, will, and potential . . . it is not a quality of life or particular persons, but *a mood of action*: a doubting, hoping provisional, cautious and testing disposition to action" (Whyte, 2005). Therefore, doubting, hoping, and testing ways of being are seen as active and not passive ways of engaging with ongoing liminality.

Henrik Vigh's concept of "social navigation" (Vigh, 2006, 2009) explores how individuals navigate through a constantly changing and uncertain landscape to relate to their future. In situations where possibilities for a meaningful life are limited, the ability to envision a meaningful future becomes crucial for individuals to remain socially alive (Turner, 1969/2017). In the context of enduring divorce, we can draw parallels with the aforementioned concepts. Divorcees often find themselves in a transient phase, where their current life is temporary, and they perceive their present existence as a preparation for a potentially fuller life beyond the divorce. In this context, the act of making meaning for the future becomes of utmost importance for divorcees.

Beech (2010) proposes that liminality in the context of identity work can manifest through three key practices: experimentation, reflection, and recognition. In the process of experimentation, individuals in a liminal state construct and project different aspects of their identity. Reflection involves contemplating the perspectives of others and questioning one's own sense of self. Recognition occurs when individuals react to or absorb identities projected onto them by external sources. The liminal process may consist of a single practice or, more commonly, a combination of these practices, woven together.

Reflection is regarded as a central practice in liminality, incorporating both externalized and internalized dialogue. It entails self-questioning and self-change, responding to external influences and perceptions. The process of self-questioning is primarily an internal dialogue, while self-change involves navigating how to project oneself in society. Turner (1967/2017) views reflection as an essential aspect of the anthropological notion of liminality. He describes liminality as a realm of "primitive hypothesis," where individuals have the freedom to experiment and play with different aspects of existence. There is a blending and juxtaposition of various categories of events, experiences, and knowledge to learn and grow.

Cunliffe (2002) also emphasizes the importance of active self-questioning in the dialogic construction of the self. It involves critically examining how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us, contributing to the ongoing process of identity formation. The dialogue with oneself and others allows for a deeper understanding and negotiation of one's identity during liminal phases. In summary, the practices of experimentation, reflection, and recognition are key elements of liminality in identity work. Reflection, in particular, is emphasized as a vital practice, involving both internal and external dialogues that shape the construction of the self during liminal experiences.

1.6.4. Liminal Transition as Opportunity and Threat

The condition of existing in an in-between state caught between established realities, presents both opportunities and challenges for change. Turner (1969/2017) contends that this liminal space fosters reflexivity, as it introduces an ambiguous and creative time that encourages experimentation. Freed from the confines of past social structures, individuals have a legitimate chance to reflect on their previous behavior within the context of the old order. In this transitional phase, people bridge past experiences with new patterns of interaction, paving the way for the development of future actions and behaviors (Bartunek et al., 2011; Howard-Greenville et al., 2011).

Indeed, while liminality can offer opportunities for reflexivity, creativity, and potential (Simpson et al., 2010; Sturdy et al., 2006), it can also give rise to feelings of ambiguity and precariousness, leading to socially challenging situations (Kamsteeg, 2011). Individuals going through change processes find themselves on a journey, transitioning from one social reality to another (Schechner, 2002). However, the endpoint of this journey is often uncertain and unpredictable (Sims, 2009). Disengaging from the established reality means entering a transitional phase without a predetermined understanding of how and when it will conclude, or what the new reality will ultimately look like. This lack of clarity can result in a period marked by uncertainty, ambiguity, and contention (McFarland, 2004), which is also associated with experiences of disorder and loss (Tempest & Starkey, 2004; Thomassen, 2014).

Overall, this chapter underscores that enduring conflictual divorce is an intricate and multifarious process, involving a prolonged transition with diverse potential

internal outcomes for the individuals undergoing it. While the literature strives to shed light on this process, it is evident that the scientific discourse does not offer conclusive answers. Particularly notable is the heightened state of self-uncertainty, which can be viewed through the lens of the concept of liminality. Many inquiries remain unanswered, including whether and how individuals progress towards self-redefinition and higher coherence amidst ongoing disputes, the salient aspects that manifest amidst this journey, and the elements that either support or impede divorcees throughout this process. Through our research, we intend to closely examine the intricacies of enduring conflictual divorce. By delving into the insights gathered from the interviews with divorcing individuals, we aim to provide clarity and insights into the questions outlined above.

2. METHODOLOGY

To construct a grounded theory explaining the process of change and integration of the "self" of divorcees in coping with their enduring conflictual divorce, we have chosen a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach based on Kathy Charmaz (2006, 2008, 2012), and data collection based on qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) guidelines (Saldana, 2003; Neale, 2021).

GT (Grounded Theory) was originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a new methodology defined as "the discovery of theory from data" and was a reaction at the same time to the dominant hypothetico-deductive use of "grand theories" in the social research of the 1960s. In contrast to verifying theories only through quantitative methods, they offered a set of qualitative methods for generating inductive theories from data. After their collaboration, the two originators took different career paths, and by the early 1990s, two distinct versions of GT had emerged – Glaserian GT (Glaser, 1978; 1992; 1998) and Straussian GT, which Strauss developed in collaboration with Corbin (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). A third version called constructivist GT was developed by Charmaz (2000; 2006; 2008; 2009). Other examples of later developments in GT methodology are Dey's (1999) version with an elaborated view on categorization, process, causality, and structure/agency in GT, and Clarke's (2005) postmodern version called situational analysis.

Longitudinal qualitative research (LQR) is an emerging methodology in health behavior research fields focused on generating evidence to support practices, programs, and policies promoting the well-being of individuals (Glanz et al., 2008; Polit & Beck, 2017). Because human experiences rarely consist of concrete, time-limited events but evolve and change over time, the use of LQR offers an innovative option to capture this natural history. The advantage of LQR over cross-sectional designs is that it provides a unique understanding of experiences across time, including turning points, critical time points in transitions, as well as the facilitators or challenges that support or undermine behaviors aligned with life course transitions (SmithBattle et al., 2018; Tuthill et al., 2020). Although our research does not claim to adhere to all the requirements of LQR, it shares many philosophical assumptions and methodological underpinnings.

In the chapters below, we present formal and personal reasons for choosing the aforementioned approaches to our study design. We also elaborate on the process of constructing a grounded theory, criteria for trustworthiness, and ethical principles.

2.1. Formal Reasons for Choosing the CGT

Philosophical position of the researcher. According to Crotty (2011), there is a strong connection between the researcher's beliefs about reality and the methodological choices made to advance knowledge about that reality. Therefore, researchers must have a clear understanding of their own philosophical beliefs and the distinctions between various grounded theory perspectives to select the most appropriate approach for their study.

In this study, we have adopted a relativist-interpretivist ***ontological perspective***, emphasizing that reality is largely dependent on human interpretation of knowledge. According to this perspective, there are multiple constructed realities rather than a singular, pre-social reality, and we can never go beyond these constructions (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999). Rather than being universal, what is considered real and true varies across time and context, highlighting the influence of where and how knowledge is generated. Since the world is experienced, interpreted, constructed, and reconstructed through everyday interactions and evolving social activities, these are the aspects of social reality that require investigation and understanding.

Ontological assumptions give rise to ***epistemological assumptions***, making epistemology another key element in the research paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). Epistemology concerns the relationship between the knower and the known object. Given our assumption that social reality is not independent of the mind and can take multiple forms, we recognize the importance of considering our values and perspectives when designing the research, collecting data, and conducting analysis. As a result, we have adopted a constructivist perspective in this research, wherein "reality" is shaped and influenced by interpretation and human interaction surrounding a given phenomenon. Additionally, we have embraced contextualism, which asserts that knowledge emerges from specific contexts and reflects the researcher's position. Therefore, it is local, situated, and always provisional (Madill et al., 2000; Tebes, 2005).

Taking a subjective approach to reality, we aimed to understand the world through the perspective of divorcees and how they perceive the altered circumstances of their lives during the divorce process. We recognized that divorce, as a traumatic life event, triggers multiple re-evaluations and the creation of new meanings. However, this transformative process does not occur in isolation; it unfolds through interactions with various individuals, such as friends, family members, professionals, and even the legal system, all within the cultural and traditional context of the country. Consequently, we embarked on exploring the lived experiences of individuals undergoing the process of handling changed circumstances due to divorce. We understood that these experiences are shaped through interactions, diverse contexts, and complex situations.

Our goal was to comprehend how each divorcee interprets and makes sense of their personal journey, as it is unique and authentic to each individual involved.

Our adherence to the aforementioned beliefs led us to embrace Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) as proposed by Charmaz (2003). CGT operates under the assumption that multiple social realities exist, acknowledging the co-creation of knowledge between the researcher and the participants, and aiming to interpret the meanings attributed by the subjects. According to CGT, it is not possible to generate a single "true" interpretation of the data (Charmaz, 2006). CGT research offers an interpretation of what is happening, rather than unveiling an absolute reality, advocating for the use of abductive reasoning (Hall et al., 2013; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014).

Furthermore, we found it important to consider the ***temporal and processual aspects*** of our philosophical understanding of the world and the phenomenon under study. We hold the belief that people's experiences and meaning-making processes can only be comprehended within the horizons and contexts of history, culture, and geography, emphasizing the crucial role of time (McIntosh & Wright, 2019). It is not merely the passage of chronological time that creates meaning, but rather how individuals experience and perceive that passage of time (Saldaña, 2003; Di Lernia et al., 2018). Consequently, we recognize that the journey of divorcees through their enduring divorce inherently involves the dimensions of time and change. We view divorce as a fluid and complex process, constantly evolving rather than a static state. Given these considerations, we have chosen a Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) approach. This approach acknowledges the necessity of exploring the intricate, unpredictable, and potentially contradictory ways in which change unfolds. It also emphasizes the need to conceptualize the pathways through which these complexities in experiences and behaviors exist across time (Pettigrew, 1990).

The object of inquiry. Initially, our focus of the study was on exploring the experiences of individuals navigating through the challenges of high-conflict divorce, highlighting the processual nature of this phenomenon. We were interested in how people transit through their conflictual divorce and how they change throughout this journey. Classical Grounded Theory (GT) from an objectivist perspective aims to answer the question of "why" (Glaser, 2004), Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) proponents are interested in understanding and addressing the questions of ***"what" and "how"*** individuals behave in specific situations and how they construct meanings (Charmaz, 2008). The focus is on the processes (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Consequently, choosing CGT seemed the best fit for our object of inquiry.

LQR also places emphasis on the exploration of "how" questions. By adopting a processual focus, LQR provides insights into the dynamics of the social world, the interactions between individuals, collective practices, values, and decision-making, as well as the sustainability or transformation of these elements over time (Van de Ven, 2007). "How" questions inherently capture the processual nature of phenomena and precede and encapsulate "why" questions, which typically seek singular and relatively straightforward responses (Bidart et al., 2013). Processes themselves become significant sources of meaning, as they inherently involve considerations of time and

causality.

Furthermore, it is crucial to emphasize that, in CGT, the construction of meanings includes the interaction between research participants and the researcher. As a result, the theory is constructed by the researcher through their interactions with the field and its participants (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). When employing CGT, the researcher is specifically instructed to analyze the interaction between themselves and the participant (Charmaz et al., 2018; Mills et al., 2006). Consequently, the researcher's position, perspectives, and interactions become integral parts of the research reality. The possibility of bringing our values, histories, politics, and perspectives into the research had a tight fit with our beliefs and ontological assumptions. Seeing the self as co-living the process with research participants was an important aspect of choosing CGT.

Research questions. The choice of CGT and the longitudinal aspects of the research methodology were influenced by the research questions. However, it is important to note that this process was not strictly linear. As Carter and Jefferson (2007) suggest, objectives, research questions, and design shape the choice of methodology, while methodology also shapes the objectives, research questions, and design. Charmaz (2014) argues that the research question and study design evolve throughout the study, necessitating an open-ended approach. Consequently, our research questions also evolved as the study progressed. However, the processual nature of the questions guided us towards selecting CGT. In constructivist GT (Charmaz, 2008), particular attention is given to different experiences related to the action being studied. The approach acknowledges the multifaceted nature of reality and recognizes the complexity of actions and attitudes.

Every phenomenon under study exists within various types and layers of context. Each context frames the object of inquiry in different ways, necessitating analysts to determine which context(s) are relevant to the data and how to incorporate that context in data interpretation (Eakin & Gladstone, 2020). In this research, multiple contexts played a significant role in the experiences of divorcees. Therefore, the researcher's attention was consistently focused on this aspect to provide a comprehensive understanding of the enduring conflictual divorce phenomenon. The CGT approach is particularly adept at addressing the social aspects of social issues and how they are contextualized, reflecting the ongoing engagement with contextual analysis.

Initially, our research questions were formulated to explore the specific field of "high conflictual divorce." At that point, no theories or assumptions were developed, and we aimed to gain an understanding of the contextual factors surrounding this phenomenon. Our objective was to uncover and investigate how individuals navigate the changes associated with divorce in their daily lives, including the various dimensions of this experience such as its content, process, and social environment. However, as the study progressed and core categories began to emerge, the research questions evolved. We shifted our focus towards understanding the process of self-transition and the layered nature of multiple experiences that impede it. Additionally, we remained mindful of the temporal and transformative aspects of this process, seeking to uncover their significance within the unfolding phenomenon.

Research aim. The ultimate outcome of all iterations of GT is the development of an original and independent theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 2004; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; 2008; Bluff, 2005; Charmaz, 2012). The purpose of the GT research strategy is not merely to describe empirical findings, but to conceptualize them, resulting in the creation of an abstract analytical theory that categorizes or explains processes or phenomena. This theory is derived from empirical data gathered on the experiences and perspectives of the research participants. Charmaz (2006) contends that theory is constructed rather than derived directly from empirical data. The focus lies on an interpretive portrayal of the phenomenon under study rather than an exact representation of it. Advocates of constructivist GT oppose other versions of GT by highlighting that the categories that arise in classical GT are abstract, objective, and general. CGT maintains the original emphasis on theory emergence, which is influenced by the research conditions and the researcher's approach and interaction. Classical GT expects the researcher to disregard any potential influences, whereas proponents of CGT argue that embracing these influences is the objective (Charmaz, 2008; 2012). The author of this dissertation, adopting a constructivist GT perspective, views the research outcome not as an objective representation of the studied phenomenon, but rather as the researcher's interpretation of the changes experienced within the divorce process. Our approach to this phenomenon is contextual, influenced by factors such as time, location, culture, and social context.

What is also significant is that the CGT methodology not only aims to develop a theory but also to explain the behaviors exhibited by individuals within the social context. This makes it particularly valuable for informing support practices and research endeavors that seek to create and assess interventions within social contexts (Reay et al., 2016; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007; Wuest, 2012). The theory that emerges from a CGT investigation is firmly rooted in the specific context and is a compilation of the participants' narratives along with the researcher's interpretation of the meanings conveyed (Keane, 2015; Mills et al., 2006a). The research report presenting the grounded theory is crafted in a way that allows the voices of both the participants and the researcher to be heard (Mills et al., 2006; Burns et al., 2020).

2.2. Subjective Criteria of the CGT Choice

According to Burr (2015), achieving objectivity in research is not feasible because our perspectives are shaped by our own experiences and societal norms, leading to embedded assumptions. The research relationship becomes more democratic when the researcher emphasizes co-production and avoids exerting power over the participants (Burr, 2015). Charmaz (2014) also highlights the importance of interaction in the research process, considering the positions of both researchers and participants. In our study, this approach allowed us to acknowledge and examine our own preconceived notions and assumptions that could influence the analysis. The researcher's values play a role in shaping their understanding of meanings (Charmaz et al., 2018; Keane, 2015). Our subjectivity as researchers can be a valuable tool, but it requires careful

consideration, as it can impact the trustworthiness of research results. Unintentionally, our preconceptions influenced by factors such as class, gender, age, profession, culture, and historical era (Charmaz, 2014) may emerge or be challenged. One crucial responsibility of the researcher is to recognize our assumptions and beliefs, make them explicit, and utilize GT techniques to go beyond them during the analysis (Macdonald & Schreiber, 2001). By acknowledging our prior knowledge and theoretical understanding, we also acknowledge the need for ongoing reflexivity instead of denying preconceptions, theoretical influences, and privileges (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006).

Mruck and Breuer (2003), Berger (2013), and Palaganas et al. (2017) distinguished the following main parameters of the researcher's subjectivity, which are important for the researcher to reflect: the researcher's socio-cultural background, professional training (practical and academic) and the researcher's principles (based on personal experience, beliefs, values, character, philosophy of life). Based on these aspects, we present our reflections.

The researcher's socio-cultural and professional background. Our decision to use CGT was not a straightforward or linear process. The choice was influenced by a subjective path that began during the researcher's psychotherapy studies, which emphasized the subjectivity of individuals' worlds and the constructivist-interpretivist approach to knowledge creation. Through these studies and ongoing work as a therapist and psychologist in counseling, she gained a deep understanding of how statistical data and prevailing conceptions often fail to capture the authentic lives of individuals and can even be harmful. Working with people experiencing relationship breakups, divorce, and other traumatic experiences solidified her belief that personal stories and individualized experiences provide valuable insights into understanding both the person and the world. Therefore, a qualitative study approach seemed like the logical choice for the research. Exploring the little-researched phenomenon of conflictual divorces further motivated her to gain a deeper understanding of various types of losses and transformations that people undergo in life.

Furthermore, the researcher's inclination to explore uncharted and less studied areas using innovative methodological approaches led her to delve into grounded theory (GT) methodology. What attracted her to GT was its openness to incorporating the researcher's experiences and acknowledging that reality is co-created through interactions among individuals. Additionally, the fact that GT is considered a more challenging yet widely utilized approach in current research was intriguing. To enhance her understanding of GT, the researcher immersed herself in literature on the subject and actively participated in the summer school held in Antwerp in 2019. This invaluable experience provided me with in-depth knowledge about the methodology and highlighted its numerous positive aspects in studying social phenomena. Collaborating and engaging with fellow Ph.D. students and researchers during the summer school further enriched the researcher's grasp of GT's fundamental approaches and solidified my decision to employ it for theory development in the study. Motivated by an ongoing openness to new ideas and connections, she took the proactive step of seeking out a study supervisor who is a renowned professor specializing in GT methodological

approaches in Belgium. With his expertise and extensive contributions through books and articles on divorce, the supervisor's passion and enthusiasm for GT cemented her resolve to embark on this journey with a relatively new approach for me. By embracing GT methodology, the researcher was driven by a desire to explore uncharted territory, challenge conventional thinking, and uncover fresh insights into the experiences of individuals enduring conflictual divorces. She believed that GT's emphasis on co-creating knowledge and the integration of personal perspectives would allow me to capture the nuances and complexities of this phenomenon in a more holistic and meaningful manner. As the researcher embarked on this research journey, she was excited to apply GT methodology to shed light on the understudied aspects of enduring conflictual divorces, while also expanding the boundaries of her understanding and contributing to the wider body of knowledge in the field.

The researcher's personal principles. The principle of *openness* guided our approach to studying the phenomenon of enduring conflictual divorce (HCD). In this regard, it is worth noting that the researcher had minimal prior involvement or familiarity with conflictual divorce, as well as limited experience in qualitative research methods. Consequently, knowledge acquisition and skill development occurred throughout the research process. Before conducting interviews, an extensive literature review on the topic was undertaken. The scientific literature served as a valuable resource during the analysis and reporting of the study results for the first article, before the follow-up interviews. Thornberg (2013) suggests that an ongoing literature review should be embraced rather than feared or delayed. It can enhance the researcher's sensitivity to the data, enrich the development of concepts and ideas, and offer fresh insights into relevant questions and issues. Instead of disregarding the literature, it should inform the study's understanding of the phenomenon and its place within the current scientific landscape (Morse, 2001). However, it is important to note that at certain stages of the research, we deliberately set the literature aside to promote enhanced objectivity and minimize the influence of theoretical preconceptions on the development of emerging codes and their associated concepts.

Another aspect of our open approach involved the researcher's geographical location outside of Lithuania throughout the entire study period. Some research participants noted that this perspective from a distance, coupled with the researcher's lack of involvement in any institutional structures related to divorce, provided a sense of neutrality and a more open perspective on the divorce process and its contextual dynamics within the country. By maintaining an open mindset, continuously engaging with the relevant literature, and periodically stepping back to ensure objectivity, our research aimed to explore enduring conflictual divorce with a fresh and unbiased perspective. The researcher's limited prior involvement and the external vantage point contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, its complexities, and its sociocultural context.

Empathy and compassion are vital aspects of the work of mental health specialists. They facilitate building genuine and meaningful connections with individuals, fostering a deeper understanding of their experiences. In line with this, we chose the

LQR (Listening, Questioning, and Reflecting) approach to establish more profound and authentic relationships with our research participants, aiming to cultivate empathy and potentially gain deeper insights. However, it is important to acknowledge the complexities surrounding empathy (Maroda, 2022), which were extensively considered throughout the research process.

One issue relates to the risk of becoming excessively absorbed in the feelings of the research participants and fully endorsing those emotions. Additionally, empathy can lead to the researcher becoming overly involved in the interviewee's emotional pain, potentially causing personal distress, particularly when the research topic revolves around sensitive subjects like trauma (Knox, 2013; Kumar and Cavallaro, 2018). This challenge was particularly evident during the interviews but also arose during the data analysis process. In the initial stages of the research, we critically examined whether the interview questions were effectively exploring the phenomenon or crossing the boundary into counseling territory. To maintain research boundaries, the researcher consistently reminded herself of the research question and adopted a perspective akin to that of a journalist or investigator, aiming to uncover the breadth and depth of the phenomenon, rather than assuming the role of a psychologist providing therapeutic support to clients. Consequently, the researcher consciously refrained from imposing her counseling experience and knowledge onto the research process, ensuring a clear distinction.

Moreover, it is essential to acknowledge that at times, the emotions and negative experiences shared by the divorcees did resonate personally with the researcher. However, through remaining vigilant and aware of this possibility, continuously engaging with relevant literature on interviewing techniques, and participating in ongoing supervision meetings, the researcher gradually honed her skills in conducting intensive interviews and analyzing the data. This iterative process fostered growth, enabling the researcher to strike a balance between empathy and objectivity while ensuring the research goals remained at the forefront.

By navigating the challenges associated with empathy, consistently reflecting on the researcher's role, and incorporating appropriate techniques and support mechanisms, we aimed to conduct the research in a manner that respected the boundaries of scientific inquiry while maintaining a compassionate and empathetic stance towards the participants.

The principle of *equality* is of utmost importance to the researcher, stemming from the belief that men and women are inherently equal and should be treated as such. This principle was thoroughly examined throughout the research, with a particular focus on gender perspectives. It is crucial to note that the researcher, being a woman, conducted interviews with both men and women on a topic heavily influenced by gender dynamics within society. To maintain impartiality, it was essential to minimize any preconceptions regarding the roles of men and women in divorce throughout the research process. Despite the researcher's initial belief in not having a direct personal connection to the phenomenon of conflictual divorce, it was important to acknowledge the prevailing cultural assumptions surrounding divorce, especially within the

researcher's upbringing and the broader Lithuanian society's traditional view of marriage and marital life (Kanopienė, Mikulionienė, & Česnuitytė, 2015). Unexpectedly, some minor preconceptions emerged during the early interviews with male participants.

The researcher realized that initial conversations with female participants had reinforced a belief that divorce conflicts were often due to fathers' neglect of their children. This perspective, emphasizing the vulnerability of mothers and the negligence of fathers, is frequently portrayed in media, public discussions, and even scientific literature. However, as the research progressed, a different reality emerged, highlighting the roles played by both mothers and fathers in the perpetuation of conflicts. It became apparent that fathers faced challenges in maintaining contact with their children, but so did some mothers who fought arduously for their parental rights, going months or even years without seeing their children.

Throughout the research process, the researcher observed a shift in her perception of divorcees and divorce, gradually moving away from a gendered view. She began to recognize more similarities between the struggles faced by both men and women, realizing that their interests and needs were not as divergent as previously thought. This shift in perspective allowed for a greater acceptance of the diverse realities and paths of each individual involved in divorce. It became evident that every person has their truth, and no truth should be deemed less reliable or valid than another.

2.3. The CGT Creation Process

Gaining contextual sensitivity through the pilot study. The pilot study (PT) was an essential initial step in developing our Grounded Theory (GT) and proved to be valuable in understanding the studied phenomenon and gaining new skills in qualitative research. While some scholars argue that PTs may not be necessary for qualitative research (Harding, 2013; Ismail et al., 2018), others argue about their importance, particularly for novice researchers serving multiple purposes (Harding, 2013; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), which include developing and refining research instruments, assessing the feasibility of recruitment protocols, designing, assessing, and refining research protocols, collecting preliminary data, and increasing training and confidence in conducting qualitative research (Williams-McBean, 2019; Kezar, 2000). According to Janghorban et al. (2014), a PT in GT provides contextual sensitivity, which is crucial for the inductive analytical process and theory development. It expands the range of theoretical concepts by offering insights on how to conceptualize the research, focus on important data, and sample theoretically (Nunes et al., 2010).

We have closely contemplated the necessity and feasibility of the PT for our research. After consulting with supervisors, conducting a literature review, and considering the researcher's limited experience in qualitative studies, we decided to pursue it. Therefore, we view our PT as an inseparable part of grounded theory creation. During this stage, we had the following aims:

1. To focus on and narrow down the proposed research phenomenon, gaining a clearer conceptualization of it (Sampson, 2004; Williams, 2019) to inform the most effective sampling strategies.
2. To identify specific methodological and epistemological issues, allowing researchers to affirm, sharpen, or revise their approach to pursuing and achieving stated goals. As this was the first qualitative study of the researcher, gaining methodological skills and knowledge was an important part of this phase.
3. To ensure the intelligibility of the interview guide, making the questions more relevant and determining whether they genuinely elicit the participants' varied perceptions and experiences (Chenail, 2011) and whether they were acceptable to the research participants (Donovan et al., 2018). As the researcher had little experience with the focus group, we found it important to tailor-make and test the questions beforehand.
4. To gain personal experience and reflectivity in interviewing individuals on a sensitive topic, such as risk management for individuals participating in the study.

We have recruited nine participants to take part in this phase. Based on the collected data and its analysis we gained more information on the content of enduring divorces as well as skills in the methodological part of the CGT creation. More information on the details of the pilot study process and achieved insights can be found in Appendix A.

Advancing in the GT Creation. After completing the pilot study and incorporating the aforementioned insights, we proceeded to advance the grounded theory development process, aiming to capture the experiences of individuals navigating through enduring conflictual divorce. Guided by a constructivist approach to grounded theory research, our study followed a cyclical process, wherein data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously, and memos were consistently generated, refined, and integrated into the research. This iterative process involved conducting follow-up interviews to delve deeper into emerging themes until theoretical saturation was achieved. The subsequent sections provide a comprehensive account of each stage of the longitudinal CGT research process.

Participant Selection. To explore the change journey of individuals within a prolonged divorce, and build upon the insights gained from the pilot study, we began by implementing an initial sampling process (Charmaz, 2006). With the overarching goal of the study in mind, we established the following selection criteria:

1. Divorce Situation: We aimed to recruit individuals who were either living apart and not in the same household or had officially filed for divorce at least six months prior. As mentioned earlier, this six-month time frame was selected to minimize the inclusion of non-conflictual divorce cases, as statistics indicate that 97.23% of divorces in Lithuania are amicably settled within the first six months (Putvinskis, 2020). Therefore, divorces lasting longer than six months had a higher potential for experiencing greater conflict. There were no restrictions on the maximum duration of divorce. We deliberately included varying lengths

of divorce as part of our accelerated longitudinal approach or sampling across different cohorts (Shlomo et al., 2019; Neale, 2021). This approach recognizes the limitations of following individuals over extended periods and suggests that multiple cohort selection can offer an alternative method for uncovering temporal and spatial processes.

2. Marital status: Legally married. We were specifically interested in exploring divorce conflicts that occur before individuals are legally divorced, to examine the unique aspects of this particular group of people.

3. Children: Due to findings in the literature and insights gained from the pilot study interviews, it was apparent that a significant majority of conflictual divorces occur among couples with minor children. As a result, we initially decided to focus our search and include only couples with children between the ages of 0 and 18 years. However, as the study progressed, we also aimed to explore whether couples with adult children experienced conflictual divorces. It is important to note that all participants in this study had common children; we were not able to find participants for this sample without children.

4. Gender: To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, we decided to include both men and women in the study. We recognized the importance of considering both perspectives to gain a more holistic view of the conflictual divorce experience. Although it was challenging to reach out to both ex-partners, our initial intention was to locate and interview both individuals to examine the influence of each side on the conflict.

5. Citizenship: In this phase of the study, we specifically included divorcees who were Lithuanians residing in Lithuania. This criterion was necessary because legal divorce procedures can differ across countries, and the experiences of individuals living in different countries may be too diverse to capture within the scope of our research. Additionally, since the researcher's native language is Lithuanian, conducting qualitative research in their language is highly recommended (Charmaz, 2014).

6. Due to the absence of legal recognition for same-sex marriages in Lithuania, this research exclusively focused on heterosexual couples.

7. Willingness to participate in the study and reflect on the divorce process.

Subsequently, the research followed the constructivist GT research strategy (Charmaz, 2006) and utilized applied theoretical sampling. This approach involves collecting, coding, and analyzing data concurrently, while also determining the next steps in data collection to develop an emerging theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to Charmaz (2006), initial sampling in GT research helps the researcher identify the starting point in the research field, while theoretical sampling guides the selection of subsequent data sources. However, sampling using the LQ research frame has its peculiarities. Below we discuss the specific considerations we undertook to combine sampling across different cases and across time, which by some is referred to as temporal sampling (Neale, 2021).

Specifics of the LQR Sampling Strategy. Cross-case comparative sampling is a

valuable approach that allows for a broader range of cases to be included in a study, thereby increasing the overall breadth of the research. This type of sampling enables researchers to discern variations in experiences across different settings, domains of experience, and even over time. However, the logic of inquiry in GT slightly differs from that of temporal sampling. In GT, sampling is an ongoing process that involves constantly searching for new cases that can provide insights into emerging theories. The goal is to achieve analytical closure, which is reached when categories become saturated, meaning that new cases no longer contribute novel theoretical insights (Charmaz, 2014). However, concepts related to time, process, continuity, and change cannot be saturated in the same way. Temporal understandings are continually evolving and refining, leading to fresh insights with each return visit to the field (Saldana, 2003). Therefore, even as categories reach saturation, the exploration of time-related aspects remains an ongoing process, contributing to the construction of new knowledge and deepening the understanding of each case (Neale, 2021).

In our study, we have loosely followed the strategy of **sampling across different cohorts, which** is a commonly employed strategy in longitudinal research (Giele & Elder, 1998). A cohort refers to a group of individuals who share a similar life experience within a specific period (Nilson, 2014). This sampling approach is particularly relevant in QLR designs, as it enables researchers to examine variations in experiences at different time points (Neale, 2021). By including individuals who embarked on the divorce process at different times or who represent different stages of the journey, researchers can gather a comprehensive understanding of the transitional nature of divorce. In our study, we followed the progress of roughly assigned three cohorts over the course of up to two years: individuals who had experienced divorce 6-12 months, 12 to 24 months, and more. This approach allowed us to illuminate the transitional process of divorce by integrating insights across these three loosely assigned cohorts. Drawing together the experiences of those who were at different stages of the divorce process provided valuable insights into how experiences vary over time. Consequently, we obtained a more holistic view of the enduring nature of the divorce process and the challenges individuals face throughout this transition. An example of thinking within the cohorts can be seen in the memo below:

> *After the 8th interview, T1:*
> *It becomes clear that people's emotional reactions differ depending on where they are in their divorce journey. People between six and 12-18 months roughly are much into their emotions and intense reactions regarding their divorce situation. The pain is so alive and intense, they feel like loosing self and self-parts. The pain of the ones further into their divorce somehow transforms into less intensive yet lingering background pain and frustration. The cutoff of 1-2 years seeems to be important here, as it is also mentioned in some literature. I need to look further into it.*
>
> *After the 3rd interview, T2:*
> *Maybe people who are longer into their divorce become more reflective and less reactive? Perhaps they are in the ongoig loss of hopes and see only absurdity in their (re)actions. Or absurdity in their situation, also related to institutional absurdity? Stuck in absurdity as a reflective-protective being with the lingering (existential) pain that comes later in the process? Absurdity is not recognized the first year(s) of divorce as it needs a certain level of prolonged reflection and connection with oneself.*

Another important aspect we considered in sampling for LQR was the ***potential for attrition*** over time. Participants may migrate, pass away, lose interest in continuing their involvement in the study (Calman et al., 2013; Kneck & Audulv, 2019), or in our case, divorce. To account for attrition, we determined a larger number of participants (Saldana, 2003) and aimed to have an initial sample size of more than 20 individuals. Although the pilot study participants displayed high motivation to discuss their divorce journey, we recognized the need to be prepared for potential attrition. It is important to note that our sampling for initial interviews was not concluded based on data saturation (which would have been impossible at this stage), but rather due to time constraints and the challenges of finding additional research participants.

T1 participants. As a result, we conducted initial interviews with a total of 21 individuals, consisting of five males and 16 females. The participants' ages ranged from 28 to 64, with a median age of 43.8. The average duration since the beginning of their divorce process was 2.1 years, with a range of 6 months to 4 years. On average, the participants had been married for 16.1 years, with marriage durations ranging from 2 to 40 years. All of the participants had children with their divorcing spouses, and the ages of the children varied. Additionally, two participants were (former) spouses of two other participants.

Data Collection. To reach our sample, we employed several strategies. Initially, we sought individuals through third-party institutions such as social and mental health support centers, community agencies, lawyers, and counselors who facilitated the recruitment process. However, the response rate from these institutions was not satisfactory. Consequently, we utilized advertisements on social media platforms to reach additional participants. Additionally, we reached out to individuals in our network and asked them to share information about the research with anyone they knew who was going through a divorce or could refer others. After each interview, we also requested

participants to spread the word about the study to others who met the criteria.

During the recruitment process, we ensured transparency and provided potential interviewees with comprehensive details about the study. This included information on the study's objectives, participant requirements, timeline (e.g., recruitment cut-off and data collection phases), and anticipated benefits for participants (Dickson-Swift, James et al, 2008; Dockett et al, 2009). We shared these details through a dedicated website specifically created for this purpose. Regardless of the recruitment method used, all individuals expressing willingness to participate underwent a screening process to ensure they met the aforementioned criteria. Those who met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate were then scheduled for an interview.

Based on the positive findings from the pilot study, we chose to continue using the semi-structured interview guide throughout the subsequent stages of our research. ***Semi-structured interviewing*** is a widely employed data collection method in qualitative research. It is particularly well-suited for investigating individuals' perspectives and opinions, as well as complex or emotionally sensitive topics (Barriball & While, 1994; Åstedt-Kurki & Heikkinen, 1994). There are several advantages associated with the use of semi-structured interviews. Firstly, it allows for flexibility, enabling us to delve into issues that are personally significant to participants (Barbour, 2000; Cridland et al, 2015). This approach also permits a diverse range of perceptions, avoiding the constraint of predefined response categories (Petalas et al, 2009). Additionally, semi-structured interviews minimize researcher control, allowing participants to freely express their experiences (Brewin et al, 2008). Given that our research focuses on exploring people's perceptions and opinions regarding emotionally sensitive issues related to conflictual divorce, employing semi-structured interviews appeared to be the most appropriate method for data collection.

The interview guide (T1) was thoughtfully developed based on an extensive literature review and insights gained from the pilot study. It consisted of two levels of questions: main themes and follow-up questions. The main themes encompassed the core aspects of the research topic and allowed participants to freely express their perceptions and experiences. Follow-up questions were used to facilitate participants' understanding of the main themes (Turner, 2010) and guide the conversation towards the study subject (Baumbusch, 2010). The intention was to maintain a smooth flow during the interview (Whiting, 2008) and gather accurate (Baumbusch, 2010; Rabionet, 2011) and comprehensive information (Turner, 2010).

The semi-structured interview guide was designed to be flexible and accommodating (Dearnley, 2005; Turner, 2010). Charmaz (2014) emphasized the importance of grounded theorists actively engaging in interviews and being attentive to interesting leads. Therefore, we have created the questions in the guide as participant-oriented, non-leading, and formulated clearly (Turner, 2010). They were designed to be single-faceted and open-ended (Cridland et al., 2015; Chenail, 2011). Overall, the interview guide was carefully crafted to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of participants' perspectives while ensuring flexibility and responsiveness during the interview process.

Charmaz (2006) recommends initiating interviews with fundamental questions such as understanding the current state of the research field, identifying key social processes, determining the contextual conditions in which they occur, and exploring the factors that influence them. As the research followed a CGT approach, the researcher continually refined the data collection instrument to enhance the emerging categories, particularly before conducting follow-up (T2) interviews. This iterative process involved adapting and redesigning the instrument to accommodate the evolving understanding of the data. It was essential for the researcher to move away from rigid data collection procedures and embrace flexibility to capture the complexity of the phenomenon under study. T1 and T2 guides can be found in the Appendix B.

Initial interviews. The initial semi-structured interview guide comprised four sections. In the first part, the researchers introduced themselves and assured the interviewees of confidentiality. The topic under investigation was "longer-lasting divorce." This section began with "warm-up" questions that aimed to gather general information about the interviewees' background and their marital relationship trajectories. They were asked about the history of their divorce process and their experiences thus far. The second part focused on the interviewees' personal experiences and their sense of identity within the ongoing divorce process. It explored how individuals viewed themselves in relation to the divorce, the challenges they faced, their perception of changes occurring, and how they interpreted those changes. The third part delved into the interactions individuals had with others in the context of divorce, including children, parents, friends, and institutions. Follow-up questions were used to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences and provide further insights into the divorce process and its outcomes. Finally, the interviews transitioned to the closing part, which encompassed broader conceptualizations of the divorce process. Participants were asked about their understanding of divorce, important lessons learned, and their perspectives on the future. We also provided an opportunity for interviewees to ask questions and share additional comments. While a substantial number of questions were consistently asked across the interviews, the semi-structured nature of the protocol and the researchers' desire to follow the participants' lead allowed for variations in the order of the questions.

The interviews were conducted online using the most convenient communication channel for each participant. The majority of participants expressed a preference for audio conferencing, while two individuals specifically requested video conferencing for their interviews. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours and were recorded in audio format. The interviews were conducted by the author of this thesis. Following the completion of the interviews, we approached each participant to inquire if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview.

Follow-up interviews (T2). After a minimum interval of six months from the initial interviews, we reached out to the divorcees via email or text messages to inquire about their willingness to participate in the second round of interviews. Out of the original cohort, a total of sixteen individuals (consisting of four males and twelve females) agreed to share their stories during the T2 interviews. During the second

interview, five participants disclosed that they had already divorced. T2 typically lasted up to one hour and utilized the same teleconferencing method as the initial interviews. Additional details regarding the research participants can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

Demographic Characteristics of Research Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Length of marriage	Length of divorce T1	Interview date T1	Interview data T2	Divorced during T2
Peter	M	46	2	1.5	2021 Feb	2021 Sept	No
Alex	M	42	15	0.5	2020 Sept	2021 Jun	Yes
Angela	F	38	13	4	2020 Sept	2021 Sept	No
Debra	F	64	40	1	2020 Oct	2021 Jun	No
Monica	F	57	36	3	2020 Sept	2021 Oct	No
Julie	F	47	20	1.5	2020 Sept	2021 Jun	Yes
Emma	F	40	20	1	2020 Oct	2021 Jul	No
Sandra	F	48	26	1	2020 Oct	-	-
Paul 1	M	48	22	2	2020 Oct	2021 Jun	No
Katrina	F	37	19	0.5	2020 Oct	2021 Jul	Yes
Daisy	F	47	22	3	2021 Feb	2021 Sept	No
Maria	F	47	23	1	2020 Sept	2021 Jul	No
Linda 2	F	39	4	3	2020 Nov	2021 Sept	Yes
Helena 1	F	47	22	2	2020 Sept	2021 Jul	No
Roberta	F	27	2	2.5	2021 Feb	2021 Sept	No
Virginia	F	39	4	4	2020 Oct	-	-
Karen	F	47	10	1	2020 Oct	2021 Aug	Yes
Steven 2	M	45	4	3	2020 Oct	-	-
Martin	M	43	13	1	2020 Sept	2021 Oct	No
Sabrina	F	28	6	0.5	2021 Jan	-	-
Eugene	F	35	5	1	2020 Dec	-	-

Note. Dyads of divorcees are indicated next to their names by the numbers 1 and 2.

The follow-up interview guide consisted of two types of questions. Firstly, we included a set of identical questions from the initial interviews to maintain continuity and enable comparison over time. Secondly, we incorporated new questions based on the emerging categories identified during the coding of the T1 interviews (Neale, 2021). These additional questions aimed to fill gaps in the data, provide deeper and broader insights into the phenomenon, and address any changes in circumstances,

particularly with regard to the transition to finalizing the divorce. When conducting a longitudinal study, it is essential to strike a balance between continuity and flexibility in data collection (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Continuity ensures the integrity and internal coherence of the emerging dataset, facilitating analysis and synthesis (Pollard, 2007). This continuity was achieved by using a core set of questions throughout the interviews. At the same time, the longitudinal nature of the study allowed for flexibility in tailoring questions to each participant, considering changes in their social context and the evolving research landscape (Neale, 2021; Saldana, 2003).

After analyzing the first wave of interviews, we realized that certain topics were not adequately addressed in the interview guide and emerged categories that needed additional information. Consequently, we decided to focus more on self-change during divorce, including internal self-changes, their meaning for participants, and how they adjusted to them. We also paid more attention to evaluating the conflict level of the divorce and the factors associated with conflict escalation or de-escalation. Additionally, we added questions about the initiation of the divorce, as it was found to be important in understanding divorce conflict. For participants who were already divorced during the T2 interviews, we asked about their (dis)agreements with their former spouse, differences in conflict before and after the divorce, and their hopes for the future. As the second interviews progressed and new (aspects of) categories crystalized, we paid particular attention to them. For example, we focussed on the duality of self-protective strategies, or waiting as opposed to being stuck in the process. The interview guide for the T2 interviews can be found in Appendix B.

The interviews proceeded smoothly, despite the occasional presence of intense emotions. None of the participants expressed a desire to halt the process or delete the recorded data, even when specifically asked. On the contrary, the interviewees were open and generous while sharing their stories. Initially, we had concerns that the emotional nature of the interviews might deter divorcees from participating in the second round. However, only five individuals declined to participate in the follow-up interviews. Many interviewees expressed their motivation for taking part in the research and stated that it enabled them to gain more self-awareness, understand their situation better, (potentially) help others facing similar challenges, and hope that the study would drive necessary actions by governmental organizations to address unresolved issues related to "parental alienation" or "psychological violence."

Data Coding and Analysis. The data analysis followed the steps of the Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) methodology, including primary coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding, as outlined by Charmaz (2006; 2008). According to CGT, data collection and analysis are iterative processes (Charmaz, 2006). While we aimed to analyze the data immediately after each interview, time constraints sometimes made it challenging to adhere to this requirement. Therefore, in some cases, extensive analysis was conducted after collecting data from multiple interviews. To mitigate this, we made efforts to review the interviews, whether in written or audio form, identify the main themes that emerged, and incorporate relevant aspects into subsequent interviews. The analysis involved examining the data between interviews, across different

participants, and longitudinally within each individual's narrative. This process demanded significant time and resources. We strived for synchronic data analysis but made adjustments when necessary (Tuthill et al., 2018; Calman et al., 2013).

Coding in GT occurs in particular interconnected stages. First, the researcher **read each interview** to gain a holistic sense of the text and wrote a summary statement to capture the overall essence of that participant's experience. This part is called familiarization with the data, which is not a passive process to understand the words, but starting to read data as data, actively, analytically, and critically, thinking about what the data mean. During this stage, the researcher noticed certain things of interest, first impressions, or conceptual ideas about the data.

Second, we have immersed ourselves in **open coding**. We mainly applied a line-to-line coding strategy when each text line was assigned a code. This stage helps separate data into categories and see processes. Throughout the process, the researcher stayed open and close to the data, kept coding simple, yet coded as actions if possible, and was involved in constant data comparison (Charmaz, 2014). She asked such questions: What process is at issue here? How does the participant act, and what might it indicate? What is their primary concern, and how do they solve this concern? An example of this process can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Initial Line-by-line Coding Example

Generated line-by-line codes	Narrative data to be coded
Pointing to husband's decision to leave Reflecting on strong emotional reactions Experiencing loss of self-worth Receiving of being left Identifying contradicting reasons Conveying own initiative to suggest exit Reflecting on mutually expressed marital dissatisfaction Conveying own initiative to suggest exit Pointing to partial expectedness of husband exit Claiming own part in decision Pointing to husband taking action to leave Questionning suggesting him to leave Discussing husband's exit with a daughter Suggesting husband's struggles to take decision Reflecting his long-standing wish to leave Claiming inciting husband to leave	Here, you see, he left. Perhaps the act of his departure, how can I put it, made me feel hurt, wronged. It shook my dignity and some kind of pride. He left me, you know, at that moment when he left. Although, on the other hand, when I reflect on it, I was the one who suggested it to him initially. I said, listen if we have a hard time communicating and it's hard, I also see that you feel bad and you have indicate that. Because I asked if you were feeling good. No, bad, he said. And I know for myself that I feel bad and nothing works out. So I say, let's each of us go in separate directions. Then the initiative was in a certain way from mine. I do not feel like his choice came out of nowhere. Just that I contributed to that as well. It's just that he decided and he left. Other times one thinks, maybe in that way he agreed to my offer and had a good chance. We are discussing it with my daughter that it was hard for him to do that, to leave, even though he wanted to for a long time. I have just encouraged him, and he did it.

Note. The narrative and codes are translated from Lithuanian, therefore to a certain extent, they may not convey original meaning.

The result of the initial data coding was the codes constructed for the available data that indicate the summarized content of the data (Charmaz, 2006). The codes adhered to specific requirements: emerged from the data, show actions, reveal the decisions made by divorcees, the choices made, and the dilemmas solved in everyday life. The researcher analyzed the narrative line, what the data revealed, what it suggested, and confirmed, and what context emerged.

The subsequent stage of the analysis involved ***focused coding***. After observing how the codes were interconnected, we identified the most significant codes and proceeded with focused coding (see Pic. 2). In this stage, following Charmaz's (2014) guidance, we paid attention to codes that appeared frequently among the initial codes and held greater significance. Continuously questioning the implications and revelations of the initial codes, as well as comparing them with one another, helped in determining categories. As a result, the codes were organized into different levels of abstraction, leading to the creation of categories. The main categories comprised those that substantially influenced the essence of the phenomenon and were prominent across the participants' experiences. Minor categories were included to add complexity and depth to the main categories.

Figure 2

Focused Coding Example

Generated Focused Coding	Narrative data to be coded
	I: How do you communicate with your wife? P: Well, we actually communicate something via the Messenger. We exchange information. However,
Communicating through texting Perceiving communication as anomalous Innitiating discussion	the communication is strange. When you try to say something, look, maybe let's not do it like that. When I receive some information, something like that [our child] is playing computer games. I get a reply [from her] which could be presented in the
Receiving officially-minded responses	court, 'He does not play computer games at our place.' Well, it's like we are communicating, but it is not a communication at all. It is just kind of
Perceiving communication as anomalous Receiving officially-minded responses	exchange of opinions. Like you would respond by thinking about how that message would look like in court. In reality, one cannot solve any real problems
Not resolving issues	because they are ignored. It's basically that kind of communication: whether nothing changes for
Exchanging basic info	tonigh, can I pick [a child] and that's it.

Distinguishing between main and minor categories was an iterative process that involved multiple immersions in the data. We approached the main categories by asking various questions: What are their characteristics? How do they encompass the minor categories? How are the main categories interconnected? How do they contribute to a theoretical statement? What is the significance of this statement? In Grounded Theory (GT), this process is known as axial coding, which facilitates the linking of main and

minor categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, in the context of Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT), this process is viewed as more creative, without predetermined analytical frameworks or strategies, allowing for the emergence of analytical strategies from the data itself (Charmaz, 2014).

Throughout this process, we engaged in memo writing, which led to the emergence of certain categories. The image below displays memos that were created after conducting multiple interviews and were focused on elaborating on the category of "the duality of self-protecting strategies:"

Figure 3
Memo-Writing Example

Memo after 8th interview T1: Non-communication as self-protection
A specific type of duality is felt around what people do to support themselves against an ex-spouse or institutional violence. They often themselves say that non-communication helps them to protect themselves. And I can understand it. Yet, when divorcee finds self on another side when their ex-partner engages in non-communication, this seems like a strategy preventing them from reaching a joint agreement. Supporting-preventing strategy, depending on the perspective? Do divorcees themselves understand its duality, particularly the ones refusing to communicate? I need to inquire further into this.

Memo after 12th interview T1: Communication via lawyers as self-protection
Lawyers are used for emotional self-protection, as is non-communication. The exosystem level is somewhat touched here, lawyers are perceived as providing assistance. It seems that it is only at this level that the requirements for the partner are expressed because, at other levels, communication is non existing. And when there is no direct communication, it seems easier emotionally. This seems to be one of the ways to distance oneself from partner's manipulations and protect oneself (self-protection). However, here again, how much does that help conflict resolution?

Memo after 4th interview T2
It seems that divorcees understand the negative side of limited-communication, and are aware of it, yet they do not see any other ways of interaction, except via professionals. Therefore they remain in that duality, occasionally checking the grounds anew if anything changed, yet again and again realizing that the situation remains unchanged. But how can it be if both sides remain in their modus operandi?

Note. Memo-writing after the sequence of the interviews to elaborate on the emerging category.

To ensure the ***longitudinal aspects*** of this study were not overlooked, we followed guidelines for exploring longitudinal data (Saldana, 2003; Neale, 2021; Kneck & Audulv, 2019). After each follow-up interview, our initial focus was on describing the

individual participant's changes over time since the initial interview (T1). Subsequently, we searched for patterns of change that were shared among the participants. We organized the data with specific analytic questions in mind, such as how participants' thoughts about their divorce transition changed over time, what emerged or increased over time, what was cumulative, what decreased or ceased, and what remained constant or consistent (Saldana, 2003). These patterns evolved throughout the analysis, progressing from organizing individual data to organizing group data. Eventually, we categorized the shared patterns into types, such as "a consistent pattern," "an episodic pattern," "an increasing pattern," and "a decreasing pattern." These patterns emerged inductively rather than grouping participants into predetermined categories or outcomes (Kneck & Audulv, 2019). We discovered them by moving back and forth between interviews with individuals, continually searching for overarching similarities that emerged over time.

Figure 4
Memo-Writing after the Second Interview with one Participant

<u>**Memo after the 2nd interview with a participant:**</u>
What decreased: *the "black cloud" feeling, worries about marriage sacrament, intensive face-to-face conflicts.*
What increased: *worries about free legal support, motivation and energy to engage in (household) activities, satisfaction with limited communication with ex.*
Remained stable: *worries about housing and continuous communication with children, finalization of the divorce, non-trusting ex-partner, need to prove own truth.*

Like with other participants, the initial disruptive phase of the divorce has moved away after almost two years, more energy has emerged, and some stability in non-communication and certain daily living with divorce was reached. However, most essential questions regarding children and housing remained open, as well as uncertainty about the finalization of the process. Background lingering negative feelings towards ex-partner remained combined with the need to prove own truth. Issues with the legal system occurred, underlining problematic financial situation. Overall, he moved toward increased self-coherence and away from self-disruption, yet remains in an unfinished transiting space with obvious restrictions to complete the process. Non-communication with ex deepened, which becomes a pattern seen accross other participants' journeys.

In yet another phase of data analysis identified as ***theoretical coding***, theoretical arrangements were assigned to the data and subsequently revised until the collection of structural experiences captured the similarities across and variations within the participants' experiences. The researcher compared all obtained theoretical codes with each other until she discovered a central category that explains the interrelationships between all other categories raised during focused coding and substantive codes

(Charmaz, 2006). We detected the central category - restricted self-transition. The central category highlighted divorcees' liminality while moving between reactive and reflective ways of being. The central category was associated with theoretical concepts: the in-between-ness/liminality metaphor. In this way, a substantive grounded theory has been developed.

During the research, categories were continuously validated in meetings and discussions with scientific supervisors and by describing the reflections of their experiences in memos. Below is an excerpt from one of the memos about how the researcher's internal dialogue unfolded while thinking around the central category of "in-between-ness."

Figure 5
Memo-Writing on the Struggles with Coding and Writing

> **Memo: divorce as hanging in-between-ness, June 2023**
> *It seems that divorcees find themselves in "in-between-ness", moving from the separation towards inner-coherence. Their move from a separation from the self (self-disruption) towards inner peace (as the re-incorporation of self) takes place in transitional space (in-between-ness). Caught in in-between-ness could be understood as not finished, as in the making, at the same time restricted and hanging, hoping and waiting, reacting and reflecting. This position feeds enduring identity pressures and calls for identity re-formation.*

Developing a substantive grounded theory. Grounded theory (GT) aims to develop an independent theory that goes beyond simply describing empirical results by providing a conceptual understanding of the phenomena under study (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Glaser, 2004, 2008; Bluff, 2005; Mills et al., 2006; Bradley, 2010; Konecki, 2011; Charmaz, 2012; Birks and Mills, 2015). The goal is to create an abstract analytical theory that categorizes and explains processes or phenomena.

In CGT (Charmaz, 2006), theory construction is seen as a creative process rather than something that arises directly from the data. It depends on various factors such as research conditions, the researcher's approach, and their interaction with the research subject. It's important to note that the result of constructivist GT should not be considered an objective description of the investigated phenomena. Instead, it should be viewed as an interpretation or approach to the phenomenon as presented by the author of the dissertation (Charmaz, 2008; 2012). The emphasis is on providing an interpretive portrait of the studied phenomenon rather than attempting to present an exact representation. The developed substantive underlying theory will be presented in 3.5. chapter.

Memoing played a crucial role throughout the entire dissertation preparation process, not just during coding. In the context of CGT, memo writing is considered a

significant step between data collection and drafting the paper. It serves multiple purposes, with its central role being the construction of theoretical categories. Through memo writing, the researcher is prompted to delve deeper into processes, assumptions, and actions related to codes or categories. It provides a space for thinking about the data and generating and exploring ideas about categories (Charmaz, 2014).

Moreover, memo writing is essential for fostering the researcher's reflexivity and preventing preconceived notions about the data. Memoing occurred at various points and utilized different resources. However, since coding was primarily conducted using NVivo 12 software, we utilized this software as the main platform for memo writing.

Figure 6
Memo-Writing on the Struggles with Coding and Writing

<div style="border:1px solid; padding:1em;">

Memo: Coding process as a childbirth labor (December, 2021)
The coding and writing process is like the childbirth labor process. One feels hung up, knowing nothing about what to expect. Sometimes, everything seems pointless—a misunderstanding, a stupid process. It seems that you yourself are worthless because you cannot comprehend the essence of the experience and catch hidden processes. You constantly have to remind yourself that things are more complicated than they seem on the surface, and there cannot be any definitive answers. You can only glance at that part of the divorce process and never to the full since people themselves struggle to find answers and hang in the unknown. So it seems that I cannot find a definitive answer with them, and we hang in the unknown together.
And the process itself is very slow. It seems you would like to hurry it. It seems like it takes nothing to code such a text where almost everything is clear. However, in reality, it is such a time-consuming process. It seems you code part of the text and can no longer force yourself to continue further by no inner strength. You need to take a break. And taking a break means the work is not progressing, the days are running out, and deadlines will still need to be met.

</div>

Overall, the coding process was not a straightforward and linear journey, despite how it may appear from the previous description. It was filled with uncertainties and raised numerous questions. At times, it felt like navigating through darkness, hoping to eventually see the light at the end of the tunnel. Coding and re-coding the same data occurred multiple times, guided by different research subquestions and perspectives. As we examined the data from various angles and with different paper goals in mind, the assigned codes varied. A particularly challenging and time-demanding process was integrating cross-sectional and longitudinal aspects of data. As a result, coding became an ongoing process that extended well into the writing of scientific articles, and it only truly concluded (if at all) with the acceptance of the papers. The messiness of qualitative research is not limited to coding alone but also extends to writing about it (Charmaz, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Writing serves as a tool for generating ideas

rather than solely reporting them. However, analytical ideas are refined and crystallized through the continuous process of writing and editing. Picture 6 serves as an illustration of some of the challenges encountered during the coding process, as indicated in the above memo (Pic. 6).

2.4. Enhancing Methodological Rigor

Charmaz's (2006) criteria of credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness were used to evaluate the quality of the emerging substantive grounded theory. Throughout our study, we have on an ongoing basis reflected on these criteria to ensure the quality of the study.

Credibility asks whether the research has sufficient relevant data for asking questions about the data, making systematic comparisons, and developing a thorough analysis. Credibility also involves the researcher's views and actions. Constructivist grounded theory requires strong reflexivity throughout the research process (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). To adhere to these requirements, we undertook multiple steps.

We have presented in the study as accurately as possible what the research participants said, thought, felt, and did; and described the processes that influenced the actions, thoughts, and feelings. Long-term involvement in the manifestation of the phenomenon under study helped to ensure the reliability of the research results in the life context and gain the trust of the research participants. We conducted the study within five years, immersed in data collection and analysis for up to two years. Multiple meetings with research participants provided the space to ensure that the results were expanded in depth and breadth and rich data was obtained. The collection of data from research participants in different divorce process phases made it possible to obtain detailed and accurate information about the phenomenon under study. We also conducted extensive and constant comparison procedures between observations and categories to establish credibility. We presented multiple memos regarding the data analysis to illustrate the research process. This, among others, made controlling the researcher's bias possible.

We paid constant attention to ensure that we applied the selected CGT strategy consistently and that research data was collected and analyzed in compliance with methodological requirements. Therefore, we provided a thorough explanation of how the data was collected and analyzed, a detailed description of the research process, and coding examples.

During the research, the author constantly wrote memos, which described not only emerging ideas about the researched phenomenon but also the researcher's personal experiences related to the research object, attitudes, feelings, and changes during the research. These reflections ensured that the researcher's subjectivity did not influence the data obtained.

We also consulted experts at a summer school of CGT held in Antwerp (2019). On an ongoing basis, the researcher also talked with two scientific supervisors at every stage of the study on data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. Throughout

these meetings, we constantly reviewed whether the results were reasonable, whether there was a clear relationship between each constructed category and a certain part of the data, whether the categories were suitable for describing the data, and whether the data supported all interpretations and conclusions. In addition to individual consultations with scientists, participating in the courses focussed on increasing methodological performance in the CGT, presentation of results at international conferences, ongoing writing multiple papers for international journals, and receiving generous review suggestions have played a role in the constant reflexivity on various aspects of data analysis. These individuals acted as critical friends by providing a theoretical sounding board and promoting reflexivity by challenging our construction of knowledge (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Originality can take varied forms such as offering new insights, providing a fresh conceptualization of a recognized problem, and establishing the significance of the analysis (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Throughout the research, we have ensured that our generalized data, organized through categories and their interconnections, would offer new perspectives on the studied phenomenon. At the beginning of the thesis, we emphasized the novelty of the study to highlight the limited empirical research in this area and how we have addressed this gap. In the introduction of the dissertation, we described the study's novelty and generated insights. Furthermore, the end of the dissertation presents scientific and practical recommendations, aimed at fostering a more inclusive and empirically grounded approach to individuals experiencing conflictual divorces. To achieve originality, we engaged in reflexivity processes such as writing memos and reflective journals. We also referred to existing literature to explore whether our analysis provided a fresh conceptual understanding of the data.

Resonance demonstrates that the researchers have constructed concepts that not only represent their research participants' experience but also provide insight to others. To achieve resonance, researchers must tailor their data-gathering strategies to illuminate the experiences of their participants. It is important to acknowledge that achieving resonance remains challenging in qualitative research, as the aim is not to achieve representativeness, but rather to develop a comprehensive and in-depth understanding and explanation of the research participants (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2006). However, we believe that the findings from our dissertation research can provide valuable insights into other similar cases. The grounded theory we have developed holds relevance for individuals undergoing traumatic and uncertain life events, not just those involved in enduring conflictual divorce processes. The central category of restricted self-transition, "transiting in-between-ness," can be explored in different contexts and with various research participants, such as patients facing challenging illnesses, individuals grieving the loss of a loved one, those enduring war experiences or even individuals experiencing significant life changes like the birth of a child or relocating to another country or job. These circumstances involve lasting changes where old versions of self come to an end, and new ones have yet to be fully established.

To ensure the reliability of the qualitative research, we shared the draft research

results (emerging categories) with select research participants during the follow-up interviews. They were asked to assess the extent to which the results accurately reflected their lived reality. This process served to evaluate and confirm that the obtained results genuinely captured the experiences and perspectives of the research participants regarding the phenomenon under investigation.

We also paid particular attention to establishing connections between the broader institutional context and individual experiences, as was indicated by the data and echoed the experiences of the research participants. This approach sheds light on many implicit meanings or perspectives that are often taken for granted by larger institutions, highlighting the disparities between their views and those of the participants themselves.

Usefulness includes clarifying research participants' understanding of their everyday lives, forming a foundation for policy and practice applications, contributing to creating new lines of research, as well as revealing pervasive processes and practices (Charmaz, 2014). In the final stages of constructing grounded theory, our objective was to achieve a concise and accessible representation of the theory. We firmly believe that overly complex theories, requiring extensive instructions to be understood, lose their usefulness not only for professionals but also for laypeople (Charmaz, 2005). Consequently, we continuously questioned the growing complexity of the data and aimed for an outcome that is simplified and easy to comprehend.

Through our research, we have delved into a relatively niche area of divorces, shedding light on the lives of individuals who are often overlooked by society, viewed negatively from an institutional standpoint, and consequently neglected in terms of raising awareness about their concerns to the public. We aimed to challenge power structures to reach more equality by enabling the expression of those not heard (Collins, 2000). Therefore, the goal of immersing in qualitative research was not only to gain new knowledge, but mainly the hope to alleviate people's suffering, address injustice, and prevent humiliation (Bochner, 2018).

2.5. Ethical Considerations

We conducted this study adhering to the Code of Ethics for Scientific Research in Belgium and the Lithuanian Code of Ethics for Scientists. Mykolas Romeris University's research ethics committee granted ethics approval (Protocol No. 6/-2021). The guidelines were followed not only during the data collection phase but also in other study stages. Protection of participants' rights was regarded as a fundamental aspect of conducting research, and the issues of informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality were of paramount importance (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2009). Although the participant should not feel worse after the study than before, various emotional reactions may surface during conversations, especially while discussing sensitive topics. Therefore, we undertook specific steps to ensure the well-being of participants, and to respect their privacy and personal freedom:

1. All potential study participants had the opportunity to visit the website created for this study with comprehensive information about its goals and aims. The website also contained information about the researcher, her affiliations with universities, and the names of the supervisors. The website was mentioned in all advertisements or communications about the study. With the help of the website the researcher aimed to support individuals to make informed decisions about participation in the study.

2. Before conducting interviews, we developed a checklist to ensure that all necessary points were covered in the explanation provided to participants. Consent was crucial in ensuring that individuals fully understood the aims of the study, their commitment to being involved, any potential risks and benefits associated with participation, and the expected outcomes of the research (Agre & Rapkin, 2003; Van den Hoonaard, 2002). The process of obtaining consent included addressing several key elements. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the format of the interview, the approximate duration of the interview, the assurance of confidentiality, the purpose of digital recording, and the participants' right to ask questions or decline to answer a question. Additionally, participants were assured that the information they provided during the interviews would not be shared with their ex-partner, promoting openness and preventing participants from seeking information about their ex-partner's response. Before commencing each interview, we reiterated the information about the research and the interview process, emphasizing that participants had the freedom to choose not to answer specific questions and could terminate the interview at any time. We emphasized creating a space where individuals could openly discuss their personal experiences of divorce without fear of judgment regarding their answers being right or wrong. Verbal confirmation of consent was obtained before each interview, and during the interview, if a participant became upset or discussed a particularly sensitive issue, consent was reconfirmed (Calman et al., 2013).

3. As qualitative research seeks to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon, the interviewer's focus lies on individuals' beliefs, opinions, and life circumstances. It is important to acknowledge that delving into personal aspects of someone's life can be uncomfortable and may induce anxiety (Rupšienė, 2007). Therefore, during the interviews, our utmost effort was directed toward creating a safe and supportive environment that would encourage participants to share their experiences while respecting their right to control the extent and nature of the information they disclosed. We ensured that participants felt comfortable speaking at their own pace. Throughout the interviews, we maintained a friendly and relaxed demeanor, demonstrating attentiveness and fostering an atmosphere of trust. It was our intention not to comment on or react to the interviewees' statements. Instead, we employed techniques such as asking questions, providing observations, paraphrasing, reflecting on participants' speech, and utilizing appropriate pauses. Drawing on the intuition and

the skills developed through the practice as counseling psychologist, we also paid close attention to nonverbal and verbal cues exhibited by the divorcees. However, it is important to note that our role was not to provide psychological counseling but rather to respond with sensitivity and empathy when participants became highly emotional.

4. Scientific literature suggests that research participants may experience a sense of exploitation as a result of potential power imbalances inherent in qualitative research (Holloway & Galvin, 2016). Exploitation typically arises when a researcher utilizes their social status and authority to further research objectives (Žydžiūnaitė & Sabaliauskas, 2017). To mitigate any potential feelings of exploitation among divorcees, we made concerted efforts to recognize and appreciate their valuable contribution to the research process. We consistently emphasized the significance of their participation, emphasizing the importance of every shared experience they provided.

3. FINDINGS

In this section, we present the findings of our research on how individuals navigate through their ongoing (conflictual) divorce process. The results are derived from the application of the Constructive Grounded Theory approach, involving multiple levels of coding. Gradually, we advanced from specific codes to higher levels of abstraction, highlighting the most prominent and frequently used codes. Through ongoing reflective coding, we identified main categories, which collectively form the grounded theory of "strained liminality." This theory encapsulates the restricted process of self-transition that individuals experience during their enduring conflictual divorce.

We will begin by discussing temporal self-disruption, the stage that initiates the self-transition, and then delve into the main orientations that guide people throughout the process - the pursuit of inner (re)balance. Subsequently, we will explore the strained in-between or liminal space where individuals engage in the process of self (re)definition and (re)balance amidst these distinct stages of losses and regains. Our focus will be on how individuals navigate these three transitional stages, utilizing various strategies and resources that either support or hinder the achievement of their objectives. Strained liminality, as the central metaphor, will illustrate the entire divorce journey, highlighting how self-transition is constrained by multiple factors, including resources, and strategies used amidst the period of heightened vulnerability and uncertainty.

The divorce process involves not only the divorcees themselves but also their parents, children, and professionals who are part of the divorce proceedings. These individuals play a significant collateral role in supporting or hindering the transition of the divorcees throughout their divorce journey, making them essential figures in the findings. Additionally, financial resources, religious beliefs, and initiator status emerge as crucial resources that influence the self-redefinition journey.

The categories used in the study have abstract names, reflecting the overall analysis of their respective topics and characteristics. Various dimensions of these categories are explored, including processes, interactions, structural elements, and semantic aspects. The statements provided by the research participants support and enrich the description of the main aspects of these categories. Visual illustrations are also included where appropriate to further enhance the understanding of the findings.

3.1. Temporal Self-Disruption as the Initiation of the Liminal Space

Losing the stability of self and not being able to reintegrate characterizes the initial stage of the strained liminality. People depict this period as overwhelmed by emotional chaos and instability associated with multiple losses pointing to the three distinct aspects of the losses: the total fragmentation of self, loss of certain aspects of inner self, and inner disruptions due to losses through the closest people. Overall, losses have a "past-future" character, related to the fading of future-directed dreams. The loss of them and the impossibility of creating new ones create a fragmented self, where the old self does not exist already and space leaves many intensive emotions to deal with.

The feelings of intense groundlessness come forward and color this initial stage of liminality.

Figure 7

Graphical Representation of the First Category
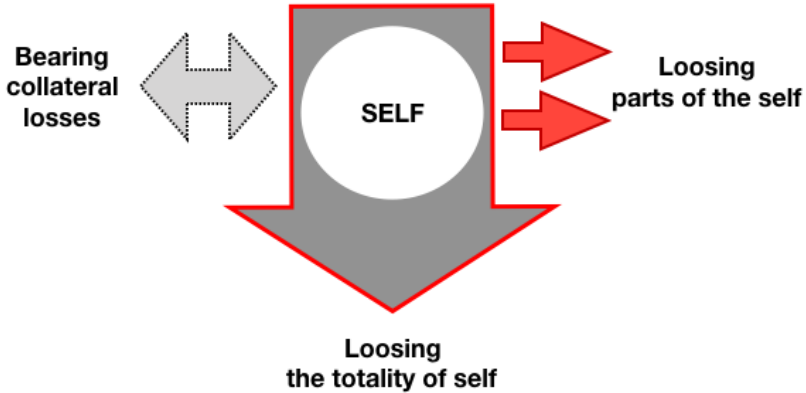
Note. Graphical representation of the Temporal self-disruption category as the interchange of three distinct aspects of the loss.

The Collapse of the Totality of the Self. The beginning of the divorce depicts the end of the world, ***the collapse of everything*** people had built, hoped, and dreamed of. It is particularly difficult to understand what is happening and how to proceed with life further. The totality of self disappears and is not easily found again. The feeling of loss is especially acute during the first year of (legal) divorce and for first-time divorcees. People realize that "everything in life is falling apart," that "the foundation of the house has been broken, and it is floating now." Many view being in a marriage and having a family as an extremely valued and important aspect of themselves, making it a laborious undertaking to let go. Debra, a 64-year-old woman, shared with us that "family is everything, [and] it has to be ideal. If it was appointed, you have to love and respect each other till death sets us apart." Losing an overarching, ideal self results in the collapse of "the whole house of cards." Interviewees express their intense emotions related to the significance of marriage in their lives, including feelings of devastation, prolonged depressive episodes, and being trapped in the crisis.

Self-disruption is largely experienced through ***the collapse of the future-directed dream***, which serves as a silver line connecting the past self with the future self and providing inner coherence. At the core of this disruption lies the idyllic imagination, a forward-looking vision of being part of a happy, traditional family. Losing the long-held vision of reaching old age with a chosen partner and having grandchildren is more painful than losing the partner itself. For instance, one divorcee (Julie, 47) shared her experience of losing her grip on the "program of her life," "one is dragged out of her comfort zone, which one programmed and knew how one would live nicely, one's

future is painted. And suddenly, one does not know one's future, where one will live, from what means, and where."

The aforementioned experiences are closely linked to feelings of low mood, depression, anxiety, and fear as individuals face the unknown unfolding before their eyes. People use various terms to describe their emotions surrounding divorce, such as defeat, illness, a nightmare, failure, significant misfortune, hell, and similar expressions. They express being frightened by the prospect of losing everything and feeling uncertain about what the future holds and how to move forward. The weight of their losses is so burdensome that it results in an energy collapse, causing them to spend days "in bed with a broken heart," unwilling to get up or to navigate through life for months or even years in a state of a "dark cloud" without the motivation to pursue activities. The sense of self remains immersed in a fog, lacking clear boundaries or perspectives to anchor and guide them. For some individuals, the pain of loss and the absence of a sense of grounding become so unbearable that they experience intrusive thoughts of suicide and express a desire not to wake up in the morning. Suicidal ideation is particularly relevant for individuals who did not initiate the divorce, as they perceive it as a shocking event.

I feel like you're standing with a suitcase and going out on that country road, you don't know where you're going. You want to shrug it off and run away. You want to not even get up in the morning, fall asleep in the evening, go to sleep, and not get up, you are not even interested (Martin, 43).

Losing Valued Parts of the Self. Self-disruption is not solely linked to the overall loss of self-coherence but also to specific losses of self-aspects that exacerbate the disruption. The loss of the traditional parental role and the role of an exclusive partner emerge as the two most significant aspects of these losses. Given the high value attributed to these self-aspects, the intensity of emotional reactions is likewise pronounced. ***The ability to fulfill the role of a parent*** within a functioning co-parenting relationship is disrupted, leaving divorcees with numerous unanswered questions. This loss is particularly impactful for parents with minor children. Divorcees emphasize the need to "be a good parent" and act in their children's best interests, yet their capacity to fulfill the traditional parental role becomes constrained and uncertain. The perception of self-as-a-parent shifts towards unfamiliar horizons. The intensity of this shift largely depends on whether the children live with one parent or not. Being separated from one's children and being unable to see them constitutes one of the most significant losses associated with divorce. The most challenging situation arises for those who struggle to fulfill the parental role when their children exhibit reluctance to interact, triggering a range of mixed emotions. These emotions encompass sadness over the loss of their children, anger towards their ex-spouse for manipulation, and feelings of shame as the "mother whose children refuse to see her."

While grappling with the enduring uncertainty of loss, individuals often find themselves yearning for a sense of clarity, particularly regarding relinquishing their parental role. The perception of officially no longer being a parent is sometimes considered easier than ***existing as a half-parent*** or as an ambiguous figure without a defined

parental role. Sandra, a 48-year-old mother fighting for her right to see her daughter, shared her desperate decision to approach the Child Protection Office and formally renounce her child. She recalled telling the social workers, "It holds significance for me. I want to formalize it, to renounce my child. I've come here to renounce my child." Another way of symbolically extinguishing the parental role is by viewing the child as deceased, thereby eradicating the existence of the uncertain parental role and potentially alleviating the associated pain. A father shared his experience of perceiving the impossibility of seeing his son as akin to the death of his paternal identity

> *In reality, I have buried my son. Maybe it's even easier to bury a person, because you know he's dead and you can't do anything about it. And now, when a person is still alive, you fight and strive to see him. It is scary. It is scary (Martin, 43).*

On the other hand, residing with children entails other losses. The burdensome and ***solitary responsibility of raising offspring*** without the support of a spouse plays a significant role in diminishing the flexibility and capacity to fulfill other roles or aspects of a fulfilling life. Individuals find themselves identifying more strongly with the role of a mother than as an individual woman, as they anticipate dedicating themselves to the "intensive life of a mother" in the years to come. Moreover, they grapple with the logistical challenges of managing their children's activities after school, struggling to find time between work and the (usually) full-time care they provide. As a result, they experience a loss of shared management of responsibilities, including time and financial resources.

> *The responsibility for raising children is now divided. We used to do it together, but now it's like separately. It is my most significant responsibility because their father appears and disappears. He found a new girlfriend and suddenly disappeared. So, therefore, the responsibility falls on me alone for the children (Linda, 39).*

Being an exclusive partner within a traditional family setup entails a significant disruption. The relational aspect of one's self is wounded and requires extensive healing. The loss of a partner while still maintaining emotional and physical ties with them initially leads to an overwhelming pain. For some individuals, the pain of this disruption is so profound and all-encompassing that they question whether it will ever fade away. One divorcee (Julie, 47), almost two years into her divorce, shared her experience of mourning the loss of her husband during the first year. She expressed, "I was contemplating how I would live without him; it felt like a person was dying. But he is alive, yet he is dead to me. It was a challenging transition... there was a physical pull towards him... I was genuinely mourning." Two other participants (Martin, 43 & Maria, 47), in their first year of divorce, revealed that they still felt a strong emotional connection to their former partners. One admitted to still being in love with her ex, while another rejected calling his spouse "the mother of my children," as she was and would always be his beloved wife. Divorce becomes a certain loss of the intimate relationship, which pertains to an immense part of the self.

> *Divorce is a loss for me, and I have been going through this for a very long time. Although, it may seem like I should not miss that unhealthy former relationship in any way, but apparently, it was important to me. Now, as I am losing it, this relationship,*

there remains such a void, an unknown (Monica, 57).

The disruption in self-view and confidence is particularly profound in cases of ***partner infidelity***. It is one of the most devastating experiences where everything seems wrong and one's sense of stability is shattered. The part of the self that believed in living with a faithful partner is torn apart. The painful reality overwhelms the individual, leaving them with more questions than answers. Karen, who had been married for 10 years, shared that her "self-esteem as a woman is zero... it's like having 'failure' written on your forehead, feeling inadequate and replaced." The moral pain associated with the experience of betrayal is even more agonizing than experiencing physical violence. Sabrina, 28, expressed, "For me, moral and emotional pain is much harder than physical pain. It's much harder for me because of his infidelity and lies than his physical aggression." Consequently, for many who have experienced partner infidelity, trusting another person and entering into a new relationship seems out of the question.

The loss of self-investment becomes apparent when divorcees reflect on their unappreciated time and energy devoted to the family structure. They express regret for dedicating so much of themselves to their family, hoping for a shared future, only to be treated as "nothing" or "nobody," or as mere "maids" or "hostesses." Looking back, they feel unappreciated and undervalued, despite having done everything for the family. They recognize their responsibility in allowing their former partners to burden them with increased responsibilities. Katrina, aged 37 and married for 19 years, shared, "I took a lot upon myself for my husband. And I admit I shielded him from all the problems, all the misfortunes... I shaped him into that, with my behavior. I made him like a little child." However, the experience of being used by their ex-partner without receiving anything in return feels like a significant loss and a squandering of their sense of self.

In the most extreme cases, self-disruption is connected to enduring psychological, financial, and even physical violence while failing to make necessary changes to support oneself. Individuals reflect on their past selves as being "completely dependent on their partners," constantly needing to ask for money, and enduring ongoing episodes of "rage, swearing, and blame." These realizations represent ***a loss of the illusion*** they had created for so long to not see the reality. People acknowledge that they deceived themselves due to certain aspects of their personalities, such as excessive caretaking, a lack of self-assertion, or avoiding obvious issues for too long. These realizations are accompanied by intense feelings of anger, disappointment, and pain. As one participant, Paul, aged 48, shared, "When my eyes opened, it was incredibly painful, it hurt a lot, and it lasted for months. When I discovered my codependence, I don't know, maybe for a month, I was in such shock."

Losing the tangible aspects of self is connected to the loss of body (health), money (financial security), and home (sense of grounding). Physiologically, individuals may experience temporary changes in their bodies, such as insomnia, irregular heart rhythms, digestive issues, and even strokes. Weight loss can be seen as a concrete manifestation of the loss of self. In many cases, the loss of a job or the inability to work effectively is linked to health problems stemming from the divorce. Consequently,

individuals perceive themselves as "being in a complete mess" and uncertain about when the situation will improve. This is especially true for male participants who view themselves as "[men] of working age" and feel the additional loss of tangible inner potential when they are unable to work and earn money. The financial burden and time spent on legal issues contribute to a sense of self-disruption, as individuals find themselves engaged in activities they do not desire. Finally, the home one lives in assumes a symbolic significance during divorce. It is not only seen as a place of shelter but also as an embodiment of invested resources. The house becomes a home through personal investments, providing a sense of rootedness and meeting basic needs. As a result, parting with the home is experienced as letting go of a cherished part of oneself. Debra, aged 64, expressed her attachment to her house, saying, "Maybe it's because of this home. It's difficult to leave it. Perhaps that's why. Because so much work has already been put into it."

Bearing Collateral Losses. Further into the divorce process, self-disruption also occurs through indirect losses, which can often have a deep impact. They refer to the diminished health and well-being of divorcees' parents and children as a result of the ongoing conflictual divorce process. When parents become emotionally involved in their children's divorce, it often takes a toll on their health. As a result, disruptions in the lives of close family members mutually influence and amplify the amount and intensity of losses experienced. The continuous experience of stress and tension due to conflicts, not being able to see their grandchildren, struggling to understand the situation, and even being directly involved in legal proceedings and communication with attorneys and social workers are some examples of the stressful involvement faced by family members. Roberta (27) told us that her mother always supported her during the process. However, she could not handle the stress and ended up in the hospital after a stroke. The divorcee reported her memories in the hospital room, "she was laying there and looking and then closing her eyes. Then I thought it was the end, that it was the last time I saw her. I was sitting there and crying and kissing her hands." Divorcees often strive to protect their loved ones from harm, but they do not always succeed in doing so, as the repercussions of the divorce can extend beyond their immediate selves and affect the well-being of those close to them.

Another critical aspect of collateral losses is witnessing one's own children going through their parents' divorce. Seeing one's child's loss of a happy childhood within an intact family and the experience of being exposed to the conflicts between parents deeply affects the reality of divorcees. The potential for a child to experience trauma as a consequence of the divorce brings forth feelings of guilt and sadness, and is perceived as a personal loss. The emotional intensity and distressing nature of these thoughts occupy a significant portion of their reflections on the divorce. One divorcee, who has two young children, shared that her daughters witnessed much of her sadness and tension associated with the divorce. She explained, "They are still so young, unable to fully comprehend everything, but they can sense all my anxiety and other emotions in an abstract way. I try to explain things to them to provide some understanding and support" (Linda, 39). Another divorcee reflected on how her older daughter became

more sensitive because she was exposed to all the issues related to the divorce. She expressed her concern, saying, "This is a consequence, a kind of trauma, and I don't know how it will impact her life" (Helena, 47).

The physical and emotional disturbances experienced by one's own child take precedence and are given greater importance than their own struggles. Divorcees feel a strong determination to do everything possible to protect their children from further harm. One mother poignantly discussed the loss of her daughter's potential due to her being prevented by her former husband from providing the care she believes her daughter deserves.

She became entirely not herself. She was charismatic, a stageperson, and had a lovely singing voice. And now she is completely broken because all this is done by the mother [grandmother], and it is evil. She is crouched, bent over... shrunken. According to her music teacher, no music band would take her now. She is a dead girl. I am thinking about how I can get her out of it so that she can become something again and somehow get out of it before she comes of age. An abandoned girl, to be honest. And one can't do anything (Angela, 38).

3.2. Seeking Internal (Re)balance as the Ultimate Goal of the Divorce Journey

The transition of self throughout an enduring divorce is a journey towards finding internal (re)balance—a renewed sense of self filled with clarity and stability. This quest for balance unfolds in two dimensions, each with its distinct orientation: forward-looking and backward-looking on the gains so far.

Figure 8

Graphical Representation of the Seeking Internal Peace Through Self-(Re)balance
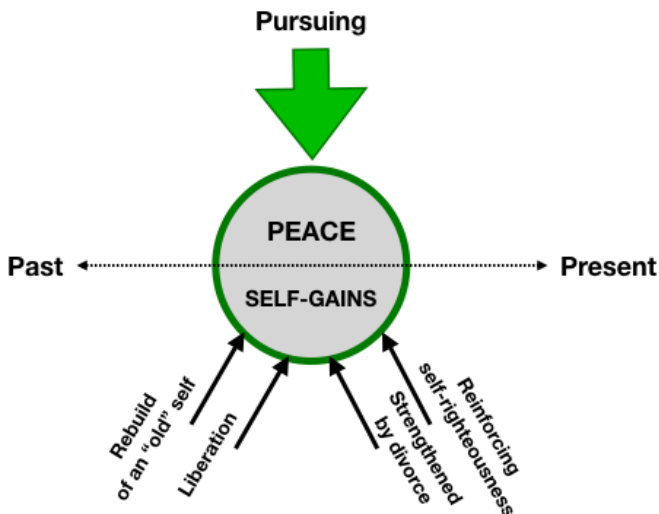
The process begins by looking forward and embracing the **pursuit of enduring inner peacefulness**, which encompasses both the need for higher self-coherence and the resolution of divorce-related conflicts. It involves striving to find a sense of harmony within oneself amidst the ongoing challenges. Peace is viewed as the ultimate goal, surpassing even the resolution of the divorce itself. Debra (64) emphasized her longing for peace, stating, "I want to live peacefully. I want to die in good health." Emma (40) expressed her hopes that finalizing the divorce would bring more peace into her life, emphasizing that peace is her top priority.

The concept of inner peace also involves the absence of conflict related to the divorce, which in turn facilitates higher levels of inner clarity and stability. Overcoming the fear of domestic conflicts and tense atmospheres emerges as one of the primary emotions that hinder individuals from attaining inner equilibrium and the freedom to take action. The desire to be free from fear serves as a motivating force propelling divorcees forward. Katrina (37) shared her perspective, stating,

Sometimes such joy comes that one does not have to be afraid. One does not have to be afraid that one went somewhere with children. Because someone [husband] works at home and is angry that he is working, even though he could be not working and going together. My dreams are such that one could just do what one wants without fear.

Attaining clarity in divorce settlements, typically achieved through court decisions, is considered a crucial step in minimizing conflicts and promoting inner freedom and flexibility: "I would like [court] to assign a stable maintenance for the child and that communication with children would be very clearly set, so that it would be clear to me so that I could live so that I could plan my own time" (Virginia, 39).

The divorce journey entails a process of backward-looking introspection, where individuals reflect on the **self-gains achieved thus far**, recognizing and appreciating the progress they have made. These self-gains serve as sources of hope and strength, establishing a solid foundation for the future. Divorcees not only direct their gaze towards a future characterized by higher inner coherence and the absence of conflict but also cast their glance backward, acknowledging the partial (re)gain of their valued self. The (re)gaining process encompasses various growth experiences reported by divorcees, contributing to inner stability and facilitating the restoration of internal equilibrium. This growth is primarily fostered by looking back and making comparisons between their previous self and their current state, observing advancements in self-acceptance, liberation, and inner strength.

Rebuilding the "old" self emerges as a process aimed at attaining internal balance and counteracting the negative repercussions of divorce. The self that was lost or diminished during the marriage or as a result of the divorce process resurfaces, albeit in a previous or modified form. Through retrospection, individuals contemplate the enhanced stability, peacefulness, and vitality that enable them to respond to their partners' aggressive behavior. They establish boundaries to protect themselves and reject self-blame. One participant described this process as "a return to self," emphasizing the rediscovery and reclamation of their authentic identity: " "It seems like now I'm a

little stronger, more stable… Now somehow it's a lot better, a lot. There has happened a return to myself" (Daisy, 47, 3 years into divorce).

A return to self also encompasses a process of rebuilding the old, yet changed self while incorporating new elements. One participant expressed this process, stating, "The old me is coming back. Only much wiser, putting boundaries to others, because before I have never had any boundaries for others" (Julie, 47). For others, the gains manifest as entirely new ways of living their lives, resulting in a "completely new person." It is a journey that involves learning to prioritize self-focus, self-love, and living one's own life, akin to transitioning from childhood to adulthood. A divorcee described her experience as nurturing her "little internal child, setting little steps to understand what I want, like, and need." From this perspective, divorce can be regarded as an inward-directed journey towards a higher self-understanding and acceptance, a turn from the focus towards the other, to the re-focussing (re-turning) towards the self.

Repartnering offers positive gains and initiates a process of restoring inner balance. Participants in the study reported feeling loved, and secure, and experiencing an enhanced sense of self-belief and self-worth. New partners make it possible for "the cure of me as a woman" to happen. As a result, those who have found new partners view divorce not solely as an adverse event but also as a catalyst for new beginnings. Alex (42) expressed this sentiment, stating, "If you can divorce with minimal consequences, why not embrace it as an opportunity for a fresh start."

Through the (re)turn towards self, individuals experience a ***profound sense of self-liberation***. This liberation arises from breaking free from dysfunctional family dynamics, particularly in cases involving financial difficulties and emotional domestic violence. People express gaining freedom from "the dependency and no life, living his life," which is paired with many adverse emotional reactions. Interviewees express a newfound freedom to engage in meaningful pursuits and activities of their own choosing. They can explore new places, partake in sports, and plan their work and leisure time without the constraints imposed by their former partners. The divorce process grants them the autonomy to fully express themselves and pursue personal fulfillment

Well, I lived my own inner life of some kind. Now it begins to express itself externally. Those desires are fulfilled, the ones I would like and the way I would like. I allow myself to go on retreats, and everywhere. I just couldn't do that before (Helena, 47, 2 years into divorce).

Over time, individuals come to recognize the ***strength they have acquired through the divorce*** process itself. For some respondents, the decision to divorce serves as evidence of their inherent strength. As Katrina (47) aptly expressed, "Divorce is not an easy thing, and it's a myth that only weak people divorce. Being in a destructive relationship is even easier than getting out of it." Surviving the turmoil of a conflict-ridden marital dissolution without succumbing to despair demonstrates the capacity to navigate challenging life circumstances. "I am strong enough to have endured all of this. Only a strong and determined person could have endured so much." The divorce journey fosters the growth of courage within individuals. One interviewee described how his courage had evolved and allowed him to overcome numerous challenges

throughout the divorce process. He explained, "Going through a divorce has cultivated a courage within me that I had never truly possessed before in my life" (Paul, 48).

Drawing strength from **backing up on self-righteousness**, individuals strive to achieve higher inner balance. They emphasize their focus on what they perceive as rightfully theirs and demonstrate a readiness to confront any obstacles in pursuit of their goals. This often pertains to matters involving children and property. For instance, Roberta, a mother of a 2-year-old, expressed her unwavering determination: "I will not give up my son in good faith. Let them do whatever they want to me. Let them make any threats they want. There's no way." Some individuals find strength in seeing themselves as honest individuals who uphold their standards and possess a clear conscience. They emphasize the importance of having no regrets or remorse in the future for not taking certain actions to fight for their objectives. In the Lithuanian language, this sentiment is often expressed as not having "the sorrow of the conscience." Virginia (39) articulated her perspective, stating, "Whatever happens, happens. I'm not afraid of anything, especially since my conscience is clear. I wasn't the one who decided to leave the family or seek another man."

3.3. Stuck Between Losses and Gains in Restricted Self-Transition

The transition between internal losses and gains comes forward as the core space divorcees find themselves amidst enduring conflictual divorce. It points towards multiple restrictions that divorcees face when moving along their self-change process. The restrictions are two-fold. On the one side, they refer to the immersion in the multilayerdness of the conflicts that provoke the feelings of enduring unprotectiveness and the need to protect self. On the other, as time passes and conflicts continue not being resolved, divorcees find themselves in being stuck and hanging in the enduring uncertainty. The picture below depicts the interconnection of these elements (Figure 9). Former spouses, professionals, and the country's legal environment come forward as the main actors in this conflictual uncertain entanglement.

3.3.1. Moving through the Increasingly Unprotected Space

The ongoing, unjust, and often unexpected **violent attacks by a former spouse** are perceived as the main force that hinders progress toward achieving a more effective and timely self-balance. The **hostile and egoistic intentions** of the former partner are evident through their abusive behavior and manipulation of valuable resources, resulting in a constant state of alertness. Participants use specific words to describe their experiences, such as to "eat me alive," to "make sure that I suffer," to "break me morally," or to prove that "I was nobody and will be nobody." These aggressive attacks, false accusations, and absurd demands are primarily seen as tactics employed to gain financial advantages from the divorce, inflict psychological harm, and provoke conflict. One woman reflected on her husband's motives, stating, "Every time he writes or does something, I know his goal is to extract as much money from me as possible and

make me feel bad" (Daisy, 47). Participants perceive themselves as being manipulated and demeaned by their ex-partners, to "simply see me suffering", "completely destroy me, to leave me naked and barefoot."

Figure 9

Graphical Representation of the Restricted Transitional Space Category
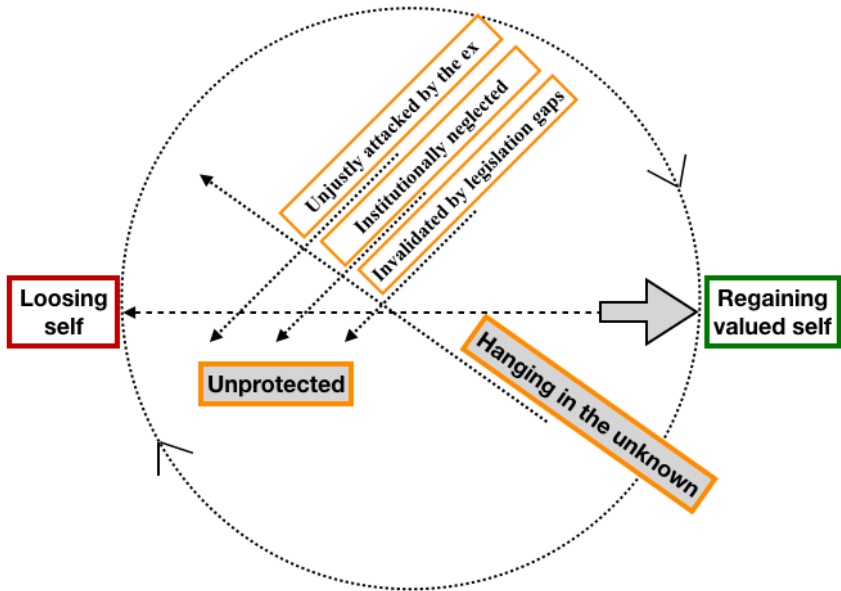
Note. The model depicts inner conflicts preventing divorcees from smoother and more timely self-transition amidst the enduring conflictual divorce process, creating the circling space of restricted self-transition.

These situations create a sense of powerlessness, leaving individuals without any means of escape. People describe feeling attacked and cornered, comparing their experience to being imprisoned, physically assaulted, or cornered "like a pack of wolves attacks another animal and it has to stay alive, escape from them and run away. But I cannot run away. If I run away, that means I run away from my kids."

Intentional and adversarial communication from the former spouse serves as another means of attacking and diminishing the opposing party. The "labeling" behavior manifests through various communication channels, including emails, text messages, legal documents, or face-to-face encounters. As Steven, 45 and three years into divorce, described the labeling, "Those night messages-letters, as I call them. The topic is practically the same that you are guilty guilty guilty, scoundrel scoundrel, but you still have a chance to improve."

Furthermore, the use of various recording devices constitutes an additional method of inflicting personal attacks. These devices exacerbate the already contentious

situation by heightening anxiety over potential surveillance, recording, and subsequent use of the data as evidence against one party. Such recordings intrude upon an individual's private space, leaving divorcing individuals increasingly vulnerable and insecure, subject to surveillance, and unable to exert influence over their circumstances. For instance, Daisy (47) shared an incident in which she discovered that her ex-spouse had covertly installed a listening device in her car, enabling him to eavesdrop on her conversations without her knowledge. Another individual (Roberta, 27) recounted her former partner's persistent behavior of filming or threatening to film their interactions by constantly loitering around her residence with a camera.

However, it is important to note that for some individuals, having the option to video or audio record serves as a means of self-protection. They employ different devices as a precautionary measure in the event of violence or harm from their former partner. A participant shared their experience, mentioning that her ex-husband

filed a criminal case against me that I beat a child. Then he exemplifies in front of the Child protection officers that I should not abuse children. I ask, how does that abuse manifest? I suggest, let us install cameras. Then everyone could see it. No, he does not want cameras. Then one would see immediately [that there is no abuse] (Karen, 47).

Perceiving attacks on one's children as personal incitement intensifies feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness. The inability to guarantee the safety and welfare of their offspring becomes a significant constraint in the process of self-transition. *Non-residential parents*, in particular, face challenges in this regard. The ***manipulative behavior exhibited by spouses*** towards their children is frequently regarded as abusive and viewed as a means to accomplish their own (financial) objectives, while simultaneously inflicting (in)direct retaliatory harm on the divorced individual. For instance, one woman shared her experience of witnessing how her former husband utilized their daughters to achieve his financial goals and inflict suffering upon her.

It is like a nightmare happening there because he already understands that the situation is bad for him… Children continue to be bullied, used, and manipulated. He involves them in property division matters; he makes friends when it is convenient for him; he does not make friends or talk when it is inconvenient for him. In that sense, they are complete hostages (Angela, 38).

The anguish of witnessing manipulative behavior and ***feeling powerless to influence*** the situation is widely recognized as one of the most exasperating aspects of divorce. Particularly distressing is the experience of seeing one's child expressing a desire to be with them, only to be unable to alter the circumstances due to legal rulings. This painful dynamic further intensifies feelings of powerlessness and a sense of being unable to provide adequate protection. An example shared by Peter (46) underscores this sentiment. During a visitation with his sick child, who resided with the mother, the father recounts the heart-wrenching moment when his son, while putting on his shoes, expressed a desire to go with him. Peter acknowledges the profound impact of this scene, stating, "One sees this, and one cannot do anything because I have exhausted all legal avenues, but to no avail."

On the other hand, *residential parents* also endure significant pain and frustration when they observe what they perceive as **neglectful behavior** from their ex-partners concerning their children, especially when it involves non-compliance with visitation and alimony payment agreements. The instability stemming from these issues, coupled with witnessing the resulting negative impact on the children, intensifies feelings of being unable to protect them and contributes to an overall sense of flux. Amidst the ongoing divorce, the residential parent finds it challenging to establish maximum stability in their and their children's lives. Instead, they feel like they are constantly adrift, and imbalance permeates many aspects of their lives.

The perceived adverse behavior contributes to an **increased imbalance within the children**, subsequently impacting the overall equilibrium of the entire family system, including the lives of the divorcees. This imbalance manifests in three primary forms: inappropriate boundary setting, failure to fulfill alimony obligations, and non-compliance with visitation commitments.

Imbalance arises when boundaries are either too lax or excessively rigid. For instance, mothers often express concerns about their former husbands allowing their children to consume unhealthy food or allowing them to go to bed at late hours. Conversely, imbalances can also occur when boundaries are excessively strict. Paulina shared her experience of her ex-partner's conviction that their 6-year-old child was overweight, leading to ongoing aggressive attempts to exert control over the child's weight:

> *"He [son] comes back home. I take his socks off. I had a look and saw that his feet were much swollen. I ask my son what has happened, and why you are not walking. He says that he has much pain in his feet and that his dad ordered him to walk much. He says, I have told my dad that I was in pain, that I could not walk, but he told me to walk anyway because I was fat'.*

In some cases not taking into account the psychological developmental challenges and undermining a child's self-esteem and confidence is also underlined. Karen, a 47-year-old, recounted an incident where she overheard her son's phone conversation with his slightly intoxicated father. The child apologized for being unable to answer his father's call because of a visit to the speech therapist. In response, the father's laughter was heard, accompanied by mocking remarks: "So you cannot talk?! You do not know the letters?! ha ha ha." Such instances further contribute to the overall imbalance within the family system and the divorcees involved.

When the perceived level of imbalance reaches its peak, some divorcees express a desire for their children to have **no interaction with the other parent**. These individuals hope that by eliminating contact, they can prevent further acts of violence, primarily directed towards themselves. For example, Sabrina (28) told us that if her ex got the right to see their son, "he will be tossing our child only with one purpose - to hurt me." The desire to sever all ties with the former partner emerges as a protective measure, driven by the belief that continued contact would lead to further pain and harm. It highlights the urgent need for safety and well-being in the eyes of the divorcee, although it may come at the cost of disrupting the child's relationship with the other parent.

A significant source of anger and dissatisfaction arises from situations where a former spouse ***fails to adhere to the agreed-upon arrangements*** with the children or shows a lack of effort in encouraging the children to engage with the other parent. Witnessing children eagerly waiting for calls or physical meetings with the non-residential parent (often the father), but not receiving them, evokes a great deal of emotional turmoil. For example, Karen (47) shared her experience of her daughter eagerly anticipating her father's arrival, only to be left disappointed because he had no desire to see his children.

> *When he was ordered to move out [by the court], he spent time fishing by the lake with his lover and her child for the whole week. He had not seen his children for a month; he did not even come to see them. He tells children how he misses them and wants to see them, but he cannot come.*

The failure to pay alimony or provide financial support to adult children is perceived as a clear indication of neglect. One divorcee reflected on her ex-husband's actions, stating that he "imagines that [by not providing financially] he hurts me, but in reality, he robbed from his children." In some cases, alimony payments are not fulfilled, even when ordered by the court. For some women participants, the lack of financial support for their children while still demanding a relationship with them appeared perplexing. Helena, a 47-year-old participant, questioned how someone could desire a connection with their children while distancing themselves from their financial responsibilities. She pondered, "The father distances himself from the material, and financial support and still wants to communicate with them somehow. Just to communicate, but how, about what then?"

Summing up the above, the ongoing unjust attacks and manipulative behavior by former spouses contribute to a pervasive sense of alertness and powerlessness, making it challenging for divorcees to find a sense of self-(re)balance. Additionally, the neglectful actions, such as non-compliance with visitation and alimony, intensify anger and frustration, further disrupting the equilibrium within the family system, and the inner lives of divorcees. In their quest for stability and support, individuals turn to institutions, hoping to find solace and guidance. However, instead of resolutions, they discover themselves pulled into deeper levels of imbalance.

Institutional Negligence Pulling Divorcees Deeper into Disbalance

Next to enduring ongoing direct or indirect attacks from their former spouses, divorcees commonly expressed concerns and frustrations regarding the involvement of institutions (courts, social services, child protection offices, judicial offices, psychologists, mediators, and alike) in the divorce process. Seeking support and protection, individuals turn to officials for assistance. However, their experiences often fall short of expectations, as many encounter institutional indifference or even feel attacked by social workers, child protection agencies, police officers, and alike. Several aspects of institutional neglect and frustrations come forward hindering the journey towards achieving a a more complete sense of inner balance. The lack of support and understanding adds to the already challenging process of navigating divorce, further exacerbating the

difficulties faced by individuals seeking resolution and stability.

For some, the initial consideration of involving officials in the divorce process often begins with a ***contemplation of the necessity*** of such intervention. Taking a spouse to court is viewed by many as a drastic and painful step. Divorcees witness examples of complex divorces with protracted litigation and are determined to avoid ending up in a similar position. They express a strong desire to demonstrate to their children that divorce does not have to be a contentious and bitter experience. However, as communication with the former partner reaches an impasse, the prospect of resolving the conflict without third-party intervention seems increasingly impossible. Consequently, turning to the court is perceived as the final and only viable option to achieve a resolution and reach an agreement.

For some, their first interaction with institutions turns out to be ***shockingly negative***, catching them by surprise. This negativity arises mainly when the involvement of officials is initiated by the former partner or automatically assigned by the state in cases involving minor children. Many divorcees have no prior knowledge that child protection officers would be involved, and their sudden appearance comes as a shock. Virginia, a 39-year-old going through a four-year divorce process with two minor children, vividly recalled her fear when social workers made their first visits to her home

> *It seems like, oh God, what is going on here?! One feels like [this] during the inspection. One wants to divorce an adult husband, and here they [officers] come and watch how I interact with the girls; they ask something, how and what, how one lives. Well, one realizes that some ladies came, and they are inspecting you and your kids.*

As divorcees continue their interactions with institutions over time, they increasingly perceive professionals as incapable of effectively fulfilling their roles, further exacerbating the imbalance in the situation. Divorcees argue that due to the unique nature of their cases, professionals often struggle to understand how to handle these complex situations or lack the necessary experience.

The experience of ***institutional indifference*** is particularly disheartening. Divorcees perceive professionals as following rigid procedures and prioritizing their agendas, merely going through the motions to demonstrate that they are doing their job while displaying little genuine concern for the well-being of those involved. Many divorcees feel being looked upon as fools: "those people with problems," "a criminal caught committing some kind of terrible crime," and "being hysterical for seeking ways to protect their children".

> *I feel like some kind of asocial. All these lawsuits, those things, oh Jesus, you know. I tell you, I feel like on those shows on LNK or TV3, TV Help [reality shows], where they are showing those. I feel that level of a person. It is so low for me. (Karen, 47)*

In addition, specialists from various institutions often ***fail to grasp the perspectives of divorcees*** and provide the necessary support. Despite repeated efforts to emphasize the gravity of their situations, institutions perceive divorcees solely as individuals engaged in "conflictual relationships" and fail to take appropriate action. One participant (Peter, 46) referred to this phenomenon as ***"institutional violence,"*** leading to a loss of trust in the institutions and the professionals working within them. "Now I somehow

understand that the truth may not exist. As it has happened with that statement to the police, one just gets disappointed with the system that doesn't support you. It's very sad, very sad" (Daisy, 47, in a 3-year divorce process). It is especially hard to recognize that all these institutional shortcomings directly impact the divorcees themselves and, most significantly, their children, who become the greatest casualties in these circumstances. One father expressed his pain and anguish, highlighting the profound effects of the flawed system on both himself and his child

I don't know. It seems to me that this is a situation of violence against a child. There should be some decisive decisions made here. Now it is like the child is standing on the hot coals, screaming that he is in pain, and a bunch of adults around him argues, "No, maybe we will not take him off yet; maybe we will wait for what the court decides, then we will take him off. Maybe you take him off; no, someone else should." Some kind of phantasmagoria, and I don't know for what? Only it is happening with living people (Peter, 46).

Dispirited by the Child Protection office. Child protection specialists receive particularly negative criticism from divorcees, who perceive them as unprofessional and incapable of effectively intervening in situations that require immediate attention. Divorcees feel unjustly blamed for their imagined wrongdoing against their children. One individual recounted seeking consolation and assistance from child protection officers when her daughter refused to see her. Instead of receiving support, she was met with blame and accusations from the workers, who suggested

Look in the mirror and ask yourself, what have you done [wrong]? Fix your mistake, and everything will be fine…They say you have psychological problems. Obviously, I have psychological problems. Listen, if your child had been taken away, you would not have psychological problems? (Sandra, 48)

What adds to the confusion is that individuals hear officials acknowledging their powerlessness in these situations. "Children's protection office is a completely null institution. They tell us, we see everything, we understand everything, but we cannot help." This realization places divorcing individuals in a state of even deeper uncertainty and exacerbates their inability to find the support and assistance needed to achieve the much-needed protection and balance in their lives.

Divorcees express negative sentiments towards the ***(in)actions of the court*** as well. They feel that court proceedings do not provide them with the clarity and support they need, but instead negatively impact their well-being, safety, and overall level of conflict. The mere thought of court hearings brings back a flood of negative memories and increases their stress levels. Many report experiencing heightened tension in the week leading up to court proceedings and for several days afterward. Recalling what transpired during court proceedings often intensifies the perceived conflict between the spouses. In cases where direct communication between the divorcees is absent, the conflict may appear to be dormant or non-existent. The court process is described as challenging, because "each bone of yours is inspected" and one fears "to say stupid things, unnecessary words." The ongoing involvement with the courts for many consequential years is seen as a highly stress-inducing process, as it takes a toll on their

mental and emotional well-being.

The mother [me] is already vulnerable, and all institutions still hit on her. One must be like a superwoman. Especially if those courts endure; for example, my litigation lasts for two years, two years. Other people litigate for five years and cannot prove anything. So how much can a person endure? As I say, I have probably aged 10 years in these two years (Karen, 47).

Divorcees express frustration with judges who often fail to grasp the complexity of their situations, leading to inappropriate or even absurd decisions and suggestions. They perceive a negative attitude from judges, feeling belittled or dehumanized. For example, one woman conveyed to us how "the very first year, the judge looked at me as to a naive girl who did something wrong herself and... it is her fault that those children do not communicate with her" (Angela, 38). Divorcees recounted instances where judges made unexpected decisions that restricted their access to their children or prevented them from residing in their own homes. Many of these judgments are seen as premature, lacking an understanding of the divorcees' unique circumstances and resulting in significant injustice. Divorcees also criticize court-ordered mediation services, deeming them ineffective in conflictual divorce cases. Emma (40, in a 1-year divorce process) stated, "You begin to distrust those courts and their decisions. Various doubts then arise." This erosion of trust further exacerbates the distress experienced by divorcees.

Overall, the sense of alienation and not being understood contributes to a feeling of being unsafe and unprotected. Divorcees describe a profound sense of vulnerability and standing alone in their battles for their children, property, and personal safety. They feel that their concerns and needs are not adequately addressed or supported by the institutions and professionals involved. This lack of protection intensifies their feelings of uncertainty and isolation during the divorce process pulling them further away from internal rebalance.

There is no protection in Lithuania. Absolutely not. I, for example, feel terribly insecure. Nobody protects me. Lawyers defended me for the first time and said something for me that was written on paper. And in other ways, no one is protecting me (Angela, 38).

Legislation Gaps Invalidating Divorcees and Their Issues: Creating a Barrier to Achieving Timely and Effective (Re)balancing

With time passing by, recognizing the ***limitations of the country's legislation***, divorcees realize that they must primarily rely on themselves to navigate the complexities of their divorce. The legislative system fails to address many systemic issues faced by individuals enduring a conflict-ridden divorce, effectively, invalidating their concerns, challenges, and ultimately their sense of self. The gaps in the legal system serve as an explanation for the limitations experienced by institutions and the professionals working within them. Many interviewees argue that professionals feel helpless in the face of these gaps in lawmaking, resulting in a situation where "nobody can do anything because there are no real laws." As a result, while parents fight, "a child suffers

most." Martin (43, T2), a father of two minor children, 2 years into divorce, argued that associated professionals "walk with their hands in their head saying that these are the gaps and we cannot do anything. It shows that the government does not help and even harms."

The absence of legal regulations addressing psychological violence, child incitement, and parental alienation is a notable concern for divorcees. They express frustration at the difficulty of proving their experiences and receiving a meaningful response from the legal system. The existing legislation and legal framework are viewed as ill-equipped to address the needs and complexities of conflictual divorce cases. A male divorcee emphasizes the system's *failure to recognize and address psychological violence*, resulting in its disregard and potential misuse. "[Psychological violence] is the kind of thing which is very difficult to prove, so it is simply ignored. [We have] a legal system that allows for misuse" (Peter, 46). He suggests the possibility of using forensic examinations to substantiate his claims of psychological violence. However, another interviewee shares her disappointment when a court-ordered report documenting violence against her daughters did not lead to any significant changes in the court's decisions. According to her, "it appears that no one is interested in that examination. No one reacts. The practice of the courts is tragic; no one changes their [children's] place of residence, no one recognizes, even though the expertise determines that it is violence" (Angela, 38).

The prevailing sentiment is that the legislative environment presents numerous challenges and limitations. Divorcees feel a sense of powerlessness and frustration, as they perceive a lack of responsiveness and action from the legal system, "One can write as much as one wants, complain as much as one wishes… but no one will do anything, and one is left alone to fight one's fights." The *inability to legally validate their issues* further exacerbates their difficulties, making it challenging to validate their experiences to others and even themselves. When the system fails to believe or officially acknowledge their concerns, it implies that the issues do not exist, perpetuating a cycle where the effects of violence or mistreatment can persist without recourse.

Male participants in the study highlighted *gendered inequalities*, particularly concerning fathers' negotiation power in securing care arrangements for their children. The assignment of living with both parents was often contingent on mutual agreement, and when the mother opposed such arrangements, the rights and interests of fathers and children were overlooked. According to Peter (46), "the power is completely unequal. If I did the same as she [former spouse], I would immediately get a case against me, and all would end up accusing me of self-governance, ruining the child's psychic, if I would take a child and say, no, I think he is better with me and not with you." Criticisms were directed at the legal system for being out of touch with societal changes and professionals adhering to outdated practices that favored assigning the child to live with the mother. This legal position left some fathers feeling powerless to effect change, resulting in them choosing not to invest unnecessary energy into fighting against it.

The limitation of rights in conflictual divorce cases also manifested in how the

concept of the "Child's best interest" is utilized. Divorcees express their concern that in such cases, the notion of the ***child's best interest is manipulated*** and used as a tool by one parent against the other. For example, one divorcee argued that "It is very easy to incite a small child. The Children's Protection Services only consider what the child says, whether she [child] wants it or not" (Angela, 38). Individuals often face the unjust consequence of losing their right to see their children based on unfounded accusations. Even when it is later determined that the accusations are inaccurate or false, no legal action is taken to prevent such situations from occurring again in the future. Divorcees emphasize the need for these situations to be addressed differently compared to less intense divorces

In addition to the tangible limitations of the country's legislation, divorcees frequently express their deep-seated dissatisfaction with the perceived ***lack of humanity within the entire legislative system***. The system is often described as cold and mechanistic, devoid of empathy and understanding, where "no one cares about one's emotions, there is a law, and all are supposed to be in a particular way." There is a prevailing sense of excessive formality and a lack of human understanding in the interactions. People see themselves as "forgotten pieces in a self-moving machine," where the institutionalized process as a whole expects them to "become robots without feelings." In the digitalized environment, divorcees find themselves interacting with impersonal computerized systems rather than human beings. The human touch is replaced by automated processes and algorithms, leaving divorcees feeling disconnected and dehumanized. Consequently, divorcees experience a deep sense of alienation from the social environment that is meant to provide order and protection. They find themselves being passed from one office to another, encountering a lack of genuine concern for their unique circumstances. This leads to heightened feelings of humiliation, isolation, and helplessness. The very institutions that are meant to support and guide them in their time of need contribute to their sense of being unheard and abandoned.

In certain aspects, the formal and structured approach to handling issues within the system is also viewed as positive. It removes unnecessary emotionality and emphasizes the importance of formalities, facts, and evidence gathering. This ***can provide a sense of objectivity and fairness***. However, to a bigger extent, this formal approach is perceived as unnatural and obstructive. Divorcees feel that their personal experiences, emotions, and individual circumstances are overlooked or disregarded in favor of rigid procedures and regulations. This creates a sense of frustration and detachment from the system, as it cannot adequately address the unique complexities and needs of each individual's situation.

Navigating the Emotional Intensity of Conflicts: Fighting the War

In general, navigating an environment perceived as violent bears a significant resemblance to the experiences of war. The circumstances akin to living in a war-like setting engender a complex interplay of multiple layers of conflict, causing individuals to become deeply entrenched in the multifaceted nature of violence. It is noteworthy that all interviews were conducted before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, thereby

ensuring that the collected data remained unaffected by its influence. However, the subsequent occurrence of the war has inevitably influenced the interpretation of the data, imbuing it with varying nuances and contributing to a heightened comprehension of the pervasive uncertainty.

During the interviews, participants frequently employ war-related terminology to emphasize the significance of their experiences. Expressions such as "war," "fight," "defense," "weapons," and "army" are utilized to underscore the gravity of events. Specifically, individuals often describe their divorce proceedings as a "war of ambitions." They frequently recount instances where their former partners made unreasonable demands, persistently clinging to their aspirations and displaying an unwillingness to take any steps toward resolving conflicts.

Nevertheless, a minority of interviewees acknowledge that feelings of anger and blame are not solely confined to one party. According to their accounts, both sides stubbornly adhere to their respective demands, ***engaging in a "war of principles"*** in their quest to establish the veracity of their positions, refusing to relinquish their stance. Daisy (47) argued that for her husband, it "is a principled thing to delay, to impoverish. Because I live in a rented apartment now, I don't have my own place." Subsequently, she admitted that after enduring four years of divorce proceedings, an inner voice urged her to assert, "One needs to teach a person that this is not done in such a way, common… Now it has become a principled issue. It's already four years: why do I have to back down? Well, no!" Another divorcee, 5 years into her divorce, argued she clearly understood that "now, one wants to prove who is right and who is stupid. These are stupid ambitions" (Virginia, 39).

The prospects of breaking free from this detrimental cycle appear dubious, according to the interviewees. They firmly assert that they have already conceded to the lowest level of demands they find acceptable, and surrendering further would "set a precedent to exploit me and the situation in the future." Accepting less than what they believe is fair and equitable would contradict their inner values and principles. Virginia (39) candidly acknowledged that everyone involved recognized the absurdity of the situation, "because one is not completely stupid. However, one cannot change anything. It is just one keeps on going and keeps on going."

The endurance of the conflict is perpetuated by specific ***pre-established fighting strategies*** employed by private attorneys, effectively transforming the divorce process into a "tactical game" or a "psychological war," according to the interviewees. There exists a widely recognized and utilized model within the country, which guides individuals in their battle against their opponents. This model entails making false accusations, such as alleging the opposing party to be an abuser, homosexual, pedophile, child molester, or mentally ill. Consequently, the accused parent's visitation rights are curtailed due to the initiation of an investigation process, leading to months of separation from their child. Astonishingly, there are no legal repercussions for employing such deceitful tactics. Those making the accusations often spend more time with the children and further incite animosity.

One father commented that "from the one side, these regulations may protect

someone, but … in the end, they do more damage than protect" (Peter, 46). Interviewees stress the need for institutions to recognize that contemporary conflicts are no longer confined to physical realms, "like alcoholism, the beating of children, and killings, as it was 10 years ago. Nowadays, people behave differently. Nowadays, it is a psychological war."

Individuals also provided insights into their strategies for self-defense and the defense of their children against the perceived aggressor, typically their former partner. They express a sense of ***being constantly under attack*** and the need to actively defend themselves. This defense is often undertaken individually but also with the assistance of others. For instance, one interviewee described the process of collecting evidence, stating that they meticulously gather any relevant information which then becomes a weapon they can wield in their defense.

The presence of supportive individuals during this challenging process is considered crucial. Facing the situation alone amplifies feelings of powerlessness amid high uncertainty. Angela (38) aptly stated, "Alone in the field is not a warrior," emphasizing the detrimental impact of isolation. Martin (43) expressed a profound sense of loneliness and solitude during the conflict, contrasting it with their perception that their spouse "has the whole team, the whole army, military force." He further contemplated his war-like experience of his divorce

I say it is not a conflict, but a war. Let us say like Putin is fighting against the world… It [my situation] is terrible, terror is used, and it is encouraged and supported. And that's how it is, and one cannot do anything.

The interviewees also expressed their experiences and perceptions regarding the involvement of institutions, which they associated with the initiation of a war-like process. From their perspective, the divorce process involving institutions often becomes an elongated series of interactions that seemingly lack a tangible resolution. Contrary to expectations of conflict resolution, the institutions involved are seen as perpetuating or exacerbating the conflict itself.

During a subsequent interview, Peter, a 46-year-old individual who had been going through a divorce with a minor child for two years, drew a parallel between the interactions and seemingly futile activities within his divorce proceedings and the process of World War I, "It is like the First World War—many deaths. Everyone sits in their trenches and does not expand anywhere. Just shoots. And there is no result." The analogy to World War I highlights the perceived lack of progress and the sense of being stuck in an unproductive and seemingly endless cycle.

3.3.2. Hanging in the Unknown: Navigating the Emotional Turmoil of Conflicted Environments

Living amidst an environment characterized by persistent attacks, neglect, and invalidation hampers individuals' ability to experience true freedom and actively shape their futures with clarity and predictability. Instead, they find themselves trapped in a perpetual state of waiting and enduring chaos, which hinders the attainment of desired

balance and inner peace. Comparable to being engaged in a war, the uncertainties that permeate the present and near future act as formidable barriers, impeding progress and hindering forward movement. These uncertainties create a state of flux and instability, making it challenging for individuals to regain a sense of control over their lives and mold the future they envision. The picture below presents the various levels of conflict, which by pulling divorcees down the spiral, in time, create the hanging (being stuck) experience.

Being Stuck in Endless Unpredictable Unknown

The experience of unpredictability within the divorce process manifests as a sense of being stagnant or trapped, akin to *"sitting in a dung,"* as one divorcee vividly described. This state of discomfort and limitation hampers individuals from attaining true freedom. There exists an incessant yearning for peace and the longing to regain control over one's life. As Maria, a 47-year-old woman in her first year of divorce, expressed, "I want to finish the divorce as quickly as possible because I finally want peace. I want to come home to where no shadow [husband] is in the house. I want to feel that full life. Plan myself, do it myself." The completion of the divorce is seen as a necessary milestone, serving as a point of disconnection from the past and a foundation for embarking on new endeavors. It becomes necessary "to set a point, to disconnect from that anchor, which is drowning you" before starting anything new.

However, even after the legal finalization of the divorce, some individuals continue to grapple with a lingering sense of being bound to their former status. The label of being divorced does not automatically translate into a personal sense of closure or emotional detachment from the past. Julie, a 47-year-old woman, shared her experience five months after her divorce was legally finalized: "My attorney called me and said, 'Be happy, you are divorced now.' I do not feel even today that I am divorced." The pursuit of freedom and a fresh start persists, with the divorce serving as a critical milestone, yet the inner journey towards emotional liberation transcends the boundaries of legal proceedings.

Joint loans exert a profound influence on divorcees, as they create a sense of entanglement with their former spouse, ***impeding their ability to forge ahead*** and establish a new life. The shared financial obligations and the uncertainty surrounding the division of assets contribute to a feeling of being trapped, incapable of severing ties, and moving forward to construct a sense of normalcy. Julie, a 47-year-old divorcee, expressed this sentiment, stating that joint loans hindered her ability "to get rid of the person or move forward building a normal life." The presence of joint loans creates a complex dynamic, serving as a reminder of the shared financial entanglement and impeding progress toward individual financial independence.

Living in the same residence during the divorce process further intensifies feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty, which can be "100 times worse than a bad court decision." Conversely, remaining legally married prevents individuals from securing new loans or pursuing their aspirations. This situation leaves them feeling like "some kind of citizens, but not fully," unable to wholeheartedly embrace the new chapter in their

lives.

The lingering legal status has a substantial impact on the pervasive sense of uncertainty experienced by divorcees. While a minority of participants hold the perception of being free and divorced, regardless of the ongoing legal procedure, the majority are left perplexed by their marital status and its ramifications for their lives. This ambiguity leaves them in search of guidance on how to navigate their current circumstances. The enduring legal designation as a married individual becomes a constraint that hinders their ability to progress and make crucial decisions, exacerbating the prevailing sense of uncertainty.

> *One understands that one is like a free person. We have not lived together for five years. But at the same time, I am still formally a married woman. And somehow, I don't know, it's a complicated thing. Maybe because one wants to start organizing one's own life. I would plan to sell that house.<…> Well, one cannot draw the line and continue going through life (Virginia, 39, 4 years into divorce).*

Divorcees express ***concerns about the prolonged continuation of conflicts*** even after the divorce is finalized. "I fear that if they [court] decide anything, if they would decide in my favor, everything would still be appealed and all this would continue. It's just not entirely clear how much longer it all can last. Because it is already almost 5 years" (Roberta, 27). The entire process feels like a heavy burden, a never-ending ordeal that carries a constant undercurrent of stress, "It is a huge burden that long, never-ending process. It is scary what a burden it really is, such latent stress".

The ***sluggishness of the legal system*** significantly contributes to the prolonged duration of the divorce process. Each official change or update in the proceedings takes an extensive amount of time, further dragging out the already protracted process. Angela (38), who had been embroiled in divorce proceedings for six years, had lost hope and resigned herself to the possibility of not seeing her daughters until they reached adulthood. The slow progress and persistent delays were disheartening, leaving her feeling trapped in a seemingly never-ending cycle.

Emma (40) reflected on the lack of substantive progress despite the numerous activities and events related to the divorce. Despite the flurry of actions and engagements, the situation remained stagnant, "at first, he [ex] corrected the claim, then something was missing, and they postponed the court hearing again. Then someone got sick and could not participate. Then he changed the judge. It was such a mess, and nothing decent happened." The overall sense of being trapped is not one of idleness but rather a feeling of constant busyness without any tangible changes in the circumstances. This passage of time, filled with countless administrative tasks and legal maneuvers, prolongs the suffering and exacerbates the frustration of those involved.

In summary, when ***contemplating the duration*** of their divorce proceedings, individuals express a sense of disappointment and surprise at the unexpectedly long timeframe, with no clear end in sight. One divorcee aptly described the phenomenon as a paradox: "Everything is clear that nothing is clear. Somehow, it seems natural to me because, in fact, everything is unclear, including how it will turn out. Still, time passed quickly. It has been two years already, but nothing has changed."

The experiences of divorcees are further compounded by a sense of reserved planning for the future. They find themselves *living in the present moment*, with limited capacity to envision how the future will unfold. The unpredictability of court decisions and the outcome of the divorce proceedings play a significant role in this reserved mindset. The ever-changing nature of the divorce process, along with the demands and actions of the former partner, contribute to the uncertainty and inability to make concrete plans, while pondering about possible outcomes and possible actions one would need to take to live further. One male participant shared his experience of a volatile divorce situation, where the constant fluctuations and uncertainties made it challenging to plan for the future

> *My lawyer had agreed on a divorce agreement with her lawyer. According to it, she keeps everything and pays me the settled amount after the sale of the house. Then she changed her mind. Then we agreed we would live on different sides of our house. After that, she changed her mind again. So after several times when I have created hopes and dreams, now I do not dream anymore (Paul, 48).*

Divorcees often find solace in daily activities and avoid looking too far ahead, as it can trigger depressive thoughts and feelings. Instead, they adopt a one-step-at-a-time approach, recognizing the impossibility of predicting the future. Planning becomes challenging, as uncertainties and unexpected circumstances can arise. For example, one divorcee told us about her impossibility of planning, "I cannot even fantazise now, how I see the future. Because maybe I will have to take my little daughter and go to live abroad for a while so that he [ex] does not get close to her" (Angela, 38). *Reserving themselves to the current moment* to survive the burdens of the next day's uncertainties comes often forward. "I live for this day, I am calm today. Tomorrow, I do not know if they will call me if the police will call me, or if children's rights will come to me... One day I can live peacefully, and what about tomorrow, I do not know. Psychologically it is difficult," Roberta (27) told us.

Observing oneself and the world, and immersing in present activities, are seen as essential for navigating through the divorce process. This *shifting from future-oriented planning* to present-focused living is a significant change. According to one divorcee, for her, at the current moment, the most important thing was to observe herself and the world around her. Focusing on the here and now was something she had never done before as for all her life, she was planning the future and living in it. Finding some enjoyment and stability in the current moment becomes a coping mechanism, as tomorrow may bring more challenges and uncertainties.

While reserved future planning is prevalent among divorcees, they also acknowledge *having small dreams* and aspirations. These dreams often revolve around personal desires, such as living in their apartment or house and creating a comfortable space for themselves. Some express aspirations like buying a car or learning to ride a motorcycle. Additionally, thoughts about entering into a new relationship one day arise, as many do not wish to spend the rest of their lives alone. However, for most individuals, pursuing new relationships is not their immediate focus. They express the need for personal space and time to heal and recover from their previous relationship. The most

challenging aspects for divorcees are unresolved issues concerning their children and property division. Divorcees recognize that achieving long-term planning and stability necessitates addressing and resolving these matters. By finding closure in these areas, individuals can gain a sense of closure, and balance and move forward with their lives.

Doubting permanent conflict resolution. Despite the strive towards gaining higher inner balance and realizations about the gains achieved so far, the possibility of finalizing the process is always shadowed by various doubts. There are lingering uncertainties about the potential limits of the inner transition and whether the ultimate goal of internal balance can truly be attained. These doubts test one's resolve and perseverance on the path to self-discovery and balance.

A finalized divorce represents a significant milestone in the transformative journey of divorcees, as it is seen as a crucial step toward achieving ultimate inner balance. However, the indefinite nature of divorce-related conflicts casts a shadow over these prospects. Dissatisfaction with court decisions and the pursuit of individual goals prolong the legal processes. For instance, Peter (46) shared his intention to appeal a court decision that did not meet his satisfaction. "So I am appealing it. I don't know; they say it can be like this until children reach adulthood. But I, in this case, if I want to see the child, I don't see many other options."

Despite the expectation that finalizing the divorce would bring clarity and stability, the reality often falls short of the anticipated outcome. Divorce does not serve as a panacea for conflict resolution. During subsequent interviews with individuals who had already completed their divorce proceedings, it became evident that doubts, miscommunications, and misunderstandings persisted even after the legal formalities. Despite the relative peace and clarity offered by court rulings or mutually agreed-upon settlements, a complete rebalance remains elusive.

That's how it seems, you've divorced, but you're still the weak side, and he won't give you alimony. So one has to go and fight, even though one has to support children for the most part... I'm saying, thank God, it's all over. One really lives peacefully, but he [ex-husband] still eats you, but one tries not to pay attention (Karen, 47).

Realizing the Absurdity

As time goes on, the experience of being stuck in an uncertain waiting period while still being engaged in various activities becomes more pronounced and takes on the characteristics of absurdity in enduring conflictual divorce processes. Individuals describe this absurdity using words such as abnormal, detached from reality, akin to fighting windmills, reminiscent of a Kafkaesque novel, and a war of absurdity. The absurdity is rooted in the involvement in a process and undertaking activities that **lack coherence and logic**, ultimately pulling them further away from attaining clarity and understanding of their situation.

The experience of **being attacked and feeling the need to defend** oneself, despite not harboring guilt or wrongdoing, engenders a profound sense of nonsense and absurdity. As one participant articulated, "I have such a feeling that I have not done absolutely anything wrong, yet I am attacked, and I have to protect myself. This is where

the feeling of absurdity comes from" (Daisy, 47). The inherent contradiction between being implicated in a conflict while lacking any culpability generates a surreal and bewildering sensation. Some individuals go so far as to label it as "the absurdity war," emphasizing the surreal nature of the situation. The experience of navigating through such a divorce process, where one is compelled to defend oneself unjustly, further amplifies the dissonance between reality and the demands imposed upon them.

The financial aspect of divorce introduces an additional layer of stress and significantly contributes to the overall sense of absurdity experienced by individuals. The divorce process entails substantial financial expenses, including fees for hiring attorneys and obtaining necessary documentation. Many individuals find these financial demands associated with litigation to be exorbitant and wasteful. Such expenses place a considerable burden on their financial well-being, further destabilizing their lives and augmenting the already pervasive uncertainty regarding their future. ***The disproportionate costs involved*** in divorce proceedings contribute to the perception of absurdity surrounding the entire process. The significant financial implications not only create additional strain but also underscore the often stark contrast between the personal stakes involved in the divorce and the financial burdens imposed upon individuals.

> *I will pay a lot of money. I have already spent 20,000 euros on my divorce process, which is not even halfway through . . . We would have better spent it sending our child to a private school. It seems like a war of ambitions. Looking from the side, one realizes that it is entirely absurd (Virginia, 39).*

As a consequence, the divorce process acquires a life of its own, detached from the individuals involved. It becomes increasingly challenging to comprehend its true essence and purpose. According to Virginia (39), the process "wraps itself up, wraps up, and then one cannot understand anymore what it is really about." This entanglement, coupled with the absence of clear boundaries and a definitive end, ensnares individuals in the present moment, leaving them ***unable to make sense of or exert influence*** over the ongoing situation. The inability to bring closure to something they earnestly desire to complete generates feelings of powerlessness and helplessness.

One divorcee articulated their frustration and sense of powerlessness, viewing the seemingly insurmountable divorce process as a violation of fundamental human rights.

> *According to the Constitution, every person has a right to freedom. It means, in essence, I have a right to freedom. If I am in a marriage and it is not good for me, I am getting a divorce. But the divorce that continues for 5 years, well, I have not heard of such a situation anywhere else. An absurd situation indeed (Roberta, 27).*

Overall, amidst the turmoil of conflicted environments, individuals find themselves caught in a tangled web, where true freedom feels elusive. Attacks, neglect, and invalidation cast a shadow over their lives, stifling their ability to shape their future with clarity and purpose. Like soldiers engaged in an unending war, they navigate a landscape fraught with uncertainties, constantly waiting for a reprieve from the chaos that surrounds them. The completion of the divorce becomes a crucial milestone, a

point of disconnection from the past, and a foundation for embracing new beginnings. However, the pursuit of freedom and a fresh start persists, transcending the boundaries of legal proceedings. The inner journey towards emotional rebalance remains ongoing. The flurry of actions and engagements does little to change the stagnant circumstances. It becomes a messy and frustrating passage of time, filled with administrative tasks and legal maneuvers, prolonging the suffering and exacerbating the frustration of those involved.

3.4. Self-strengthening Strategies: the Ways of Engaging with Distinct Stages of Transition
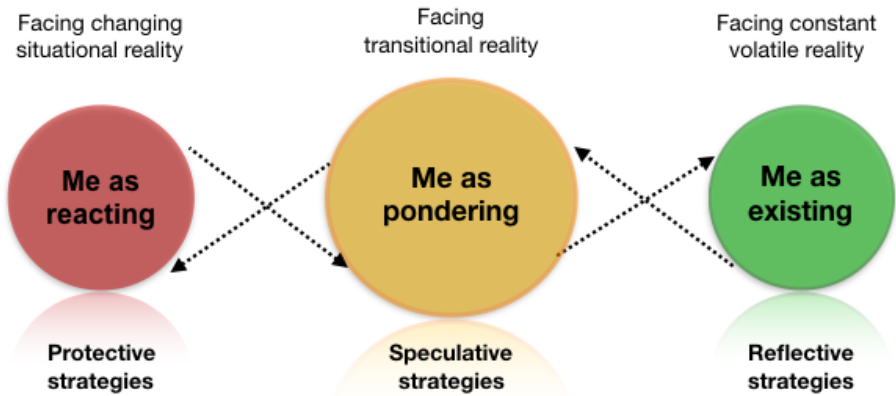
Divorcees employ self-strengthening strategies to navigate the challenging transition from self-fragmentation to regaining internal balance. These strategies serve as a bridge between different stages of self-transition, each influenced by the pervasive uncertainty of the liminal space. At the early stage of divorce, individuals are primarily focused on protecting themselves and their interests. However, as time progresses, their mindset shifts towards more reflective and inclusive thinking. In between this transitional phase, divorcees find themselves in a state of contemplation, pondering about future possibilities and enduring the waiting period. These strategies of self-expression and introspection play a crucial role in navigating the complex journey of divorce.

The perpetual oscillation among the three modes of strategies is a continuous phenomenon, contingent upon the immediate and persistent circumstances surrounding divorce. However, as time elapses, individuals tend to move themselves from reactive strategies and embrace more reflective approaches, all the while persistently engaging in pondering. The application of strategies to navigate the divorce environment entails three distinct forms of self-presentation through actions: commencing with the "me-as-reacting" mode, followed by the "me-as-pondering" mode, and ultimately culminating in the "me-as-existing" mode.

In the initial and disruptive stage of divorce, and throughout the subsequent restrictive self-transition, divorcees frequently employ **protective strategies** that facilitate their journey towards achieving a higher level of self-rebalance. The rapidly changing situational reality and the experiences of fragmentation and attacks compel individuals to react by intensifying their self-protection, ensuring they do not lose their grip on their lives. These strategies establish a mode of self-as-protecting, enabling divorcees to engage with the volatile reality they face while safeguarding their fragmented well-being.

Figure 10

Graphical Representation of the Interchange of Self-Strengthening Strategies

Facing changing situational reality | Facing transitional reality | Facing constant volatile reality

Me as reacting | **Me as pondering** | **Me as existing**

Protective strategies | Speculative strategies | Reflective strategies

Note. The interchange of reactive-protective and reflective ways of engaging with different transitional stages, creating a central space with pondering speculative mode of being.

Among divorces, one of the primary challenges is to ***control intense emotional reactions***. Maintaining personal integrity and preventing oneself from becoming overwhelmed by heightened stress levels becomes a paramount task. The ability to regulate emotions often involves creating a psychological distance between oneself and others, sometimes taking the form of a volitional or less conscious ***bodily shutdown***. Participants frequently described experiencing various psychosomatic reactions to stress. For instance, Angela (38) shared that her body automatically responded to stress by becoming "locked from head to toe," rendering her unresponsive to external stimuli. Other women reflected on their emotional suppression, noting that they had refrained from crying since the beginning of their divorce until recently when they broke down in tears during a session with their psychologist. They recognized the accumulation of pent-up emotions that had remained unexpressed for a prolonged period. Katrina, a 37-year-old participant, expressed feeling like "a zombie, an antihuman, who does not feel anything, pain, or joy. I am dreaming about when I will be able to feel everything."

To cope with the stress and emotional turmoil of divorce, individuals often find solace and stability in ***engaging in self-consuming activities***. These activities serve as a means to mentally distance themselves from the source of stress and maintain their momentum. Examples include immersing oneself in household chores or renovating homes, participating in sports, tending to children, and pursuing educational endeavors. For some divorcees, committing to ongoing intensive activities becomes a crucial method to prevent themselves from falling apart or becoming ill. As one participant expressed, "To lay down and read a book, to watch a movie from the beginning till the

end, I do not remember when I have done that for the last time. One turns around as a squirrel because if one relaxes, certain illnesses might start attacking" (Virginia, 39).

Immersing oneself in professional work emerges as a significant coping mechanism for individuals seeking to escape the pain and relentless negative thoughts associated with divorce. Sandra (48) told us that her work saved her life during the initial years of divorce. She was able to immerse herself in it throughout the working days. Weekends were the scariest days as she compared being alone and doing nothing to a nightmare. Another interviewee revealed that "sitting at home puts one down. How long can one be alone? For me, being on my own means a bottle [of alcohol]. If loneliness is a bottle, one has to go out, interact with others, and be with them" (Maria, 47). Implementing a strict daily schedule and planning the day meticulously provides a much-needed sense of relief and structure. As a result, many participants viewed emotional crying and overthinking the situation as unproductive strategies that hindered their progress, emphasizing the need to focus on moving forward rather than getting caught in a cycle of rumination.

Maintaining self-control becomes crucial within the legal divorce process, where emotions hold little sway and factual evidence takes precedence. Over-emotional reactions work against individuals, putting them in a less favorable position. Alex (42) shared a regretful incident where he acted impulsively and hit his former spouse during a moment of emotional intensity. As a consequence, he faced severe repercussions, including being barred from his own house and restricted from seeing his children for an extended period. This experience served as a wake-up call, highlighting the detrimental effects of allowing emotions to override logical thinking in an already sensitive situation. Maria (47) recounted her own experience, revealing that her heightened emotions during a court hearing resulted in a 200 euro fine for shouting and displaying excessive anger. These examples underscore the importance of maintaining self-control and rationality within the legal process to avoid exacerbating an already challenging situation.

Consequently, divorcees find themselves in an additional stressful reality where the need to control their emotions and carefully choose their words becomes paramount. They are acutely aware that any slip of the tongue or inappropriate action can be used against them in court. Consequently, individuals feel compelled to be highly cautious and precise in their expressions. Alex (42) argued that "everyone told me, do not even try [to go to court without attorney]. Any unfitting action can be used against you. That is a fact. One cannot tell everything one thinks of, as one can quickly tell too much." The fear of divulging too much or saying the wrong thing leads to a sense of self-censorship and detachment from personal expressions. While this controlled approach may serve the purpose of moving closer to conflict resolution, it also distances individuals from their true emotions and creates a sense of *self-disconnection and censorship*.

Divorcees often resort to *distancing themselves from the source of harm*, typically their former spouse, as a self-protective measure on their journey towards increased self-coherence. The breakdown of constructive and direct communication with their

ex-partner leads to a perception that engaging in such interactions is harmful. These interactions tend to be filled with heightened emotions, blame, demands, and manipulation, resulting in a volatile and contentious atmosphere. Divorcees recognize that *limiting their interaction* with their former spouse is necessary to shield themselves from further harm. By minimizing direct communication, they create a space where the conflict appears to be less prominent, residing in the background.

Initially, divorcees often resort to physically removing themselves or their spouse from the shared environment as a way of dealing with perceived violence. Moving out and creating physical distance between them can be an effective strategy, although it can also escalate the conflict temporarily. However, as time goes on, *written modes of communication*, such as messaging and emails, become the preferred method of interaction for distancing themselves from their ex-spouse. Written communication offers a more controlled and fact-based approach, allowing divorcees to keep their emotions in check. It provides a sense of detachment and allows them to focus on conveying necessary information without getting entangled in emotional disputes. As one divorcee reflected on their experience two years into the divorce, written communication became a crucial tool in maintaining distance:

> *Does distancing deepen the conflict or reduce it? I think it reduces because it would continue going deeper, and there would be no end to it because he decided not to change. If a person decides to go and solve something, then yes. But when the solution is only to show aggression, then the conflict only increases (Helena, 47).*

Indeed, while limited communication may help some divorcees maintain distance and reduce conflict, it can be perceived by the other party as a stalling tactic or an avoidance of addressing the underlying issues. When one party chooses to limit communication, it creates frustration and a sense of being ignored or dismissed by the other party. They interpret the lack of engagement as a deliberate attempt to avoid resolving the conflicts and finding common ground.

Divorcees often choose to *involve professionals*, such as private attorneys and social services, to act as intermediaries in their communication with their former spouses. This distancing strategy aims to reduce emotional intensity and provide a sense of security by entrusting the communication process to these professionals. Divorcees find some comfort in leaving the task of conveying messages to their attorneys, allowing them to handle the legal aspects of the divorce.

However, relying on third-party communication has its drawbacks. Some individuals feel that this approach takes matters out of their own hands, diminishing their control over the situation. It leads to a perception that the divorce has shifted from being a personal conflict between the divorcees to a battle fought by their representatives. This power dynamic further fuels the conflict, as the divorcees feel that their voices and perspectives are disregarded. "The fights are already going on between the lawyers; we are left behind. There is absolutely no respect for each other," told Martin (43).

In situations where distancing oneself from the perceived sources of threat, such as former spouses or institutions, is not possible or counterproductive, divorcees may

resort to **derogating their opponents** as a coping mechanism. Divorcees find themselves in a complex situation where cutting off all communication with their former spouse is not always feasible, especially when there are shared minor children involved. Similarly, ongoing communication with officials is necessary as every activity and decision must be officially documented for court purposes. The repeated contact with public servants (and a former spouse) is emotionally challenging and it contributes to a heightened sense of frustration and perceived attacks on their well-being. Derogating the other party by questioning their legitimacy, prestige, or authority provides a temporary sense of relief or empowerment.

Divorcees often resort to derogating their spouses and officials through **negative labeling and judgments**. Some attribute negative traits to their former spouses, such as labeling them as abusers, manipulators, or pathological liars. This contemptuous view stems from a perception of their spouse's narcissistic tendencies and egoistic needs. On the other hand, some divorcees adopt a different approach by pitying their former spouses. For example, one woman reported looking at her spouse as a patient, inadequate, and slightly ill. That was the main reason she stopped feeling anger toward him, as "one cannot be angry with a patient." It is a particular strategy to diminish self-uncertainty and enhance self-righteousness.

> I started… wondering whether I may have done something wrong here, like maybe I missed something essential here, where my mistakes are. However, I realized that in the end, he [ex] has schizophrenia, and nothing can be changed here (Roberta, 27).

Divorcees frequently express negative perceptions of specialists involved in the divorce process, particularly when it comes to Child Protection Services workers and mediators. They criticize these professionals for what they perceive as a lack of professionalism, experience, and ethical standards, particularly in cases involving children who refuse to see one parent. "We had a really poor mediator; she sits and watches. The attorneys are chopping each other, and she sits and listens" (Daisy, 47).

Engaging in a self-protective mode helps individuals preserve and safeguard aspects of their self that remain intact, enabling them to navigate through heightened levels of stress. Over time, divorcees start **engaging in speculative strategies** about different facets of their identity and circumstances. They contemplate and evaluate their self-perception, seeking clarity and a more coherent sense of self to counteract inner doubts. Additionally, they engage in reserved contemplation of future possibilities, strategizing approaches to address challenges, and resorting to an undetermined waiting period as a coping mechanism for managing ambiguous circumstances.

Amidst volatile circumstances marked by uncertainty, manipulation, and humiliation, individuals actively seek second opinions to navigate the dissonance between the negative perceptions imposed upon them and their self-perceptions. They engage in a search for answers that can offer clarity and validation. This often involves seeking support from external sources, such as relatives, friends, and professionals from different institutions, in their quest to **establish a sense of self-normalcy**.

For instance, Alex (42) consulted an addiction psychologist to get answers about

his dependency issues: "I visited him and he reassured me that there was no problem with me... I am not dependent on alcohol." Seeking authorized responses from trusted professionals serves to resolve doubts and brings individuals closer to attaining internal clarity regarding their own rightness or wrongness. Angela (38) expressed that obtaining official opinions from psychologists about her daughters would bring her peace of mind in the current moment of uncertainty.

If that is the truth, in the sense that I am fantasizing… then let them tell me such truth, I need the truth. That they are safe, live there well, are psychologically unbroken, are unaffected, and that it is their free will. Then it is all ok, then I will let go very easily and will leave it as it is and will not fight.

Other divorcees actively strive to establish their normalcy by purposefully **aligning their behavior with societal or professional norms**. Within this context, there exists an implicit understanding of what is deemed "normal" or socially acceptable. Individuals consciously endeavor to adhere to a set of expectations and standards that govern social interactions and conduct. By doing so, they seek to affirm their own sense of normalcy and validate the conformity of their actions.

She [wife] repeats [to everybody] that I scream, that I raise my voice. However, it is natural for me because I am a guide, I talk in front of an audience of 40 people. One lives in a house. Therefore, to call somebody who is on the first floor or second floor, I have to raise my voice (Martin, 43).

Engaging in self-reflection and **contemplating a non-conflictual self** is another way to reinforce answers to pondering questions. Individuals continuously speculate about the origin of the conflict, often attributing it to their former partner. Angela (38) stated that she had never engaged in a conflict with her ex, explaining, "I simply distanced myself because I was being abused." From their perspective, if it weren't for the actions of the former spouse, there would be no conflict, and the divorce process would be swiftly resolved. It is worth noting that many interviewees hesitate to label their disagreements as "conflicts." They speculate about the disputes as predominantly one-sided, as their ex-partner refuses to engage in negotiations and work towards finding common ground. Reflecting on the nature of divorce conflicts, one participant shared their perspective,

For me, it is complicated to think about the conflict as a conflict. Because when there is conflict, both people quarrel, they are hurt or something else. In our case, I do not even know. I want to negotiate, but she does not. She distances and builds walls (Peter, 46).

In the Lithuanian context, there is a notable contention regarding the use of the term "high-conflict divorce," with the prevailing preference for the phrase "conflictual relationship" among individuals. However, this term is deemed inadequate by divorcees, as they argue that the majority of conflict arises predominantly from their former partner's side. Divorcees perceive their legal actions as defensive measures taken to safeguard themselves and their children, rather than acts of aggression or attack. This viewpoint highlights the asymmetry in conflict dynamics. As one divorcee described the issue,

A conflictual relationship is mainly from his side, not mine, but despite that, it is assigned to both of us. And it seems that if I didn't go anywhere, would not say anything, everything would be good. However, if I later informed that such and such situation happened, but it was not officially notified, it would mean that nothing had happened (Roberta, 27).

Divorcees engage in ***speculation about the potential actions*** they could take and whether those actions would yield the desired outcomes. In subsequent interviews, divorced individuals shared their ongoing struggles with issues such as unpaid alimony or non-compliance with visitation agreements. They found themselves confronted with a dilemma: should they officially report these violations or simply let them go? The enduring uncertainty and lack of resolution surrounding these matters led to feelings of apathy and hopelessness. Divorcees questioned the efficacy of taking any action, as it seemed to only perpetuate the cycle of conflict and further amplify the sense of absurdity they experienced. Individuals also engage in speculations about the actions of their former partners and what that could mean to their divorce process.

All-consuming waiting is a significant aspect of engaging with the prolonged divorce process, characterized by heightened speculation and uncertainty about the future. It entails a deep immersion in the proceedings without having substantial influence over the situation. Reflecting on their divorce experiences, many individuals express a sense of being engulfed by the demanding and protracted months that extend into years. Their sense of self appears to fade into a haze, leaving little room for the formation or recollection of distinct memories. Their focus becomes exclusively centered around divorce-related interactions, primarily of a legal nature, making it challenging for them to disconnect emotionally and physically. For example, Julie (47) told us that

[My first years of divorce] passed like in a fog as I waited from letter to letter, from message to message. My life wasn't happening. Yes, I was starting to get angry that I didn't even remember what we [me with my ex] talked about. Years have passed, and I do not understand how.

Waiting in the context of divorce is not a passive void but rather a dynamic and active period filled with anticipation and uncertainty. Divorcees find themselves waiting for various responses, answers, and reactions from officials, former partners, and court hearings. This waiting is often accompanied by a sense of apprehension and unease. Although there is a glimmer of hope for a positive outcome, in many cases, the process remains stagnant with no real progress. However, people worry about the potential emergence of unexpected situations and their ability to navigate through them. Peter, a 46-year-old father, expressed it as finding self in the absurdity of "the novel of Kafka," "Something will happen again, that child is again incited, again. I always get Something. And one continuously feels hung, not released… So one sits and waits."

The continuous waiting in a volatile environment keeps individuals in a constant state of vigilance, preventing them from fully moving on from the separation. The prolonged and uncertain nature of the waiting is emotionally burdensome, often resulting in persistent feelings of sadness and low mood. According to Julie (47), "There is a big probability of falling into depression, of feeling hanging in the air. One does not

understand what is happening around."

Overall, the lack of resolution in divorce proceedings perpetuates a state of ongoing uncertainty, prompting divorcees to ponder about their volatile environment and themselves in it anxiously anticipating the future. People carefully consider the potential outcomes of their actions, striving to assert their agency in navigating the complex divorce process. This ongoing speculation reflects their determination to find clarity and meaning in the enduring conflictual transitional process.

Amidst the enduring turmoil of divorce, with the passage of time, individuals reach a point where they adopt a more reflective engagement with their volatile reality. They recognize the absurdity and seemingly never-ending nature of their situation. In response, individuals **engage in reflective strategies**, such as a profound search for meaning being in the divorce, which serves as an important coping strategy. Through the process of *future-directed meaning-making*, divorcees strive to find significance and coherence in the actions they undertake, ultimately allowing them to create a more stable and clear self.

One prominent aspect of meaning creation among divorcees is the ***establishment of themselves as moral individuals***. The data gathered indicates that divorcees find meaning by emphasizing moral integrity, honesty, and the trustworthiness of their goals. They view themselves as genuine individuals, with nothing to hide and therefore nothing to feel ashamed or blamed for, as they have been "following the path of truth." Fighting for their values, perceived truth, and what they believe to be rightfully theirs is a common theme. One divorcee expressed her determination to continue the fight because she believed it to be the right course of action according to her own conscience.

The [divorce] result is not that important to me. I know that the fight is going according to my conscience. I do not admit less because, in my view, that is the right way, and that is it. For the rest, it will be as it will be (Helena, 47).

Guarding the well-being of their children holds significant importance in the process of meaning-making for divorcees. Individuals prioritize the welfare of their offspring as the central focus in their quest for meaning. One divorcee strongly expressed her determination not to willingly give up her child, "Let them do what they want. Let them threaten me or something. I am not asocial, I do not have any bad habits or like. Everything is for the child; everything is only for the child" (Roberta, 27). Another divorcee highlighted the importance of protecting her daughters from the psychological harm inflicted by her husband, "I am fighting because I believe that my daughters are experiencing the same psychological violence I experienced for so many years" (Angela, 38). Children occupy a central role in the process of meaning-making and self-creation. Linda (39) reflected that despite all the difficulties, at the end of the day, lying down with her little daughters in their house's safe and cozy environment felt like the most significant present that could come from the exhausting divorce process. Financial concerns, in comparison, take on a secondary role as a means of safeguarding the well-being of their children.

By ***recognizing and harnessing their inner strength***, divorcees find a profound sense of meaning in their journey. They portray themselves as resilient individuals who have already endured the difficult process and are determined to continue the fight. This self-perception of strength serves as a strategy, allowing them to transcend the hardships of divorce. For some, the decision to divorce itself is seen as proof of their strength. One of the interviewees argued that "divorce is not an easy thing. It is a myth that only weak people divorce because being in a destructive relationship, I think, is even easier than getting out of it" (Julie, 47). Others defined strength as the ability to persist and not give up, even when faced with adversity:

> *It costs a lot of energy, effort, money, and health. All that was an extraordinary experience. I had to somehow survive it, but as of today, I am very happy because I have grown my spine. I am a strong, happy woman, and I can do everything for my child now (Angela, 38).*

Through self-reflection and analysis, divorcees come to terms with the inevitability of their situation, recognizing that ***accepting of the circumstances*** is a necessary step towards healing and rebuilding their lives. Divorcees acknowledge that there are certain aspects of their past and present that they cannot change, and they actively work towards accepting this reality. By letting go of the desire to alter the unchangeable, individuals strive to find inner peace and move forward in their lives. Karen (47), one year into divorce, argued, "You try to let go, analyze the situation, the why, and then you realize that you cannot change the fact; you have to accept it."

Allowing the divorce process to run parallel to their everyday lives is another aspect of acceptance for divorcees. Initially, the intense emotions associated with divorce consume their thoughts and actions. However, as time passes, especially when the legal process extends over several years, divorcees learn to let the process "go like something natural, which is happening along with all your other things" (Virginia, 39, four years into divorce). The divorce process becomes integrated into their routine, and the fears and anxieties surrounding its outcome diminish over time. Divorcees perform the necessary tasks and await the finalization of the process. One divorcee, 4 years into divorce, reflected that divorce

> *Drags on, drags on, and then everything drags on so much that one does not know what is next. One does not even get nervous or dig deep anymore because one's life just goes on, and the divorce process goes sideways.*

For certain divorcees, ***accepting the systemic inequalities*** inherent in the divorce process becomes part of reflective engagement. They reach a point where they choose to avoid further interaction or resistance against the system, recognizing the potential futility of their efforts. This decision often arises from a realization that the legal resources or information available to them, including media reports, indicate a longstanding legislative tradition that would make their fight seem futile. Paul (48), a father in a 3-year divorce, argued

> *It is not typical for both partners to participate in a child's upbringing and financial support 50%. . . If a court decision is in dispute, then all the money must be allocated to one [parent], [children have] to live with one, and another [parent] has to provide*

money and see their children sometimes. I realized that I would not turn against the wind because there is such an order, and that is all.

A final aspect of reflective engagement in enduring divorces involves **recognizing that both parties hold their own subjective truths**. Divorcees acknowledge that their pursuit of individual goals and advocacy for their perspectives can contribute to the perpetuation of conflict within the divorce process. While they are aware of their aspirations and beliefs, they recognize that these can potentially fuel disagreements and tensions with their former partners. Despite this understanding, the conflicts persist, as neither side is willing to relinquish their position. Divorcees come to terms with the fact that each party has its own truth, yet the inability to effect meaningful change perpetuates the ongoing conflict. Consequently, divorce strategies are often shaped by individual meanings, objectives, and aspirations, further contributing to the perpetuation of the conflict.

Summarising, with time, by engaging in meaning-making and accepting the circumstances they face, divorcees start navigating the challenges of their enduring divorces with increased resilience and purpose. They shape their strategies and decisions based on their individual meanings, objectives, and aspirations, to find resolution and move forward. This reflective engagement helps them find more sense of closure, rebuild their lives, and embrace a new way of being with a stronger sense of self.

3.5. Navigating the Multifaceted Nature of Resources

The utilization of resources plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' engagement during various stages of transition. These resources can have diverse effects, ranging from supporting individuals in attaining higher levels of inner coherence to potentially triggering increased protection tendencies. Furthermore, they also can contribute to keeping individuals in a restricted transitional space, where they engage in ongoing contemplations and reflection on unanswered questions. We discuss several resources, including social support networks (friends and family), financial resources, spiritual resources (religion), and the distinctive role of the initiator in playing a role in the enduring divorce process. The overview of the resources is presented in the Figure 11.

3.5.1. Family and Friends: Foundations of Strength or Sources of Uncertainty

Family, including parents and children, as well as friends, play a vital role in providing support during the challenging process of a conflictual divorce, especially in its initial tumultuous stages. The strong bond with parents and their emotional, financial, and even legal assistance **serves as a solid foundation** during the most difficult times. One individual highlighted the significant support received from her family, particularly during the first two years of the divorce, "my family helped me throughout the whole divorce case. Throughout the process, they supported me not to give up, to hold on, not to let him manipulate me, and so on" (Angela, 38). Similarly, another divorcee expressed gratitude for her parents' unwavering presence throughout the entire
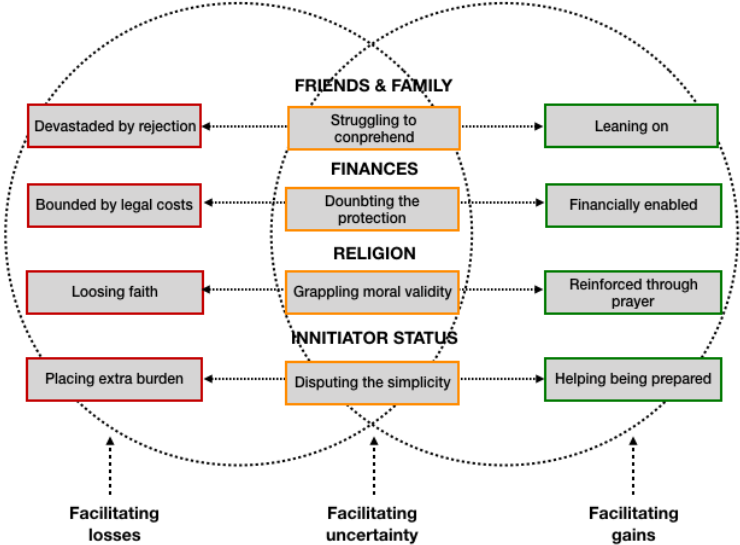
divorce process.

> I have huge support from my parents, huge. Because they really say all the time, just say, if you need something, just say. It gives me such peace that if I were to be all alone, it would get me. It would be very, very difficult to endure all that (Daisy, 47).

Adult children are often viewed as a valuable resource for divorcees, offering support and standing by their side. Their presence is instrumental in various ways. For example, one divorcee shared how her daughters played a significant role in purchasing a house and how one of them actively supported her in court by contesting her father's false claims. Often, the involvement and determination of adult children provide divorcees with much-needed assistance, both practically and emotionally, during the divorce process.

Friends emerge as a significant source of social support for divorcees. The strength of emotional connections and the number of friends can make a difference in ***providing solace and companionship***. Divorcees rely on friends for listening, advice, and opinions, appreciating their unwavering support throughout the process. "I have a very good friend of mine who has really helped me a lot, and she lives nearby. She would get up there at 6 or 7 AM and run to help if necessary" (Virginia, 39). Notably, even friends of the former spouse can offer moral and practical assistance, which can come as a surprise to the divorcee.

> Friends told me, namely, his friends, that they knew how to build [a house]. They said we'd help you to set up; we'll help you to take care of it; we'll help you with everything we can. It is that kind of moral support (Karen, 47).

Figure 11
The Multifaceted Nature of Resources

However, the presence of certain parents, including parents-in-law, becomes an obstacle in the divorce process, hindering divorcees from achieving inner rebalance. In the case of divorcing women, they often face condemnation, criticism, and even rejection from their mothers, further complicating their situation. One interviewee, Linda (39), shared her experience of *encountering an overwhelmingly negative attitude* from her mother, which became one of the most challenging aspects of her divorce journey.

> *My mother accused and condemned me, which was a shock for me. She behaved with me in a vile way for a year, humiliating me, saying that now I will be that woman about whom everyone will talk.*

The manipulative behavior of parents-in-law has a detrimental effect on the divorce process. One divorcee strongly emphasized the negative impact of her ex-spouse's family on her children and the overall divorce proceedings. According to her, "My husband's mother has a negative impact on my children. She really contributed to the whole thing because she is also an abuser, and in that sense, her husband is a complete victim of violence" (Angela, 38). Another divorcee echoed similar sentiments, underscoring the negative influence of parents-in-law.

> *The mother-in-law seeks to paint a picture to my son that I am mentally ill, crazy; that this was the reason why she [former spouse] left and lives with another man. It is to justify the daughter's behavior in front of our children (Martin, 43).*

Friends have varying negative reactions to divorce. Some are shocked by the news and become reserved in their support, unsure of how to navigate the situation. Others distance themselves and cut off communication. Additionally, some friends place blame on the divorcees, perceiving them as the main catalyst for escalating the divorce process. These negative reactions further contribute to the emotional challenges faced by divorcees, *adding to their sense of isolation and disappointment*.

The influence of friends of the former spouse can play a significant role in the divorce process. They are often seen as suggesting and encouraging the individual to make increased demands and adopt a more aggressive stance. One interviewee described how his ex-wife's friend, who was going through her divorce, influenced her decision to divorce with heightened demands and aggression as "the only thing that she knows is that half of all the property belongs to her no matter what" (Alex, 42). Another divorcee shared a similar experience, attributing her former husband's increased requests to the influence of his friend.

> *He [friend] consulted him, don't be a fool, don't give up, demand money… So it seems to me that one of his friends influenced that, so to speak. Because he [friend] bought a house somewhere for 50,000, and now he [ex-husband] is somehow stuck on the idea that he needed 45 grand as well (Emma, 40).*

However, it is important to note that some social resources, particularly children, contribute to increased uncertainty and speculation for divorcees. Divorcees often *struggle to comprehend their children's refusal to communicate* or engage with them, leading to frustration and pain. While interviewees attribute this behavior to the other parent, they also experience inner doubts about their own importance as parents

to their children. Paul, a father of two, doubted "whether I will be needed [for the] children, or only the money when they are in need." This uncertainty can manifest in moments of despair, where divorcees contemplate severing ties with their children. Angela (38) told us how out of frustration, she was calling her daughter and asking what they wanted from her and how she was supposed to behave because she felt lost and helpless in receiving any communication from her offspring. Another divorcee talked about reading her daughter's declaration at the child protection services office full of negative remarks about herself. Out of despair at such moments, individuals strongly elaborate on quitting all ties with their children. However, they remind themselves about the reasons for that and motivate themselves to forgive them and continue further.

> *That was the end, and I broke down. I broke down when once again I was at Child Protection Services, and they told me that my girl was here and again said many terrible things about me. (Sandra, 48, a mother of a 12-year-old)*

Friends' opinions and suggestions can significantly **influence divorcees' perspectives** and decision-making processes, especially when they are uncertain about their next steps or grappling with doubts about their actions. One divorcee shared an example of how his friends' opinions shaped his contemplations on the possibility of accepting his wife back into his life.

> *I shared with them [people around] how everything went and how I was let through that 'meat mincer' [by my ex] in all possible ways. They say, how you can accept such a person back... They say you're a fool. She ate you alive, mixed you with shit, told you're not a man, did not take care of your family, that you were some kind of abuser (Alex, 42).*

While none of the research participants openly acknowledged that their friends played a potentially detrimental role in escalating their conflicts, the data reveals that friends indeed play a significant part. Friends, often with good intentions, can unintentionally **contribute to the escalation of conflicts** by offering support and encouragement for certain behaviors during a divorce. While the divorcee may be contemplating the best ways to navigate the situation, the influence of friends can inadvertently reinforce confrontational or aggressive actions. This unintentional support further intensifies tensions and hinders the potential for peaceful resolution.

3.5.2. Financial Resources: Empowering Self-Protection while Extending Conflict

Financial resources and skilled attorneys play an intertwined and crucial role in the enduring divorce process. The availability of funds not only ensures financial security for the divorcee and the newly formed family structure but also enables the engagement of a competent private lawyer who serves as a key participant in the litigation proceedings.

The significance of financial aspects is multifaceted. Financial security and stability are particularly vital for many divorcees throughout the tumultuous process of marital

dissolution, with a specific emphasis on women who find themselves living alone with their children. Their capacity to provide for themselves and their children **serves as a testament to their resilience** and ability to navigate life independently, without the support of a spouse.

Employment serves as a crucial source of financial stability and positive support for divorcees. Having a job where divorcees feel valued and supported plays a significant role in **facilitating a smoother transition** through the challenging aspects of divorce. It provides not only a source of income but also a sense of purpose, accomplishment, and social interaction, which can contribute to their overall well-being and resilience during this period of transition. "Giving me a job was a huge boost, getting me back on my feet, raising my self-esteem. I can say that these women [colleagues] mean salvation to me," said Katrina (37).

In addition, financial resources enable divorcees to **cover the expenses** associated with divorce litigation, including the fees for private attorneys and necessary legal documentation. Attorneys are considered essential in helping divorcees effectively communicate their needs and navigate the complex legal system. "They are in touch with reality and clear-minded; [they] keep it calm" and thus facilitate the process by minimizing the influence of intense emotions. Without adequate legal representation, divorcees find it challenging to protect themselves in the divorce proceedings.

However, the financial burden of covering divorce-related expenses adds significant stress to divorcees, further **exacerbating their sense of uncertainty** and instability. "I work a lot. Last year I was working just to support my daughter and to pay for lawyers. Nothing else at all. From 6 in the morning to 9 in the evening with breaks, of course, but the fatigue was terrible," said Daisy (47). Moreover, there is speculation that some professionals involved in the divorce process may have a vested interest in prolonging the proceedings, as it financially benefits them. This adds to the already challenging circumstances faced by divorcees.

Individuals who lack employment or sufficient financial resources experience heightened anxiety and uncertainty during the divorce process. They grapple with the challenge of affording costly legal specialists, as government support is often limited. The inability or uncertainty of how to pay for attorneys leads to **doubts about their ability to protect themselve**s and their future. "I spent all my savings on a lawyer to prepare a settlement agreement. Afterward, I saw that I had no more money for defense," told Paul (48). He continued, "If the legal aid guaranteed by the state is blocked, I will not know what to do. Well, that is the situation I am hanging in right now."

Individuals many years into the divorce speculate that the availability of financial resources can **contribute to the prolonged nature of the divorce process**. According to Reberta (27), "if he [former husband] did not have money to pay a lawyer and do all kinds of things, there would be fewer conflicts." Angela (38) saw money as the central aspect of the prolonged and conflictual divorce process: "Not every person can afford to spend tens of thousands on courts and lawyers and this long process. [There should be a system] that one would have somewhere to turn to, receive state support and psychological help because not everyone has a wealthy or strong family for support."

As a result, the lawyers representing the former spouse are perceived to have a negative impact on the litigation process, with divorcees believing that they contribute to igniting and perpetuating the conflict. There are claims that the ex-spouses have chosen attorneys who are similarly unbalanced, forming alliances that intimidate and bully the divorcees. While divorcees consider the suggestions and advice of their attorneys, they perceive the lawyers representing their ex-spouse as the primary instigators of conflict within the divorce process.

3.5.3. Religion: Strengthened through Prayer vs. Challenging Moral Validity

Religion emerges as a significant element in the self-transition journeys of several divorcees. The faith *provides a sense of hope and assurance* that things would eventually work out. During difficult moments, individuals seek solace and support from God through prayer, turning to their religious beliefs for comfort and guidance.

> *I've practically been hanging on [my faith] like a drowning straw these past two years. Before work every morning I went to church, to morning mass, to receive communion, that there would be some kind of reinforcement that day, because I could not pray for a long time (Paul, 48).*

Katrina (37) talked about the prayer being her source of support, helping to work through her anger and contempt, "But I prayed, I prayed a lot when I wanted to take revenge on my husband, to gossip, perhaps."

For some individuals, religion served as a guiding force and *a source of moral values*, shaping their outlook on how to live their lives and navigate the challenges of divorce. According to Steven (45), the most important thing for him in life was to "adhere to Christian norms" and "to be a human as it is said in the Bible," because "in the beginning, it might seem that you have lost, that you were fooled… but in the end, everything balances." Consequently, for certain individuals, seeking the nullification of their marriage in the church held significant importance, as it symbolized the end of a union that they perceived as not being a true marriage in the eyes of their religious beliefs.

On the other hand, deeply religious individuals face *challenges in reconciling their faith* with the concept of divorce, which hinders their transition to a divorced self. They grapple with the uncertainty of how divorce aligns with Christian norms and struggle to find answers on how to navigate the dissolution of their holy sacrament of marriage. Paul (48), for instance, initially expressed confusion and a lack of clarity on the matter, unsure of how to approach the issue.

> *I do not know, I cannot solve it. For now, I have set this question aside. Maybe later on, something will clarify, maybe I will read something, maybe someone will tell me. I have no clue how to deal with that Marriage Sacrament.*

However, during a subsequent interview, he mentioned that the advice of a monk had provided him with the support and reassurance he needed to view divorce as a way to escape a life of suffering. This perspective helped him find some resolution and peace of mind regarding the religious aspect of his divorce.

Furthermore, individuals **grapple with self-doubt and question their own worthiness** and identity in divorce situations, when considering the religious perspective. They express doubts about God, the teachings of the church, and the perceived categorical opposition of priests against divorce. One participant highlighted that the church often labels the initiators of divorce as "bad" people who have broken their sacred oath and caused harm. These conflicting messages and judgments contributed to their inner turmoil and raised questions about their place within the religious community.

Divorcees emphasize the conflicting messages they receive from church officials. They **observe a contradiction between the teachings** of respect and love for one another advocated by the church and the behavior of their children or spouses who are involved in the church. This dissonance leaves them perplexed, especially when witnessing their former spouse's violent anger outbursts and deception at home despite their religious affiliation. Maria (47) was questioning her former husband's involvement with church and his violent anger outbursts and lies at home,

How such a religious person [her former husband] can behave in such a terrible way. There are commandments of God; he breaks all of them. Moreover, he still goes to church and prays. I just do not know.

Frustrated and feeling a sense of injustice, she distanced herself from the church for some time, driven by anger. "For about half a year, I refused the church because I was angry."

3.5.4. (Non-)Initiator Status: Challenging the Perceived Simplicity of the Phenomenon

The status of being an initiator or non-initiator in divorce is a complex and contentious issue, filled with doubts and uncertainties that hinder individuals from finding clear answers. While society tends to view being the initiator as the resource, divorcees question this assumption. On the surface, it may seem clear who the initiator is, typically the one who moves out or expresses the desire to divorce first. However, upon closer examination, the distinction becomes blurred, **leading to speculation and ambiguity**. Monica (57) argued that, on the one side, her husband was the initiator because he had left the house. However, according to her, they have discussed this possibility for so long. She had repeatedly mentioned to him this divorce idea. Therefore, she could name herself an initiator as much as he did. Among our research participants, all initiators were females except for one male.

Despite the initiation status, the experience of divorce and the act of divorcing come as a surprise to the majority of individuals. The dissolution of their marriage is something they have never anticipated or believed would happen to them. **Non-initiators**, in particular, emphasize the painful shock of finding out their spouses moving out or their wishes to divorce. The fact of being "the one who was left" prompts resentment and **shakes "dignity and pride."** Martin (43) spoke about seeking revenge as a response to these emotions. He planned to use his former wife's initiator status as a means to achieve his goals in the divorce case, believing that the one who initiated

the divorce should bear the consequences.

> *When my wife left, I did not give in to [initiate legal] divorce for a long time. She pressed me. I said I would not divorce in my life because you filed for it and wanted it. [I want] children to see that she is doing that, not me. I was cornered that she was forcing me to divorce. I'm leaving because I don't see any other way out. But the wife wanted a divorce. The children will remember this. I will vilify her in front of the children.*

While divorcees acknowledge that there had been issues within the family for a long time, they regard those issues as insignificant and did not consider taking the step towards divorce. However, some admit to having had expectations that their spouses would be the ones to initiate the divorce or expressed their conscious inactivity in progressing with the divorce process. Sometimes different approaches rest within the same person.

Initiators of divorce also experience disturbance and disappointment. They often view themselves as individuals committed to their families and never imagined that they would be the ones to initiate a divorce. For many initiators, the decision to divorce **goes against their moral beliefs** and contradicts the way they have envisioned their lives. They disclose that they were compelled to take the first steps towards divorce only due to significant issues such as infidelity, violence, or alcohol problems within the marriage.

Taking the first step to divorce is not easy; it takes much time and effort to decide to leave a (violent) marriage to protect oneself and children. Some left their homes without savings or a place to live. They feel guilty for divorce, even those who leave "bad" spouses.

Initiators also perceive themselves as **being unjustly blamed for the divorce** and its consequences. However, they attempt to minimize their sense of guilt by arguing that it is unfair to place all the responsibility on their shoulders.

> *According to her [former spouse], I am divorcing here, even though she has started a separate life and has never offered us to do something together sometimes. But I'm still the one who initiated the divorce. And since divorce is harming children, I am harming them (Paul, 48).*

Despite their attempts to deflect blame, initiators generally acknowledge that they are emotionally and sometimes legally **better prepared for the divorce process**. Being the initiator provides them with inner strength and more time for preparation.

Overall, the status of (non)initiator in divorce is characterized by a significant degree of uncertainty and speculation. While the surface understanding of the initiator is based on observable actions such as physical departure or initiating the divorce process, deeper exploration reveals a complex and ambiguous reality. Divorcees engage in introspection, questioning their roles and the reasons for the end of their marriage, resulting in a state of liminality where clarity and answers are elusive. The uncertainty surrounding initiator status contributes to the space, where divorcees grapple with their identity and the emotional upheaval caused by the dissolution of their marriage.

3.6. Grounded Theory of Strained Liminality: Self-Transition of Individuals through their Enduring Conflictual Divorce

In this chapter, we present the final integrated grounded theory (GT) that depicts the process of self-transition among divorcees enduring conflictual divorces, based on the empirical data we collected. This part of the data analysis aims to illustrate the interconnections among all the main categories, revealing their relationships. Additionally, we take an analytical step forward by providing a more comprehensive conceptual understanding of the results. We introduce three ways in which individuals engage with enduring conflictual divorce: losing-protecting, in-between-pondering, and gaining-reflecting. While a significant portion of the theory has been presented in previous chapters, here, we offer additional insights to summarize it.

It is important to emphasize that this data-driven constructivist theory, termed 'strained liminality,' concerning self-redefinition, has been developed through interactions between the researcher and research participants, leading to the creation of shared meanings. We provide a visualized structure of the theory in the picture below (Pic. 12).

Through the application of CGT methodology, we have identified that the core process of self-redefinition unfolds in three distinct yet interrelated phases of the self. The self initially transitions from being in the state of losing-protecting to in-between-pondering and ultimately to gaining-reflecting. The phase of in-between-pondering assumes a central role in this journey, bridging the transitions between the phases of losing-protecting and gaining-reflecting. This concept of constrained self-transition represents the central space that individuals predominantly traverse during the enduring divorce process. It involves the utilization of multifaceted strategies and resources that enable the strengthening and continuity of this liminal space.

The initial stage of enduring divorce involves the emergence of the self as ***"losing-protecting."*** This phase marks the transition characterized by multiple losses, leading to a state of self-disruption. During this period, the present time becomes a painful limbo that severs the connection between one's past and future, thereby introducing a temporal dimension to the self. This disruption and disconnection manifest across various dimensions of self-understanding, encompassing agency, physical, intrapersonal, relational, social, and emotional aspects. Self-disruption reflects the multitude of losses individuals confront from the outset of their marital dissolution. Throughout the ongoing divorce process, numerous facets of self-experience and self-understanding are adversely affected and disrupted, causing the previous "coherent and integrated self" to gradually fade and vanish. These losses are positioned along a temporal continuum, surfacing and receding at different points in time.

Various resources that divorcees utilize to help them navigate the challenging terrain of divorce can sometimes lead to further losses. The strategies and resources they employ often prioritize mitigating these losses and preserving aspects of the self that are either intact or at risk of being lost. This can result in a fragmented self, where some elements are surrendered while others are safeguarded. This self-protection reflects

a reactive approach to dealing with the constantly shifting circumstances of divorce.

The state of self-disruption is a dynamic and transitional phase that holds the potential for new and different life circumstances, giving rise to an ***in-between-pondering*** version of the self. However, instead of undergoing a natural and unrestricted process of self-redefinition at its own pace, this transition is constrained by multiple limitations. People's initial expectations of the divorce process are challenged as the practical reality imposes unexpected restrictions. Navigating through violent encounters with former partners, encountering institutional neglect, and facing gaps in legislation all hinder progress toward achieving self-coherence. As time passes, divorcees oscillate along a spiral that involves experiencing losses, enduring attacks, and confronting invalidation, remaining entangled in a state of enduring uncertainty as they contemplate the actions to take.

Certain actions contribute to the state of in-betweenness, creating more questions than answers amid ongoing uncertainty. While these actions may strengthen self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-redefinition, they can also hinder effective communication and conflict resolution. Consequently, self-strengthening actions indicate not only forward-moving progress but also occasional setbacks, prolonging the process of self-transition, and bringing individuals to increased absurd uncertainty.

Finally, confronting an unchanging and volatile reality prompts a shift towards a more reflective and existential version of self, characterized as ***gaining-reflecting.*** As time progresses, divorcees come to the realization that the ever-changing reality will not alter, leading them to confront the situational absurdity. This realization brings about a sense of disillusionment as expectations are temporarily halted, and the constant absurdity of reality becomes more apparent. Moreover, it also brings out the realization of gains above all the losses. People encounter answers to their questions and clarity amid increased uncertainty.

To cope with this existential condition, individuals employ strategies centered around meaning-making. They increasingly reflect on their personal growth, establish separate lives from their former spouses, and engage in the process of divorce itself. This process of creating a meaningful and morally true self serves as a forward-looking response to address the challenges posed by the enduring absurd reality. Paradoxically, however, as individuals gain greater inner strength and a sense of righteousness, it often leads to more intense conflict with their former spouse. These feelings can fuel further disputes and result in more assertive and opinionated positions. As a result, reaching a state of complete resolution is seen as unattainable and infinite in nature.

Overall, our data analysis revealed that enduring conflictual divorce involves a transformative journey of self-redefinition through three interconnected phases creating particular types of self to engage with them: losing-protecting, in-between-pondering, and gaining-reflecting. The process is marked by restricted self-transition, navigated with the help of diverse strategies and resources. At the initial stage, divorce brings about various losses and disruptions to one's sense of self. As the process unfolds, individuals find themselves in an in-between state, reflecting on their experiences and seeking new life conditions. The final stage of gaining-reflecting is

mainly centered around creating a morally true self by making meaning of the divorce experience.

Throughout this challenging journey, individuals find strength in their financial stability, supportive family, and engaging activities. The ultimate outcome of the divorce becomes not the primary concern; what matters most is staying true to one's conscience and making decisions aligned with personal growth and resolution. Throughout this challenging journey, the concept of strained liminality emerges as the overall uniting aspect, representing the state of enduring tension and uncertainty that divorcees navigate on their path toward self-redefinition and healing.

Picture 12. Constructed grounded theory of "Strained Liminality" of how people go through the process of change and integration of "self" amidst their enduring conflictual divorce.
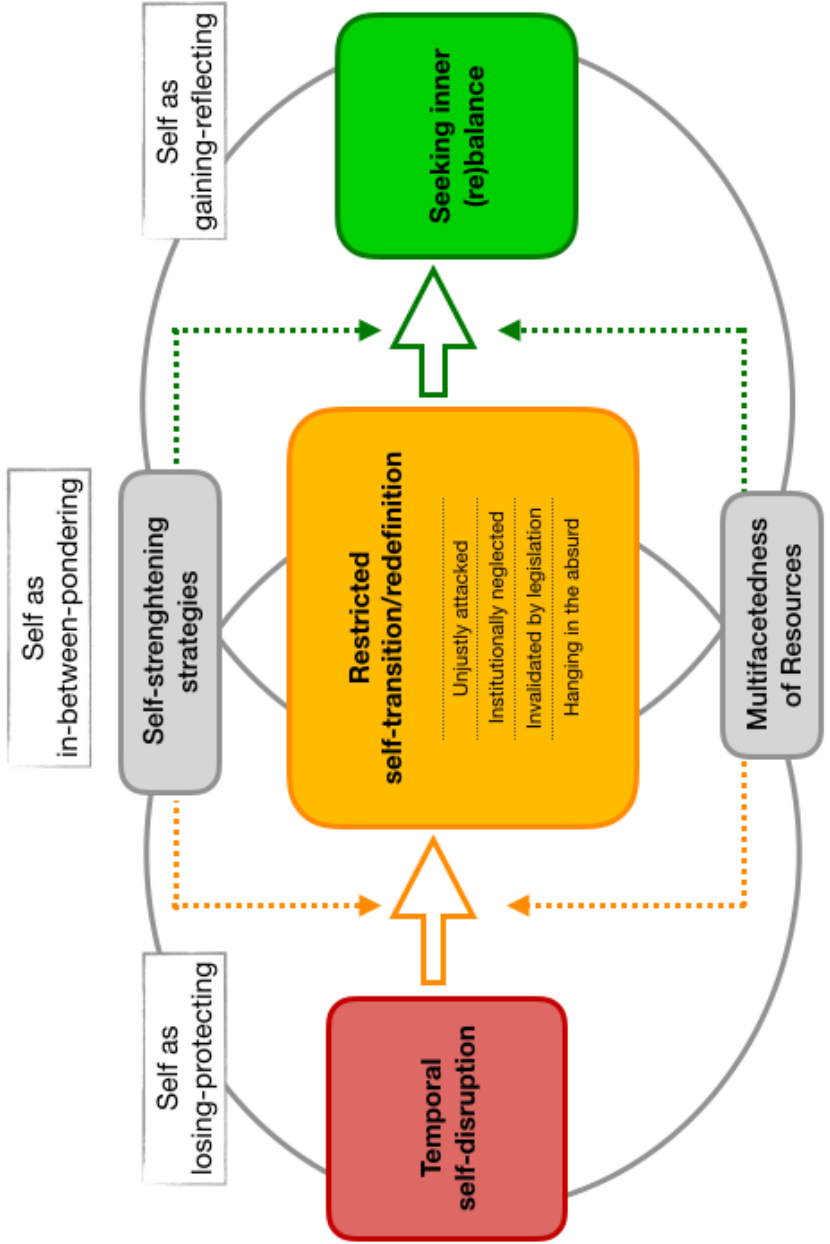
4. DISCUSSION

Previous research has yielded conflicting findings regarding the relationship between the divorce process and an individual's sense of self. Some studies have reported that individuals undergoing divorce may experience a confused and unstable self-view (Crabtree & Harris, 2020; Lodi-Smith et al., 2017). Conversely, other research has suggested that individuals, particularly those exiting less satisfying marriages or relationships, may undergo a process of self-clarification, leading to personal growth and increased positivity (Lewandowski Jr & Bizzoco, 2007; Treloar, 2019). It is noteworthy that these portrayals often remain theoretical, especially in the context of individuals engaged in conflictual divorces (Haddad et al., 2016). Moreover, empirical data concerning the experiences of divorcees are limited, which creates gaps in our ability to provide sufficient support to individuals navigating the divorce process (Bertelsen, 2021). Specifically, the impact of the divorce process on the long-term trajectory of divorce and the well-being of divorcees remains an area of understudied significance. Given the inconclusive results and the scarcity of empirical investigations in this domain, we have embarked on this study to explore how the self-transition of divorcees in Lithuania unfolds and evolves amidst the protracted and conflict-laden process of marital dissolution.

Utilizing a constructivist grounded theory methodology, we have formulated a substantive grounded theory which we termed "strained liminality" to address the aforementioned inquiry. This theory encapsulates the distinctive attributes of the process, their interrelations, and the factors that facilitate or impede divorcees in attaining inner equilibrium. "Strained liminality" delineates that the experience of enduring conflictual divorce unfolds as a constrained self-transition, manifesting as an intermediate, liminal phase. This phase commences with a period of temporal self-disruption, akin to a phase of loss, and progresses toward the attainment of enduring peace.

To elucidate the above-described process and its constituent elements, we have drawn insights from prior scholarly research. Furthermore, we have underpinned our arguments and insights with reference to the liminality concept articulated by van Gennep (1909/2019) and further expanded upon by Turner (1969/2017). This theoretical lens offers a deeper perspective on the findings presented in our study.

4.1. Fluctuating Between Temporal Self-Disruption and (Re)build

The divorce journey commences with a phase of temporal self-disruption, characterized by the experience of multiple losses. Of particular significance is the profound loss of the idealized vision of a unified family and a lifelong marriage, signifying symbolic hurdles at the outset of the divorce process. Individuals often describe this as the loss of something of immense value and fundamental importance, akin to the disintegration of their entire world, dreams, and aspirations for the future. In certain instances, the impending loss is perceived with a sense of imminent mortality, akin to facing life-threatening situations. Consequently, divorcees' self-coherence is substantially

disrupted, and their perception of self-control and agency diminishes significantly.

The aforementioned process can be elucidated through the lens of liminality theory, which posits that significant life events commence with a "separation phase." During this phase, individuals disengage from the routines of their everyday lives, often accompanied by symbolic acts of detachment and heightened anxiety (Turner, 1969/2017). This separation phase entails a sense of alienation and disruption in relation to one's customary life and social standing, resulting in a feeling of disconnection from their prior temporal and social context (Fisher-Lichte, 2005). When individuals undergoing divorce signal changes in their relationship, they encounter "structural loss" (Nuru, 2023). This concept encompasses both the detachment from an earlier state in the relationship and the initiation of a transitional phase of in-betweenness (Nuru, 2023). In essence, it represents a pivotal juncture where the divorce journey begins, marked by the disentanglement from the familiar and the entry into a period of profound transformation and liminality.

Previous research has also delved into the concept of self-losses in the context of divorce. According to Aron et al. (2001), divorce entails the loss of numerous integrated and cherished self-aspects that have become intertwined during the course of the marriage or relationship. The significance of these self-aspects is directly related to how much they define an individual, particularly if they hold deep value in connection to the relationship (Tabri et al., 2017).

Despite the prevalence of divorce and evolving societal norms, marriage continues to be perceived as a highly esteemed and sacred union, traditionally expected to endure until death separates the couple (Bernhardt et l., 2007; Hopper, 2001). Consequently, parting with these valued self-aspects can be exceptionally challenging, akin to losing a cherished piece of one's identity (Maddux et al., 2010). In his qualitative investigation, Hopper (2001) conceptualized divorce not merely as the separation from a partner but as the dissolution of a future built upon the dream of unity and personal fulfillment. The profound sanctity attributed to marriage, coupled with the notion of its lifelong commitment, engenders a predicament in rediscovering meaning amidst the disintegration of the marital bond (Yárnoz-Yaben, 2013; Jimenez-Garcia et al., 2018). Consequently, divorce often triggers an intense moral preoccupation, manifesting as emotions of betrayal, shame, guilt, and societal stigma, all interwoven with the symbolic value of divorce (Hopper, 2001).

These losses are particularly poignant because marriage and family life continue to hold significant value in many societies. This sentiment is notably prevalent in Lithuania, where traditional family values persist. Lithuanians regard family life, particularly for women, as the central and paramount aspect of an individual's existence, encompassing child-rearing (Kanopienė et al., 2015). Consequently, divorce in such a cultural context becomes exceptionally distressing, as it threatens deeply cherished core self-aspects connected to participation in the traditional family structure, thereby intensifying the experience of loss.

From a more ontological perspective, the losses experienced during divorce can be likened to *symbolic deaths*, representing the ultimate separation of an individual

from their past-future self (Carel, 2007; Pedersen, 2016). In this context, the former self ceases to exist, and the emergence of a new self remains in a state of becoming. The inability to bridge yesterday's self with tomorrow's engenders a profound sense of losing one's present self, which is responsible for day-to-day activities and future-oriented endeavors. The disruption of the past-future dream, a recurring theme in our interviews, can be comprehended as a forfeiture of the potential self. It's important to note that symbolic death does not pertain to physical demise (although it may manifest through the loss of health or contemplation of suicide) but primarily pertains to what is commonly referred to as "potentiality" losses.

An individual is perpetually preoccupied with the question of who they may become and their relationship with these latent possibilities (Heidegger, 1927/2008). Consequently, they are constantly projecting themselves through future-directed potentialities, forever in a state of becoming. However, during boundary situations marked by losses and anxiety, individuals often find themselves unable to envision their future selves or harness these unfolding potentialities. Consequently, they perceive a lack of agency, impeding their ability to exist authentically. From an ontological perspective, the notion of death as the culmination of potentialities is a fundamental and ongoing facet of human existence, which becomes particularly pronounced during moments of crisis (Pedersen, 2016).

Losses related to the parental role emerged as among the most emotionally charged and significant, especially for those with minor children. Research participants commonly spoke of a general loss associated with the traditional parental role, characterized by the collaborative caregiving of a child within a co-parenting framework. This loss also encompasses the forfeiture of the parental role due to an inability to interact with their child, stemming from divorce-related circumstances, particularly prevalent among non-custodial parents. For divorcees whose children refuse to engage with them, the emotional toll is especially profound. They not only feel invalidated as parents by their former spouses or professionals involved in the divorce process but also by their own offspring. For some of these parents, the inability to engage with their children disrupts the stability and coherence of their overall self-structure and intensifies feelings of shame, particularly for mothers, who find themselves in the position of being a parent "whose child refuses to see them." It is akin to occupying a parental role with potential rights and responsibilities while being unable to enact them, leaving them suspended in an indeterminate state, grappling with how to reconstruct their shaken parental self-identities.

The divorce literature is somewhat scarce on information about the experiences of divorcing parents on the loss of their traditional parental role and the relationship with children. Cottyn (2022) argues that the shift from co-parenting to solo parenting is a significant yet often overlooked aspect of divorce. The majority of information is geared towards the experiences of children themselves or can be obtained from the literature aiming at the death of children or parental alienation. This is regrettable, as the divorce-related identity losses for people with children are more costly than for the ones who are not yet parents (Kalmijn, 1999; Lye, 1996; Seltzer, 1991, as cited in De

Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006), therefore the need to understand this transition is particularly important.

The scholarly literature posits that the parental role significantly shapes the identity of adults (Toller, 2008). Consequently, the (potential) loss of a child often evolves into a profoundly distressing experience, as it challenges the perceived "natural order of life," undermines the parent's role as a protector, and diminishes the investments made in caring for their child (Finzi-Dottan et al., 2012; Lee-Maturana et al., 2020). Parents who encounter rejection from their children perceive this situation as a threat, both to the well-being of the child and to themselves. The delineation of their designated roles as parents becomes increasingly nebulous, as functioning as a parent without communication with their children raises profound questions about the essence of that role, which might result in a self-crisis characterized by the paradoxical feeling of "being a parent and yet not being a parent simultaneously" (Poustie et al., 2018; Toller, 2008). This complex emotional state gives rise to a range of distressing emotions, including frustration, stress, and helplessness. Perceived threat and tumultuous emotions impede the process of self-redefinition and diminish the energy and motivation required for self-care and the care of others, including navigating custody disputes (Baker, 2010), and contribute to the escalation and prolongation of conflict during divorce (Balmer et al., 2018).

Despite the myriad challenges, parents often harbor a strong desire to remain involved in their child's life. However, this desire for ongoing involvement exacerbates parental conflict, particularly when it runs counter to the preferences of the other parent, who may perceive the actions of their former partner as intrusive and not in the best interest of the child (Balmer et al., 2018). This discord in desires further complicates the already challenging parenting in the conflictual divorce context.

It is crucial to highlight that not all losses incurred during divorce are seen as detrimental but have a perceived ***positive effect***. Interestingly, our findings reveal that individuals, especially those exiting abusive relationships, assert that divorce enables them to shed negative self-aspects, such as illusions about themselves or unwarranted self-investment. These losses are accompanied by a sense of liberation, the rediscovery of their former, more valued self, or even the acquisition of new positive self-aspects, like a resilient and authentic self. It's worth noting that, during our interviews, the process of reconstructing the old self was more prominently emphasized than the creation of a new self.

Mattingly et al. (2014) contend that individuals not only integrate positive aspects of themselves during their partnership but may also incorporate negative elements or neglect more valued self-aspects. These two processes are termed self-adulteration and self-contraction, respectively. Our interviews revealed that the retrospective recognition of past self-adulteration or self-contraction was especially salient within the context of ongoing conflictual divorce. Some scholars posit that the perceived gains arising from otherwise adverse events are linked to improved adaptation and a more seamless identity reconstruction (Jayawickreme et al., 2020; Samios et al., 2014). By reevaluating their past with a former spouse in a more negative light, divorcees engage

in cognitive restructuring of events and ascribe positive meaning to an otherwise painful divorce process (Wilson & Gilbert, 2008), which aids them in the self-redefinition process. Successful engagement in new relationships further amplifies this process, aligning with existing literature that highlights the positive influence of new romantic partners on the smoother progression of self-redefinition (Strizzi et al., 2021).

Drawing from the liminality theory, we contend that both the rediscovery of the old self and the construction of a new self signifies that, with time, individuals undergoing divorce gradually progress toward the "incorporation" phase. This phase is characterized by the assimilation of the individual into a new and relatively stable state, marked by distinct obligations and norms in contrast to the initial state (Turner, 1969/2017). While incorporation may not be entirely realized, and the stage remains partially achieved, certain aspects of the self that are newly (re)acquired symbolize the proximity to the desired state of selfhood.

Empirical research framed within the crisis-resilience theoretical framework consistently highlights positive developments following divorce. For instance, Treloar (2019) conducted research with divorced individuals, revealing that all participants experienced positive changes in their identities. These individuals engaged in forward-looking activities and embarked on a journey of reconstructing their identities as self-authorizing individuals. Similarly, Mendoza et al. (2020) demonstrated that post-divorce women often developed a heightened sense of resilience, and experienced newfound freedom, allowing them to reconnect with forgotten aspects of their self-identity and fostering personal growth. Gregson and Ceynar (2009) also observed that women undergoing post-divorce transformations frequently engaged in retrospective rediscovery and reclamation of their lost pre-marital identities. They embarked on new beginnings, pursuing activities and aspirations previously unattainable during their marriages.

Life-transforming events, such as divorce, present individuals with emerging potentialities and possibilities. While crises are inherently disruptive, they also offer the opportunity for individuals to explore their stance on fundamental questions (Du Toit, 2017). Regardless of the severity of the impact, such situations invariably contain elements of both pain and possibility, suggesting that the positive can emerge from the negative (Jacobsen, 2009). This perspective underscores that trauma, pain, and suffering are not solely pathological; they can also serve as openings for personal growth and self-discovery. When freed from the constraints of past social structures, individuals have a legitimate opportunity to reflect on their past behavior within the context of the old order. It enables people to bridge their previous experiences with new patterns of interaction, laying the foundation for the development of future actions and behaviors (Bartunek et al., 2011; Howard-Greenville et al., 2011). In essence, crises like divorce can be transformative, offering a unique chance for self-reflection, learning, and the possibility of forging a more authentic and fulfilling path forward.

Resting on this body of research, our study highlights the ongoing and enduring positive self-growth and change that occurs amidst the challenges of a prolonged divorce process. Amidst the multiple losses experienced, individuals continue to create

and recreate themselves to align with their evolving self-perceptions, separating from their former partner and past marriage. This ongoing self-evolution contributes to the formation of a more coherent and stable self-structure. However, fluctuating back and forth between losing and regaining, between death and reborn without clear guidelines on how to act and be, adds up to self-instability and unclarity. Both positive and negative changes encountered during a relatively short period evoke the feeling of incompleteness and in-becoming, transiting the process of self-redefinition. Losing something during the ongoing divorce goes hand in hand with the gains in something else, creating an ongoing liminal being and the need for re-equilibration with own means or the aid of others.

4.2. Restricted Self-Transition amidst the Ongoing Volatile Absurdity as the Central Aspect of Strained Liminality

While the two-dimensional model proposed by Mattingly et al. (2014) has been valuable in shedding light on the dynamics of gain and loss during divorce, it does not adequately address the experiences of individuals who find themselves trapped in a protracted and uncertain divorce process. In our society, it is relatively uncommon to discuss the challenges of being unable to finalize a divorce or experiencing a deceleration in the divorce proceedings (Lebow, 2020). Nevertheless, this was the reality faced by a majority of the individuals we interviewed.

Our research findings indicate that alongside the experiences of losing or reconstructing certain dimensions of the self, individuals often perceive themselves as suspended in a state of temporal limbo, unable to move forward. Occasionally, divorcees express a lack of clarity regarding their marital status, which can have negative implications for their present and future planning. They describe feeling ensnared in a semi-liberated, in-between status, yearning to complete the process, especially given its unpredictabilities, absurdities, and external challenges, which can generate feelings of helplessness and the need to defend themselves and their interests.

The concept of liminality proves to be a valuable framework for understanding the restricted transitional experiences of individuals caught in protracted divorces. Liminality represents a temporary phase situated between the initial and final stages of a transition, concluding when the individual is reintegrated into the social structure (La Shure, 2005). During this state of liminality, individuals find themselves on the threshold between the old and the new, existing in an interim condition characterized by ambiguity. They neither fully belong to their previous state nor fully embrace the new one, resulting in a limited identification with the associated identities, social norms, and practices.

Turner (1969/2017) refers to these individuals as "liminal people" or entities, as they occupy a "neither here nor there" status, existing in a betwixt and between the state that transcends the roles prescribed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony. The liminal phase enables individuals to navigate the complexities of change and transition with greater depth and insight. This phase involves a process of identity

reconstruction, marked by significant disruptions in one's sense of self. During this time, individuals are no longer the selves they once were, yet they have not fully evolved into the selves they aspire to become. Within this ambiguous and transitional phase, individuals grapple with the task of comprehending and reconstructing their emerging liminal selves within a shifting relational context. They move away from their previously established selves, ultimately giving rise to a new and meaningful identity for both themselves and their community (Beech, 2010; Nuru, 2023). The liminal phase, therefore, plays a pivotal role in facilitating self-exploration and personal growth amidst the challenges and uncertainties of enduring divorce.

Recent empirical research offers further support for the notion that individuals often find themselves in an ambiguous and transitional state during divorce or breakup experiences. Qualitative investigations into enduring separations, where divorce is not pursued with clear intent, have highlighted the challenges of navigating prolonged and unclear circumstances. Such situations have been associated with elevated stress levels and increased role ambiguity (Crabtree & Harris, 2020). Moreover, Hartman's research (2021) illustrates that male non-initiators of romantic breakups can undergo a liminal experience where their masculinity is questioned, and they perceive a threat to their identities as men. It is only upon entering into another romantic relationship that this liminal phase concludes, allowing them to experience a re-initiation into manhood.

Schaefer's work (2021) also underscores how individuals undergoing parenthood transitions, such as divorce or separation, can feel a lack of support and guidance. This lack of support often leaves them in a liminal state where they have neither fully let go of their old identity nor been able to construct a new one due to ongoing tensions and uncertainties. Therefore, our study aligns with a growing body of research indicating that enduring divorce is not solely characterized by self-gains and losses but is predominantly marked by a protracted state of ambiguity and liminality, wherein individuals grapple with uncertainty about themselves and the evolving situation surrounding them.

While Turner's (1969/2017) and van Gennep's (1909/2019) work traditionally characterizes liminal space as a transitional phase that individuals go through at their own pace and often by their own choice, our findings indicate that the liminality experienced by divorcees in the context of a conflictual and enduring divorce can keep them in this phase seemingly against their will. This deviation from the conventional understanding of liminality is associated with two particular experiences: ***a sense of unprotectedness and a feeling of being trapped in absurdity***.

As violent interactions with the former spouse escalate, repeated and unsuccessful attempts to finalize the divorce process further complicate the transition. Individuals find themselves unable to progress towards greater inner clarity and stability, all while grappling with a profound sense of helplessness in altering the situation. In the face of experiencing unjust harm and an inability to control perceived attacks and manipulations from their former spouse, individuals turn to institutions and legislation in search of the support, validation, and protection they need.

Institutions and legislation primarily exist to regulate interactions between

individuals by providing a framework and guidelines for addressing specific situations. However, individuals primarily perceive these organizations as operating solely according to their established procedures, failing to offer the expected support. Divergent legal regulations further exacerbate the situation, leaving individuals without the necessary reference points and understanding, ultimately perpetuating their state of ongoing liminality.

Our findings align with prior research in conflictual post-divorce settings, which underscores the limitations of judicial processes and involved institutions in resolving family problems (Bertelsen, 2021; Polak & Saini, 2019). Particularly in cases of conflictual divorce, institutions frequently inadvertently exacerbate conflicts, resulting in additional harm (Saini et al., 2013). Individuals often turn to these institutions seeking help and support but frequently encounter outcomes contrary to their expectations. Studies usually underline negative experiences when interacting with specialists, including a lack of understanding due to differing discourses (Bertelsen, 2021; Treloar, 2019). Namely, when viewed from the narratives of divorcees, they emerge as ordinary individuals striving to create a safe and fulfilling everyday environment for themselves and their loved ones amid irreconcilable and enduring disputes. However, when seen through the lens of professionals, divorcees are perceived as incapable of adequately caring for their children, potentially causing harm. The growing disconnect between the impersonal, formalized knowledge of institutions and the experiential knowledge of divorcees constitutes a significant point of invalidation for parents, perpetuating their ongoing liminality by constraining self-transition and heightening the sense of absurdity. Considering the prevalent mistrust among Lithuanians toward the judiciary (Pankūnas, 2020), negative attitudes toward the legal system could be further exacerbated, intensifying feelings of ambiguity, uncertainty, and insecurity.

Our argument posits that individuals embroiled in conflictual divorce perceive professionals and legislation as establishing systems that are intricate and challenging to comprehend and navigate. The disparity between their expectations and the reality of interacting with these institutions is so vast that individuals begin to question their collaboration with specialists. As institutions and legislation seem to counter their role as sources of support and clarity, individuals struggle to validate their problems, their realities, and specific aspects of their identities. Their role in the divorce process becomes increasingly meaningless, absurd, and anxiety-inducing. The growing complexity of disputes over time drags divorcees further into a state of liminality, seemingly without an end in sight. Lebow (2020) underscores that divorce, along with the experience of being unable to act on one's needs and desires, exacerbates various problematic emotions. The absence of a timely mechanism for disengagement leaves many individuals trapped in a prolonged pause, marked by uncertainty, which is ultimately unhelpful for everyone involved.

Our findings suggest a concept that contemporary scholars have variously referred to as "permanent liminality." This concept reflects situations in which liminality becomes a persistent condition, with one or more phases in the liminal sequence becoming frozen, akin to a film paused at a specific frame (Szakolczai, 2000). D'Souza (2016)

introduced the idea of "undesired (perpetual) liminality," highlighting the experiences of individuals who have little control over events that significantly impact their lives. These individuals find themselves ensnared in an undesired in-between state, unable to transition permanently from their current circumstances. More recently, Greco and Stenner (2017) and Kofoed and Stenner (2017) have introduced the concept of a "liminal hotspot," which characterizes situations where the liminal transition remains incomplete or markedly prolonged. In a liminal hotspot, the emotional state associated with the pre-transition condition persists and remains prominent, contrasting with traditional liminal rites where such affectivity is expected to diminish over time.

While the concept of permanent liminality aids in understanding the experiences of divorcees to some extent, it implies an inability to progress further and does not fully capture the intense and ongoing experiences of absurdity and the volatile conflict that emerge from our interviews. To better encapsulate these aspects, we have introduced the term *"strained liminality."* This term not only signifies the inability to move forward toward greater clarity but also underscores the violent and absurd uncertainty in which divorcees find themselves.

In situations riddled with inner uncertainty, the world can cease to appear meaningful to those who have been harmed and who perceive themselves as cautious and decent individuals (Scheppele & Bart, 1983). As the guiding framework collapses, individuals confront the meaninglessness of their circumstances (Camus, 1955/2018; Sartre, 1956/2015). When levels of enduring ambiguity remain high, it can occasionally engender feelings of absurdity, akin to what Camus (1955/2018) referred to as "the divorce between a man and his life," or, in other words, a sense of self-incoherence.

The sensation of ***meaninglessness and the absurdity*** of interactions with institutions bear a particular resemblance to the experiences of Kafkaesque characters, as depicted in works such as "The Castle" (1998/1926) and "The Trial" (2011/1924). These characters find themselves navigating alone through labyrinthine and contradictory bureaucratic organizations. Power relations are portrayed as a vast bureaucratic machinery that serves as a disintegrating force, inflicting countless obstacles on the characters' actions, upholding a rigid hierarchical structure, and stifling social mobility. Reflection on this hierarchy and its inaccessibility becomes apparent as individuals' attempts to establish personal contact and understanding with officials gradually prove futile and fruitless. Paradoxically, the more one strives to connect, the wider the chasm of unshared reality becomes.

Narratives of absurdity provide valuable insights into the norms and power dynamics that underlie bureaucratic systems, enriching our understanding of liminality. While the notion of liminality may not directly address structural power, its connection with the absurd offers a revealing perspective on the relative power and position of actors (McConnell, 2016). Therefore, in the context of enduring divorce, highlighting the absurdity of the situation serves as a means for divorcing individuals to underscore their limited power to influence the ongoing circumstances.

When an individual's reality is not acknowledged or is disregarded by others, they often perceive themselves as having a unique perspective that others do not, or perhaps

cannot, comprehend. This deepens their sense of absurdity and isolation. The feeling of isolation resulting from invalidation is closely tied to the sense of a self's demise because people primarily construct their self-understanding through interactions with others (Lavis, 2010). When validation from others is lacking, the self cannot be reflected or affirmed through external sources and, as a result, seems to fade away. When such experiences persist over an extended period, they can lead to a reduced identification with social sources of meaning and a withdrawal from seeking fulfilling relationships. This, in turn, results in longer-term consequences such as chronic emotional depletion and a decline in overall well-being (Helm et al., 2019).

The *war-like experiences* described by research participants closely resemble the feelings associated with an ongoing conflictual situation fraught with uncertainty and absurdity, especially for those who feel attacked and unprotected. It's noteworthy that while the interviews were conducted, the war in Ukraine had not yet begun; however, the later stages of data interpretation coincided with the outbreak of the war. Consequently, divorcees' comparisons of their experiences with war emerged as a fitting means of gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges they were grappling with.

War is often characterized by a world turned upside down, the destruction of everything once familiar, and a profound absence of hope for the future, all of which contribute to a prevailing sense of the absurd (Hawk, 2017). Absurdity and war underscore the significance of the stark contrast between (expectations of) what is meaningful, good, and normal on one hand, and the actual experience of the situation on the other. This stark contrast is key to comprehending the role of context in psychological distress (Rond & Lok, 2016). The concept of "absurdity" is viewed as a potential root cause of psychological distress during times of war, characterized by "a sense that one's established social worlds are hopelessly alien from one's conception of the good, the expected, and the 'normal'" (Lyman & Scott, 1970).

In summary, we emphasize that the constrained process of self-transition during enduring conflictual divorce is a central facet of strained liminality. This state is chiefly characterized by a sense of enduring, cyclical attacks and invalidation, which, in turn, manifests as a feeling of being trapped in an absurdity and uncertainty within the divorce process. In response, individuals adopt various strategies to distance themselves from this volatile situation and bolster their own resilience and well-being.

4.3. Dual Effect of Strategies and Resources: Promoting and/or Preventing Self-Redefinition

Our findings indicate that individuals navigating the enduring conflictual marital dissolution process employ strategies that can be broadly categorized into three distinct groups, reflecting their interaction with the three phases of the divorce process. These strategies involve protective, speculative, and reflective ways of engaging with the ongoing reality, thus giving rise to particular ways of being throughout the ongoing divorce. These modes can be described as "losing-protecting," "in-between-pondering," and "gaining-reflecting." While these modes are present to varying degrees

from the beginning of the divorce, it is noteworthy that speculative and reflective ways of being gradually become more prominent as individuals grapple with the prolonged uncertainty inherent in a divorce that spans several years.

Speculation about various ways of being and behaving emerges as a predominant approach for individuals caught in *extended waiting* periods during enduring conflictual divorce. These waiting periods are characterized by a sense of absurdity and powerlessness, as divorcees find themselves in a protracted state of uncertainty with limited control over their circumstances.

In this context, waiting can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it can be a space filled with expectations and hope for a new role or identity, offering the possibility of a positive change and a better future. Waiting can serve as a psychological buffer against the distress of enduring uncertainty, allowing individuals to maintain a sense of agency and purpose (El-Shaarawi, 2015).

However, on the other hand, waiting can also be psychologically taxing. Prolonged exposure to a state of waiting can lead to a sense of vulnerability and a loss of self-definition. The uncertainty of the divorce process can trigger rumination about various potential outcomes, which, in turn, can exacerbate distress. This creates a potential feedback loop where distress makes time seem to slow down, further intensifying distress (Rankin et al., 2019).

In essence, waiting can be experienced as a state of "dead time" or stillness that halts personal progress due to its lack of linearity. It is a transformative space filled with both despair and potential for self-creation. While waiting can be an opportunity for individuals to reflect on their identity and envision a new self, it also carries the risk of psychological strain and a sense of stagnation. The enduring conflictual divorce process, with its extended waiting periods, thus presents a complex and challenging psychological landscape for those involved.

Emerging from a state of uncertainty and transitioning toward greater self-coherence involves the active construction of a new reality centered around *moral-based meaning-making*. This process propels individuals into a more contemplative mode of existence characterized by the pursuit of a novel, forward-directed, and enduring meaning. Discovering purpose amid the challenges of an enduring divorce proves to be a vital cornerstone for individuals, enabling them to confront the heightened existential stressors that accompany such a situation. While previous research has traditionally portrayed meaning-making as a retrospective endeavor focused on reconciling with past experiences, particularly in the context of coping with divorce-related losses (Hopper, 2001), our findings reveal a significant shift. Within the realm of enduring divorce, we assert that meaning-making assumes a forward-looking dimension.

This future-oriented meaning takes precedence and emerges as a primary source of purpose and personal agency, critically assisting individuals in reestablishing coherence and continuity in the face of the dissonance generated by the conflict between present circumstances and envisioned future possibilities (Heiland et al., 2002). In essence, proactive engagement in meaning-making, particularly within the context of enduring divorce, acts as a guiding beacon, illuminating the path forward.

Liminality scholars suggest that contemplating various ways of existing and behaving both in the present and the future, along with envisioning a purposeful existence, constitute some of the most significant strategies for navigating the liminal state. Whyte (2005) posits that questioning, aspiring, and experimenting with different modes of existence represent proactive approaches to grappling with the uncertainty characteristic of enduring liminality. In circumstances where the potential for leading a meaningful life is constrained, the capacity to envision a purposeful present and future emerges as an essential lifeline for individuals, enabling them to sustain their social vitality (Turner, 2015).

At this juncture, we can draw a parallel with the myth of Sisyphus as articulated by Albert Camus (1955/2015), likening divorcees to the ancient Greek figure of Sisyphus laboriously rolling a stone uphill only to witness it endlessly descending once more. In the relentless cycle of repetition without a discernible conclusion, the concept of absurdity surfaces. However, rather than succumbing to despair and relinquishing hope, Sisyphus, much like the majority of divorcees in our interviews, assumes a heroic stance, embodying what Camus refers to as an "Absurd Hero." In this existential context, life transcends conventional rationality and necessitates an acceptance of the inherent absurdity.

Embracing the absurd signifies acknowledging the subjective nature of reality while recognizing the limitations of objective circumstances (Becker, 1997). There exist certain facets of life that remain impervious to change, and our duty is, akin to Sisyphus, to derive meaning from them. Individuals must construct their own understanding of reality to truly discover themselves. Identifying themselves as heroes courageously confronting the challenges posed by divorce amid the backdrop of absurdity furnishes them with a defined sense of individuality, and an unequivocal moral compass, all under a degree of safety and control (Becker, 1997).

Nonetheless, this heavy reliance on their reference system carries a ***potential drawback***. When individuals articulate their personal perspectives on a situation, they often become motivated to uphold and safeguard these viewpoints. In our study, participants exhibited this behavior by creating emotional distance from their spouses and by disparaging the specialists involved in the divorce process. Existing literature has elucidated that individuals frequently employ distancing and derogation as alternative coping strategies when confronted with the salience of loss (Snyder et al., 1986).

To preserve their self-concept, individuals may sever ties with those who pose a threat to their self-esteem. However, in cases where interactions with specific individuals are deemed necessary or preferable, people often resort to derogation as a form of criticism (Dechesne et al., 2000). This approach allows individuals to safeguard both their self-perception and the integrity of their relationships. Those who opt to maintain contact with certain individuals tend to derogate the source of negative information, while those who choose to sever ties with individuals or groups often distance themselves following reminders of potential harm or loss (Dechesne et al., 2000).

Despite the prominent role of both strategies in self-protection, our findings indicate that individuals, in employing them, tend to ***further isolate themselves*** from their

immediate environment. Given that effective communication is widely recognized as the primary means of resolving disputes (Gulbrandsen et al., 2018; Lebow, 2019), the prospect of achieving lasting agreements without communication appears considerably unlikely. Transitioning from reliance on professional authority and expertise to self-authorization and personal agency can be viewed as a significant aspect of positive change, as it fosters an individual's perception of themselves as capable, self-directed decision-makers (Treloar, 2019). However, the complete embrace of one's own values, perspectives, and beliefs about the truthfulness of the situation carries adverse consequences. When individuals firmly anchor themselves in a particular interpretation of events, it becomes challenging to disengage from the conflict, thus contributing to its perpetuation (Rovenpor et al., 2019).

Viewing divorce as a war type of conflict, we can also consider how divorce itself might offer individuals a sense of purpose and direction. Hedges (2002) argues that, at times, individuals accept conflict and suffering as necessary if they can rationalize that it serves a higher good. Beyond happiness, people often seek meaning in their lives. Paradoxically, conflict, even in its destructive nature, can provide this sought-after sense of purpose, meaning, and a reason to continue living (Hedges, 2002). Societies enduring prolonged experiences of intractable conflicts often develop a specific worldview to satisfy their fundamental psychological needs and goals. This worldview supports individuals in their daily tasks and activities, supplying meaning and motivation for their daily lives. However, it can also hinder them from seeking lasting external and internal peace (Bar-Tal et al., 2009).

The issue mentioned above also pertains to the ***resources*** that individuals engage with during their enduring divorce process. These resources can be perceived as either facilitating their engagement with particular modes of existence, reinforcing their stay in a specific mode, advancing their journey toward inner self-coherence and conflict resolution, or conversely, hindering these processes. The term "resource" typically implies something that an individual can access for support and assistance. However, based on our study results, we contend that resources can inadvertently become sources of conflict, even when divorcees may perceive them as supportive without recognizing the potential long- and short-term consequences.

In this context, we want to spotlight the roles of ***friends and family, including children***, as one of the most complex sources of both support and conflict during enduring divorces. While some divorcees find their families and friends to be invaluable sources of strength and assistance, many experience family members as additional sources of stress and tension due to inadequate or unhelpful support. The dual nature of family, especially when children are involved, raises questions about whether they help or hinder divorcees in achieving timely inner coherence and conflict resolution.

Previous research in the field has been somewhat divided on this issue, with the majority of studies highlighting the positive influence of children, family, friends, and religion in supporting a more timely transition and overall well-being during divorce (Van Lawick & Visser, 2015; Soulsby & Bennett, 2015; Fen-Lin & Brown, 2021). However, some studies have pointed to potential adverse effects of these factors on

the divorce process (Langlais et al., 2016; Symoens et al., 2014; Kołodziej-Zaleska & Przybyła-Basista, 2016).

For instance, research has shown that **spiritual resources** play a crucial role in helping individuals adjust to divorce (Steiner et al., 2011; Steiner et al., 2015) and can generally support individuals in maintaining a quality of life that aligns with their personal needs and expectations (Riklikiene et al., 2019). However, these resources can also exacerbate challenges and negative emotions, leading to difficulties in adjusting to divorce and higher levels of depression (Krumrei et al., 2011; Jenkins, 2010).

With our research, we acknowledge the **duality of the resources**, arguing that whether a particular aspect becomes a resource or a challenge heavily depends on the individual and the broader situational and circumstantial factors within the person's (new) family structure. No resource can be definitively labeled as helpful or unhelpful in the self-transition journey of divorcing individuals without considering their complete divorce context.

4.4. Divorce as a Liminal Space to Renegotiate Gendered Assumptions

In the final chapter of our discussion, we would like to explore the gendered aspects and discourses that emerged in the context of enduring conflictual divorce. Three main aspects surfaced from our results, and we will discuss each of them below. Firstly, in line with other research, we argue for higher perceived gains from divorce for women. Secondly, we discuss the perceived gaps in legislation that struggle to accommodate the changing societal norms for fathers. Lastly, we address the duality of the (non)initiator's role and its effects on the divorce process. Overall, we emphasize that while gender does play a role in the conflictual divorce process, the individual circumstances of divorcees must be given primary consideration. The enduring divorce creates a liminal space where gendered assumptions and presumptions surface, offering an opportunity for their renegotiation on both individual and societal levels. This process has the potential to bring individuals closer to a more equitable sense of self and promote greater gender equality.

When discussing the first issue, it becomes evident that the process of (re)building the self is observed in both male and female research participants throughout the divorce process. However, this transformation is particularly prominent among female divorcees. They journey to regain self-confidence, freedom, and aspects of their identity that have been undervalued or neglected during their marriages. Our findings align with prior research that highlights the **significant inner gains women often experience** as a result of divorce (Gregson & Ceynar, 2009; van Schalkwyk, 2005; Mendoza et al., 2020).

These gains for women can be attributed to various factors. On one hand, they may relate to financial considerations and power dynamics during the divorce. Women may find that the benefits of marriage are not as substantial as the sacrifices they are required to make, including fulfilling traditional wifely roles and responsibilities (DeVault, 1990). The disproportionate financial burden that divorce places on women

can contribute to this perception, as they may have invested more in the marriage than men, both financially and in terms of emotional labor (De Vaus et al., 2017; Mortelmans, 2020). Additionally, women may have less bargaining power in abusive relationships, making it challenging to reduce domestic violence (Hsu & Henke, 2021). As individuals shed negative aspects of themselves during divorce, they move closer to their ideal self, facilitating a more effective process of self-reconstruction throughout the divorce journey (Lewandowski Jr & Bizzoco, 2007). Consequently, within the liminal space of divorce, we argue that women, in particular, shed traditionally gendered self-parts tied to supporting the family and instead embrace roles that enhance their positive self-view, allowing for a more fulfilling, liberated way of being.

While more dated research suggested that men acquire less valued social roles such as being the primary householder or child rearer after divorce (Bisagni & Eckenrode, 1995), our research aligns with more recent studies that point to evolving societal norms and ***changing expectations regarding the role of fathers*** in caregiving. In contrast to earlier perceptions, all five of our male participants expressed a strong desire to take an active and engaged role in raising their children. This leads us to the second issue highlighted in our study, which pertains to the evolving role of fathers in contemporary society. In essence, our research underscores the shifting landscape of fatherhood in Lithuanian society, where fathers are increasingly eager and willing to play an active and nurturing role in their children's lives. However, they face obstacles tied to longstanding legal and societal norms that often prioritize mothers as primary caregivers. This evolving dynamic calls for a reconsideration of legal and social frameworks to ensure more equitable opportunities for both parents to engage actively in their children's upbringing during and after divorce.

Our findings are consistent with prior research conducted in Lithuania and other regions. Maslauskaitė and Kuconytė (2016) have previously argued that despite the legal framework in Lithuania advocating for equal parental rights and responsibilities, the practical reality falls short of this ideal. The legal context is not conducive to promoting shared parental roles, particularly when parents live separately.

In many Western societies today, there is an expectation for fathers to be actively involved in child-rearing, household responsibilities, and providing financial support equally (Eräranta & Moisander, 2011). However, divorce often relegates fathers to the role of breadwinners, diminishing their involvement in caregiving and rendering the caring father role less relevant (Gruson-Wood et al., 2022). Fox and Bruce (2001) demonstrated that men's engagement in fathering tasks is determined by the perceived importance of the fatherly role in their lives and the expectations that significant others place on them as fathers. This discrepancy gave rise to a significant dilemma experienced by the male divorcees in our study. On one hand, these individuals recognize the societal importance of their role as fathers. However, the legal framework and the actions of their former partners do not validate this identity during the divorce process, leaving them feeling invalidated and uncertain about how to proceed. Considering the critical role of children in the process of parental self-transition and the prevalent trend of mothers receiving custody in the country, we contend that the

self-transition of men faces more constraints compared to women who continue to live with their children.

It's important to highlight that in these specific situations, the challenges individuals face concerning fatherhood are not solely related to gender but are significantly influenced by the living and visitation arrangements with the child. Our findings indicate that both non-resident male and female divorcees encounter difficulties in maintaining contact with their children. These challenges often arise due to issues such as children refusing contact or former partners actively preventing such interactions. In situations where female divorcees are prevented from seeing their children, the consequences are marked by increased tension and difficulty. The inability of mothers to have access to their children places additional pressure on their self-transition, especially considering the societal expectations in Lithuanian culture regarding the highly esteemed role of mothers in a woman's life (Kanopienė et al., 2015). Furthermore, it's worth noting that some scientific literature suggests that mothers may experience more severe cases of parental alienation compared to fathers (Balmer et al., 2018), which places them in a more vulnerable position and can further restrict their process of self-redefinition during divorce.

Our analysis suggests that the current shifts in the role of fathers in contemporary societies place both fathers and mothers in a liminal space where they must navigate the challenges and possibilities of solo co-parenting after divorce. The inability to interact with one's child places divorcees, regardless of gender, in an intensified state of liminality. For women, this heightened liminality manifests as an inner struggle against increased social pressure to fulfill the role of a "good mother." Meanwhile, for men, the challenges are multifaceted. In addition to their internal battles, they must also contend with traditional legal and social assumptions regarding child rearing that are predominantly geared toward mothers. This situation becomes a battle on multiple fronts for men, as they seek to redefine their role as fathers within a changing societal landscape.

Finally, we find it important to discuss the ***initiator status*** and the arguments surrounding it among divorcees. Consistent with prior research, our findings indicate that women are often the primary initiators of divorce (e.g., Mortelmans, 2020). However, the initiator status can be somewhat ambiguous. Despite being able to identify the divorce initiator, individuals frequently emphasized the uncertainty surrounding this status. Both parties often claimed innocence, leading to a complex understanding of who truly initiated the divorce.

Scholarly literature suggests that the partner responsible for the breakdown of the marriage may not necessarily be the one who legally files for divorce (Diamond & Parker, 2018). For some, actively seeking a divorce is unacceptable, but provoking their partner into initiating the divorce is deemed acceptable (Lebow, 2019). Consequently, the initiator status remains ambiguous when considering its impact on self-transition. There appears to be a consensus that the divorce experience is more challenging for non-initiators compared to initiators (Ranđelović & Goljović, 2020; Strizzi et al., 2021). However, our results only partially support these claims. We observed the most

significant differences in adjustment to divorce between non-initiators and initiators during the initial phase of temporal self-disruption. However, these disparities diminished after the first few years.

Furthermore, we note that the most painful aspect is not necessarily the initiation of divorce but rather the partner's infidelity, which often served as a reason for the dissolution of the marriage. When a former partner's infidelity was combined with their role as the divorce initiator, the individual's self-disruption became more intricate, distressing, and challenging to overcome. Spring and Spring (2012) highlight that infidelity deeply wounds individuals and forces them to redefine themselves at the most fundamental level. This loss of one's basic sense of self is a profound injury that extends beyond the infidelity itself and necessitates an extended period of healing (Spring & Spring, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

The developed grounded theory of "strained liminality" offers a framework to understand the process of self-transition during enduring conflictual divorce. This process is depicted as a continuous journey with interconnected phases that create an in-between space for individuals. It is not a linear progression but rather a fluctuation between ongoing losses and gains. This transition is influenced by numerous internal and external factors, making it multifaceted and constrained. Strained liminality characterizes enduring conflictual divorce as a process marked by uncertainty and volatility. However, it also provides opportunities for personal development and growth, allowing individuals to redefine themselves within the process and see themselves anew. Therefore, self-transition during enduring conflictual divorce is seen as a dynamic intricate process, demanding individuals to engage in various modes of being to address the diverse needs and requirements stemming from internal and external sources, all while navigating the ongoing flux of divorce towards emerging inner clarity and stability.

The process of self-transition during divorce initiates with a temporal self-disruption characterized by numerous losses. This phase triggers intense emotional reactions and disrupts the individuals' sense of past, present, and future, leaving them in a state of increasing vulnerability. One of the central losses experienced during this phase is the shattered dream of a unified, intact family, including shared parenting. However, within this disruptive change, there is also room for positive transformations, marked by the recovery and rediscovery of valuable aspects of one's inner self. These perceived positive gains manifest as self-liberation, heightened strength, empowerment, and inner peace. They serve as guiding lights and building blocks upon which divorcees can rely. However, the natural and timely progression of this transition is hindered by ongoing conflicts involving the former spouse, professionals, and the country's legal system. This dynamic creates an increasingly volatile and uncertain environment, akin to experiences of warfare and absurdity. Despite the ongoing flux and changes on the surface, the self-transition process remains strained and in a state of hanging, lacking clarity about its ultimate destination.

Various coping strategies are employed to engage with interconnected ways of being within the process. Protecting oneself from potential losses by derogating the opponent or distancing oneself from the source of harm represents a "losing-protecting" way of being, especially during the initial years of divorce. With time, as gains and self-rebuilding occur, increased speculation about possible ways of being and behaving amidst the enduring divorce conflicts emerges, signifying an "in-between-pondering" engagement with the process. Finally, forward-directed meaning-making becomes the central strategy, pulling divorcees out of the absurd uncertainty by creating moral-based meanings to explain their existence in the increasingly volatile and uncertain process of enduring divorce. Despite the usefulness of these strategies and specific resources in strengthening individuals during their divorce journey by providing much-needed purpose and personal agency, they often propel them further away

from their environment and hinder timely and peaceful divorce conflict resolution. In this way, conflict resolution becomes increasingly difficult, ultimately constraining individuals in their self-transition journey and pushing them further into the state of liminality.

Our findings encourage readers to consider conflictual divorce as a multifaceted and evolving phenomenon, intricately entangled with numerous inner conflicts on multiple levels, which characterizes the strained liminality space that is challenging to move beyond. The focus of attention should be directed toward the unique circumstances of each individual going through divorce, as well as the broader institutional, legislative, and even political contexts. Given the heightened vulnerability of individuals, especially during the initial years of divorce, there is a pressing need for child protection officers, lawyers, mediators, and other professionals involved to pay special attention. Divorcees often feel abandoned in their efforts to resolve ongoing disputes, which can be an overwhelming task, particularly in light of the emotional labor and inefficiencies present at the institutional and legislative levels.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Viewing enduring conflictual divorce as a process of strained liminality can broaden our understanding of the experiences individuals undergo and enhance the potential for self and other support. On an individual level, adopting the concept of strained liminality allows divorcees to comprehend the intricacies of their journey, the oscillation between losses and gains, and the enduring nature of living within volatile uncertainty. On a societal level, seeing divorcees' experiences through their perspective can aid specialists and even family members in gaining a deeper understanding of the realities faced by them. This includes the challenges they confront and the resources they utilize. A developed grounded theory of strained liminality contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that either facilitate or hinder a timely and effective process of self-transition and conflict resolution amidst the complexities of daily life.

For individuals experiencing enduring conflictual divorce, whether they are men or women, it is crucial to normalize their ongoing situation. It's essential to understand that such circumstances are not unique to them and are not solely the result of personal shortcomings or an inability to maintain normal communication with an ex-partner. Various forces and factors come into play during this process, and it involves intense emotions and multiple actors that must be managed.

Divorce is a challenging transition, especially when marked by high levels of conflict. However, it can also be viewed as a journey toward positive self-transformation and a more fulfilling life. Divorce is not merely the separation from an ex-partner but a profound transitional experience. It involves numerous changes, particularly in one's parental role, as well as losses and gains, all of which require careful attention and time to unfold and adapt to. During the initial years of enduring conflictual divorce, the primary task for the divorcees is to utilize as many available internal and external resources as possible to achieve a certain equilibrium. It is important to recognize that adaptation to changes and changes themselves do not happen overnight. Healing and adaptation occur gradually over time and are not finite or definitive outcomes.

Efforts of specialists should focus on both maintaining continuity and fostering adaptive change. It is essential to emphasize the potential for growth and gains within the situation rather than dwelling on actual or potential losses. Individual strengths and inherent resilience should be encouraged and harnessed to discover the most effective ways of coping with the current circumstances. However, as the situation stabilizes, attention should shift toward ensuring that individual opinions, values, and perspectives do not become so overpowering that they leave little room for the viewpoints and positions of others. Balancing personal growth with consideration for others is key to navigating enduring conflictual divorce successfully.

Based on our research findings, which have highlighted gaps between the expectations regarding institutional support and the reality, we advocate for special attention to this issue. Institutional support is critically important, particularly during the initial years of the divorce process, but it must be carefully monitored and managed.

Specialized training programs should be implemented to address the risks of misidentification or oversimplification of complex situations, especially when it involves taking sides for or against one of the ex-partners. It is crucial that professionals who are adequately trained can make accurate assessments and take appropriate actions without inadvertently causing more harm than support.

Continuous observation, monitoring, and measurement of the effectiveness of interventions should become routine practice for support professionals. Transitions are fundamentally the processes through which change and development unfold. Therefore, institutions aiming to support divorcing families should pay meticulous attention to how they facilitate or hinder these transition processes within their frameworks or boundaries. For example, we argue that imposing direct communication with a conflicting spouse is risky and might result in more harm than help. Similar counts for the interactions with various involved professionals. Any potential communication needs to be carefully examined and planned accordingly on a short and long-term basis to avoid further conflict escalations and harm. We urge professionals to acknowledge the strengths, capabilities, and realities of divorcees while also empathetically understanding their challenges and limitations. This balanced approach is essential for providing meaningful and effective support during enduring conflictual divorce.

We would also like to draw attention to the need of people in their enduring divorce to be understood, their pain and struggles recognized and accepted. People who were unjustly harmed seek validation and are helped when they find the validation they seek. Regarding psychosocial support, this would mean conveying to individuals that their presence, words, and responses make sense and are understandable in their current situation. Professionals should respond to divorcees' strengths and capacities while at the same time empathically understanding their difficulties and incapacities. It would enable them to feel acknowledged and recognized, which would become a solid foundation for change and cooperation. If professionals treat divorcees with dignity and respect and can gain their confidence, divorcees will still feel fairly treated even when unpopular decisions are made. This is particularly important during conflictual divorce when favorable outcomes for one or both divorcing parties can rarely be guaranteed.

Our study emphasizes the substantial emotional labor experienced by individuals engaged in litigation processes, particularly during enduring conflictual divorce. It underscores the urgent need for institutions to actively work towards making the litigation process more psychologically friendly and less stressful. This objective can be achieved through a combination of measures, such as providing litigants with estimates of how long their case is likely to take can help manage their expectations and reduce uncertainty, or offering resources to help litigants better understand legal processes and court etiquette, thereby empowering them to navigate the system more effectively. Furthermore, lawyers can be provided with training in counseling techniques to better support their clients emotionally, for example by sharing more information about the litigation process, potential scenarios, and the experiences of other litigants. By thoughtfully planning and improving the litigation process, professionals can prevent

overwhelming emotional reactions, foster better decision-making capacity, and ultimately work toward more positive outcomes in divorce cases while reducing conflicts between divorcees.

It is evident from our research that child custody and contact remain central concerns for divorcees, influencing both their conflicts and their self-transition processes. Policymakers should give careful consideration to evolving societal norms and expectations surrounding "new" fatherhood. Fathers' active involvement in child-rearing should be encouraged not only within the context of marital life but especially during divorce or post-divorce situations. One potential direction for improvement is the promotion of a shared residency model, where children spend equal time with both parents, automatically applied in divorce cases. In situations where the shared residency model is not suitable or desired, special attention should be directed towards the protection of the non-custodial parents who express a clear desire to maintain contact with their children but are prevented from doing so, often due to the child's preferences.

Our study highlights the high vulnerability experienced by many women during the initial years of divorce, especially those who were in violent marital relationships. We strongly encourage women to seek external resources and support. Institutional and legislative changes are necessary to assist individuals who may struggle to seek support on their own due to remaining stigma or lack of finances and time. It is crucial to provide free socio-psychological support, particularly in the early stages of divorce. As our research suggests, divorce can be a complex journey for many women (and men), marked by both challenges and opportunities for personal growth and self-reconstruction. In this context, support professionals can have a significant impact by assisting divorcees in recognizing the potential benefits of their liminal situation. By doing so, they can help them lay the foundation for more fulfilling and positive future lives.

We recognize that enduring conflicts are violent, harsh, and vicious, causing much suffering to individuals involved in them. People do not pretend or make exaggerations. Their pain is there and valid. People involved in this type of conflict experience losses and suffering, and they cause losses, injuries, and suffering to the opponent. Both sides perceive themselves as being harmed in intractable conflict. Therefore, one of the main goals is to help individuals mutually see the other side of the conflict and realize that both sides are victims. There might be no winners, only further losses if the conflict remains intact.

Researchers are encouraged to use or question the constructed grounded theory of strained liminality of self-transition through an enduring conflictual divorce to delve into the scientific issues related to (conflictual) divorce, raise new questions, and address them. We propose to use the strained liminality of self-transition in similar contexts, for example, when studying self-transitions in the contexts of death, war, migration, professional changes, and alike.

LIMITATIONS

Firstly, it is important to emphasize that qualitative research is adept at identifying and validating patterns of interactions and intricate pathways, but its purpose is not to establish causation (Tuthill et al., 2020). Consequently, while our research indicates the existence of loosely defined stages within divorce, it should not be interpreted as demonstrating causal relationships among the elements. Furthermore, the generalizability of our findings is limited, and therefore, the application of our grounded theory in other contexts should be approached with caution.

The potential for research bias arises due to the high degree of immersion the researcher has in the data, and this issue must be addressed in the research. To mitigate this bias, every effort has been made to ensure that preconceived notions do not influence our findings. Nevertheless, as emphasized by scholars in the field of Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT), personal knowledge and experience can contribute to knowledge creation. Therefore, fully leveraging the researcher's interpretive abilities to explore the data, engage in a grounded inquiry in the field, and co-construct a theory with the participants is an integral aspect of the CGT development process (Charmaz, 2014; Singh & Estefan, 2018).

Our findings predominantly rely on the accounts provided by female research participants, potentially introducing a gender-related bias to the data. Despite our efforts to include as many male participants as possible in the study, we were unable to achieve a balanced representation of both genders. Nevertheless, the insights and challenges provided by the five male participants have offered valuable perspectives and shed light on issues particularly relevant to this group of divorcees.

Our sampling strategy deviates from the typical temporal sampling approach often used in grounded theory studies. Instead, we adopted a strategy of sampling across different cohorts, a common practice in longitudinal research (Neale, 2021). While this approach may not completely align with traditional aspects of grounded theory, such as achieving full data saturation from the outset, we contend that our research has yielded rich data for grounded theory development. Furthermore, in line with Low's (2019) and Timonen's et al. (2018) arguments that complete data analysis and fully formed theories are not always attainable, we advocate for a pragmatic approach to saturation and theory building.

Enduring conflictual divorce is an emotionally charged journey, particularly during the initial months and years. It is possible that some of the interviews with divorcing individuals involved heightened emotions and a certain level of stress, which could raise questions about emotional stability, potential memory lapses, or dissociation. However, it is essential to emphasize that prior to conducting the study, we placed significant emphasis on creating a safe and supportive environment for research participants during the interviews. We elaborated on these precautions in the ethics chapter of our research. The interviews were conducted online, allowing divorcees to select a safe and comfortable environment and choose a convenient time. Importantly, interviews were not conducted during particularly stressful circumstances, such as court or

mediation sessions, which were identified as the most stress-inducing for participants. The low attrition rate and the valuable feedback provided by participants highlighted the significance of allowing them to express their concerns and issues without encountering the aforementioned problems.

Furthermore, our research aimed to explore divorce as an ongoing process, emphasizing the necessity of conducting interviews before the legal dissolution took place. This approach was crucial because post-event studies often struggle to capture the complexity and ambiguity experienced by individuals during divorce. Retrospective reports in such studies tend to oversimplify the uncertainties that are present as events are unfolding (Francia, Millear, & Sharman, 2019; Rollie & Duck, 2006).

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Appendix A

Insights from the Pilot Study

The Insights from the Qualitative PT. Here we outline the key insights we gained during this stage of the study and how they have influenced our preparation for the subsequent stages of grounded theory development.

Refining the definition and *conceptual framework of conflictual divorce* was a crucial task in our research, given the challenges associated with defining this phenomenon (Haddad, Phillips, & Bone, 2016). The PT played a significant role in the development and refinement of our definition and conceptual framework over time. Initially, our conceptualization of conflictual divorce did not consider the duration of the divorce. We sought individuals who were still legally married but no longer living together or had intentions to divorce. However, as the pilot study progressed, we recognized the importance of incorporating the time aspect to provide more stability in the understanding of divorces.

We conducted interviews with individuals who had recently separated, and we observed multiple instances of back-and-forth movements and uncertainty regarding their intentions to divorce. To address this, we consulted the statistics of the Lithuanian courts and decided to include a threshold of 6 months since the official filing of divorce, as it would reduce the inclusion of non-conflictual divorce cases. Additionally, we realized that relying solely on the intention to divorce might be too vague. As a result, for the subsequent stages of the study, we decided to include individuals who were still living together only if they had already filed for divorce at least 6 months ago. This adjustment aimed to increase the focus on conflictual divorces and enhance clarity in the research.

Furthermore, we initially considered focusing primarily on female participants, but during the pilot study, we recognized the limitations of such an approach. It became evident that solely including women would provide an incomplete picture of conflictual divorce, neglecting the perspective of the other party involved. While we hoped to include both partners in the subsequent stages of the research to gain a more holistic view, this strategy did not succeed. However, we were able to partially address this gap by including male participants to some extent, which helped to provide a more balanced perspective on the phenomenon.

Reviewing recruitment strategies was another important aspect of our pilot study. Initially, we aimed to include only Lithuanian residents in our sample. However, as we entered the field and attempted to recruit participants through personal networks, we encountered challenges in reaching our desired sample. We discovered that many individuals who had conflictual relationships with their ex-partners had already completed the legal divorce process. We also noticed a gap in the existing literature, which tended to focus on divorced individuals rather than those still in the process of divorce. Considering the difficulties in reaching our intended sample, we decided to broaden our focus and include Lithuanians living abroad for this stage of the research as well.

In total, we had nine participants in the pilot study, and their demographic information is presented in Table 1. All participants were still legally married, with three of them currently undergoing court-regulated divorce proceedings. Two of the participants were from the same divorcing couple. Five participants were from Lithuania, while the others resided in countries such as Ireland, the Netherlands, and Kenya. The inclusion of the non-Lithuanian participant living in Kenya was due to the researcher's residence in Kenya during that period, which provided an opportunity to explore the nuances of cultural differences. This particular interview led to paying more attention to certain topics and adding questions to the interview protocol about religion, church, and the societal influence on divorcees. When reflecting on the interviews with individuals living in multiple countries, we have strongly decided to continue the research only with Lithuania residents, as diferences in legal procedures surounding divorce vary from country to country and therefore influence the data too much.

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Pilot Study Participants

	Code	Gender	Age	Residency	Year of marriage	Length of divorce	Legal process in court?	Dyad?
1	S	M	36	Vilnius, LT	2013	2 yrs	N	Y
2	L1	F	32	Vilnius, LT	2013	2 yrs	N	Y
3	L2	F	38	Netherlands	2017	1 yrs	Y	N
4	A1	F	42	Ireland	2000	3 yrs	N	N
5	A2	F	46	Ireland	2005	1 yrs	Y	N
6	T	M	35	Vilnius, LT	2016	1 mo	N	N
7	K	F	41	Kenya	2005	6 mo	Y	N
8	E	F	38	Kaunas, LT	2005	1.5 yrs	N	N
9	G	M	39	Vilnius, LT	2012	1 mo	N	N

Given the difficulties in recruiting participants through personal channels, we decided to approach potential participants for the subsequent stages of the study through institutions. This approach aimed to increase objectivity, as participants would not have any personal connection to the researcher. Additionally, we hoped that this strategy would simplify the process of reaching our desired sample. However, the reality turned out to be different once again, and we faced further challenges in recruitment.

Interview Process. We initially formulated the questionnaire for the pilot study, which included numerous questions that later formed the basis of the T1 interview protocol. However, the pilot study interviews served as a valuable resource for refining and reorganizing the questions. Initially, the protocol started with abstract questions about how individuals defined conflictual divorce, which often led participants to provide abstract responses throughout the interview. However, during the last few

interviews, we changed the order of the questions, resulting in fewer abstract responses. Despite this improvement, some issues of generalization and abstract responses persisted. Therefore, we decided to revise the interview questions to focus more on inquiring about the aspects of conflict and the various contexts in which these conflicts occur. We also emphasized asking for examples from daily life, which provided deeper and wider information for follow-up questions.

Additionally, we discovered that more abstract questions, such as lessons learned from the divorce process, yielded important insights and encouraged participants to reflect further on their divorce transition. Some doubts arose regarding the opening question, and after testing various options, we found that inquiring about the beginning of the relationship and its development until problems appeared was the most fitting and least threatening for interviewees. We also realized the importance of dedicating more attention to the present experiences of individuals to gather information about ongoing conflict reflections.

Flexibility in the interviewing strategy was crucial, considering the diverse experiences of divorcees, particularly those with minor or adult children, living arrangements, and involvement in court-based divorce processes. Questions that focused on the overall evaluation of the divorce process, such as main learning points or suggestions for others in similar situations, generated valuable information and insights.

After each interview, we took the opportunity to discuss the questions with participants to minimize any potential harm and reduce interview-related stress. Instead of questioning whether divorcing individuals should be involved in research, we focused on how to undertake the research in a way that minimized harm and maximized potential benefits for participants (Donovan et al., 2018). We found that research participants acknowledged the helpfulness of the interviews in providing them a space to reflect on important events in their lives, despite discussing painful experiences. Overall, the initial structure of the interview, addressing the divorce process, self-aspects, relationships with others, and expectations of the future, along with some concluding questions, was justified. The use of semi-structured interviews effectively gathered data about high-conflict divorce experiences. Overall, the questionnaire from the pilot study was found to be mostly suitable for initiating data collection at T1. Consequently, we made some adjustments based on the insights gained from the pilot study and proceeded to use them in our research.

Analysis. The recorded interviews were uploaded to the PC and transcribed using the ExpressScribe program. The first two interviews were coded using the traditional method of pen and paper. Subsequently, all the data was coded using the NVivo 12 program. The coding process presented its own set of challenges. As a new process for the researcher, it brought forth a range of emotions, including doubts, anxieties, and fears, as well as joy and a sense of pride in gaining new insights and knowledge.

Throughout the coding process, various questions emerged. The researcher pondered the differences between coding in CGT and other approaches. While it is often said that there are no strict rules in coding, the researcher questioned whether she was coding correctly. After consulting with the supervisors, she has shifted from focussing

on the themes to looking for the processes and conceptualizing them. She also wondered about the usage and application of in vivo codes, the optimal number of codes to create (is 200 too many?), the effectiveness of creating memos, when and how overarching themes would emerge, and the differences between coding on paper versus the NVivo program.

To find answers to these questions, the researcher engaged in extensive reading of books and articles, watched online videos, and sought guidance from supervisors and other professionals in the field. Some answers were discovered through immersing themselves in the coding process, while others required more time for understanding. As the analysis process progressed, the researcher decided to primarily use the digital format of coding as it appeared to be more feasible and easier, despite having its implications and limitations. Although initially coding with pen and paper seemed to generate more analytical codes, gaining more experience with digital coding narrowed the gap and provided greater flexibility and structure. Overall, the coding process became clearer and more understandable, boosting the researcher's confidence in the coding skills.

Much of the attention was dedicated to the use of gerunds in coding, especially considering that the Lithuanian language does not have gerunds. In GT coding methodology, coding with gerunds, which are verb forms functioning as nouns and ending in "-ing" in English, is advocated. This approach helps in capturing processes and staying closely connected to the data (Charmaz, 2014). However, in the Lithuanian language, translating gerunds turns them into nouns that lose their verb properties and hinder the coding of processes. Therefore, the researcher decided to utilize a combination of English and Lithuanian codes interchangeably to better focus on the processes and avoid coding solely for topics and themes. It is worth noting that coding in English, particularly when it is a second language, can slow down the process due to searching for the appropriate words (Charmaz, 2014). Even though this may have resulted in a loss of spontaneity, it fostered a more critical and creative perspective toward the codes.

Overall, when reflecting on the experience of the above process, we can agree with other researchers arguing that pilot studies can yield detailed and segmented representations of context-dependent realities and support novice researchers in preparations for further steps in the process. In our case, the pilot study allowed us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the internal structure of studied phenomena, avoiding the overwhelming complexity of a large, monolithic cognitive space. We were able to more effectively manage context-related information, refine research design, and test the adequacy of data collection and analysis tools. Additionally, the pilot study served as a filter to determine the relevance of different knowledge sources, providing us with a sense of direction for subsequent research tasks.

Appendix B

T1 and T2 Interview Questions

T1: *How do people experience enduring divorce?*

A. Divorce process
What does the term "divorce" mean to you? How do you define it?
Could you give me a brief history of your relationship problems from when they started to the beginning of the legal divorce?
I'd like to know more about going through a divorce (as a man/woman). Can you tell me what it is like for you now?
How does divorce affect your everyday life?
Could you tell me more about your experience with/during court hearings?

B. Identity
How would you describe yourself as a person (strengths, weaknesses, character, needs, wishes, roles, goals-values-beliefs)?
Has going through a divorce process made a difference in how you see yourself? (or how others see you?)
What positive/negative changes have occurred in your life since divorce started (if any)?
Could I ask you to describe the most important lessons you learned through experiencing divorce?
Where do you see yourself in two to three years? How would you compare the person you hope to be and the person you see yourself as now?

C. Others
Tell me about your interaction with your children. What role do children play in the divorce process?
How would you describe the role your family, friends, colleagues, and other people play in the divorce process?
Could I ask you to describe your current interactions/relations with your ex-partner? Could you describe his/her interaction with your child(ren)?
Tell me about the role of professionals involved, institutions, and society as a whole. Who/what has been the most (un)helpful to you during this time? How has he/she/it been helpful?
Have you encountered any prejudice (as a divorcing person)? How have you dealt with it?

D. Closure
Is there something that you might not have thought about before that occurred to you during this interview?
Is there anything you would like to ask me?

T2: What facilitates conflictuality in the divorce process?

A. Change
What has happened/emerged since our last talk?
Did something increase/decrease? What remained constant? (thoughts/emotions/behavior/opinion)
How do/did you respond to the change? / What does it mean to you?
How do you adapt/change?
Has your divorce progressed as you expected?

B. Divorce conflict
How would you rate your divorce's conflict level? (0-10 points)
What fuels the conflict? What is the most salient and essential to resolve? (communication and problem-solving, problematic parenting, parent-child relation) / What would be needed to make the conflict go away, to come to a joint decision?
Are there patterns that frequently result in the manifestation of problems? A more positive direction?
Are there topics/areas that you agree on? What is the difference when compared to the ones you don't? (financial, custody, decisions on children)
What is your part in contributing to the conflict? Your ex-partners? Other people's?
How do you handle conflict? What do you do/don't do? What happens as a result? Cost-benefit of your actions?

C. Other
What communication means do you use to communicate? How could that be connected to maintaining the conflict?
Who initiated the divorce? Does that make a difference? How?
What role (if any) time has had in the escalation/decrease of conflict?
What would you like to change in a current situation? What do you believe will not change? How does that affect your actions?
Looking back, would you have done anything differently?
What feelings/emotions/thoughts dominate regarding the ex and the divorce process?

D. If divorced:
How did you come to the divorce agreement? What influenced the agreement?
Is it how you expected? If not, what not?
Do conflicts continue? If yes, is the post-divorce conflict different than before the divorce? If not, how did you manage to work around it?
If you went back in time, would you do anything differently? What?

Appendix C

Interview introduction

Aš esu Lina Butkutė, studijuoju doktorantūroje M. Romerio ir Antwerpeno universitetuose. Atlieku tyrimą apie besiskiriančiųjų patyrimus skyrybų metu. Tyrimas susidaro iš pokalbių/interviu su besiskiriančiaisiais. Remdamasi surinktais duomenimis rašysiu disertaciją, keletą straipsnių bei pranešimų keletoje konferencijų.

Šito pokalbio/interviu tikslas - pakalbėti apie jūsų patyrimus ir išgyvenimus skyrybų metu. Žmonės šitą procesą patiria ir išgyvena labai skirtingai. Man labai įdomu, kaip jūs patiriate buvimą šiame procese, ir ką jums tai reiškia. Čia nėra teisingų ar klaidingų atsakymų. Mano tikslas - suteikti jums kuo daugiau erdvės pasidalinti savo patirtimi. Būtų puiku, jei atsakydami į klausimus kalbėtumėte kuo plačiau ir duotumėt sau laiko tiek, kiek jums reikia. Pasakotumėte tai, kas tuo momentu ateina jums į galvą.

Translation into English:

My name is Lina Butkutė, I am studying for a doctorate at M. Romeris and Antwerp universities. I am conducting research on the experiences of divorcees during their divorce. The research consists of conversations/interviews with divorcing individuals. Based on the collected data, I will write a dissertation, several articles, and presentations at several conferences.

The purpose of this conversation/interview is to talk about your experiences during the divorce. People experience this process very differently. I am very interested in how you experience being in this process and what it means to you. There are no right or wrong answers here. My goal is to give you as much space as possible to share your experience. It would be great if you could be as broad as possible when answering the questions and give yourself as much time as you need. You can share with me what comes to your mind at that moment.

Appendix D

The template for the written consent

Aš …………………………………………………………………., sutinku dalyvauti tyrime, kurį vykdo M. Romerio universiteto Psichologijos instituto ir Antverpeno universiteto doktorantė Lina Butkutė-Van de Voort. Tyrimo tikslas - išanalizuoti besiskiriančių asmenų išgyvenimus skyrybų metu.

Esu supažindintas (-a) su šio tyrimo gairėmis ir dalyvavimo tyrime tikslu.
Mano dalyvavimas šiame tyrime yra savanoriškas.
Aš suprantu, kad dalyvaudamas (-a) tyrime turėsiu atsakyti į tyrėjo klausimus.
Turiu teisę neatsakyti į bet kurį klausimą.
Buvau informuotas (-a) ir sutinku, kad mano interviu bus įrašytas naudojant diktofoną.
Turiu teisę bet kuriuo metu atsisakyti dalyvauti tyrime.

Buvau informuotas (-a) apie dalyvavimo slaptumą ir anonimiškumą. Suprantu, kad mano tapatybė nebus atskleista (tyrimo metu gauti duomenys bus naudojami tik mokslo tikslams; tyrime užfiksuota medžiaga bus prieinama tik tyrime dalyvavusiems žmonėms, ji nebus viešai platinama).
Sutinku, kad mano interviu metu išsakyti teiginiai, neatskleidžiant mano tapatybės (tikrojo vardo, pavardės ir kitų asmens duomenų), bus cituojami moksliniuose straipsniuose ar kitoje mokslo sklaidoje.

Parašas …………………………………

Data ………………………………….

Lina Butkutė

GROUNDED THEORY OF STRAINED LIMINALITY: SELF-TRANSITION OF INDIVIDUALS THROUGH THEIR ENDURING CONFLICTUAL DIVORCE

Summary of Doctoral Dissertation
Social Sciences, Psychology (S 006)

Vilnius, 2024

The doctoral thesis was prepared in 2018-2023 and defended at Mykolas Romeris University and Antwerp University under the right to organize doctoral studies granted to Vytautas Magnus University together with Mykolas Romeris University by 22 February 2019 Order of the Miniter of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania No. V-160.

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The doctoral dissertation will be defended in the Psychology Science Council of Mykolas Romeris University and Vytautas Magnus University:

Chairperson:
Prof. Dr. Rita Bandzevičienė (Mykolas Romeris University, Social Sciences, Psychology, S 006).

Members:
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Asta Adler (Vilnius University, Social Sciences, Psychology, S 006);
Prof. Dr. Aistė Diržytė (Mykolas Romeris University, Social Sciences, Psychology, S 006);
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Prof. Habil. Dr. Vilma Žydžiūnaitė (Vytautas Magnus University, Social Sciences, Education Science, S 007).

The doctoral dissertation will be defended in the public meeting of the Psychology Science Council on 8 March 2024, at 2 pm at Mykolas Romeris University, room I-414.
Address: Ateities str. 20, LT- 08303, Vilnius, Lithuania.

1. INTRODUCTION

Relevance of the Study

Conflict is an integral part of the divorce process, however, many couples find ways to reduce the intensity of it (Amato, 2000; Jiménez-García et al., 2019). However, some find themselves entangled in divorce or separation processes that can last for years (Lebow, 2019; Crabtree & Harris, 2020). Statistical data reveals that approximately 10% to 25% of divorces are characterized by enduring and pervasive disputes (Kelly, 2012; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015). Conflictual divorce involves significant anger, hostility, and distrust between divorcing partners, often leading to intense custody battles and ongoing communication difficulties, with some experts defining it as a divorce where spousal conflicts persist for more than 2 to 3 years.

Conflictual divorce is seen as a growing and particularly challenging problem for involved individuals and society as a whole (Ferguson, 2021), which requires interdisciplinary attention from various professionals (Hald et al., 2020; Judge & Deutsch, 2016). Scientific research on the psychological and emotional experiences of individuals enduring prolonged, contentious divorces is lacking, and further research is essential to understand their inner changes and transformations during this process. Recognizing divorcees as crucial sources of insight, and understanding their experiences can be invaluable for improving support systems and addressing their needs (Johnston, 1994; Kelly & Emery, 2003). In this study, our focus is on the self-transition of individuals amidst their enduring conflictual marital dissolution process before legal divorce has taken place and individuals are still legally married.

Despite the negative impact of contentious divorces on individuals and their children, research suggests that these effects may not always be long-lasting or profoundly harmful. People's ability to adapt to the stressors of divorce varies (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Kalmijn, 2017). A significant number of divorced individuals experience positive changes, including a clearer self-concept, increased openness, conscientiousness, and personal growth (Costa et al., 2000; Prati & Pietrantoni, 2009; Zittoun, 2008). Research also shows that divorce's level of conflict and duration may not directly relate to depressive feelings or life satisfaction (Symoens et al., 2013). Overall, divorce can be a challenging process, but it can also offer opportunities for personal growth and the pursuit of autonomy, which should be further investigated. Furthermore, conflictual divorces are not solely a result of disputes between spouses but can also be exacerbated by adversarial legal systems and a lack of professional support (Bertelsen, 2021). This lack of appropriate assistance is due to difficulties in accessing it and professionals' limited understanding of this group, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive approach that considers legal systems, professionals, and support networks to better address the challenges faced by divorcees in such situations. Research on conflictual divorce in Lithuania is underdeveloped, particularly concerning how adults experience it, despite an increase in such cases involving child custody decisions.

Research Problem

First, despite the significant adverse effects associated with high-conflict divorces,

empirical research in this area is surprisingly scarce and it faces several challenges and limitations (Haddad et al., 2016). The literature has limited insights into how individuals navigate enduring conflictual divorces and how they perceive the difficulties and personal changes they encounter (Treloar, 2019; Crabtree & Harris, 2020; Huff et al., 2020). The voices of divorcees are often not heard or listened to, making it challenging to fully comprehend their experiences and provide appropriate interventions (Bertelsen, 2021). Recent qualitative studies (e.g., Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011; Gulbrandsen et al., 2018; Jevne & Andenæs, 2017; Treloar, 2019) challenge the prevailing notion that divorcees in conflictual divorces are consumed by their disputes, which are often deemed pervasive, pointless, or centered on irrelevant issues. Instead, the research suggests that such a depiction might be a misinterpretation of these families' experiences.

Second, scholars emphasize the significance of how divorcing individuals redefine themselves during the conflictual divorce process (Hopper, 2001; Jimenez-Garsia et al., 2018). The ways in which they acquire new social rights and obligations or construct narratives that legitimize their divorces socially, thereby bringing order to an otherwise chaotic dissolution, are crucial but relatively underexplored aspects that underlie the divorce conflict. Research is needed to better understand the in-between period of relational transition and to explore how individuals live within periods of relational instability for extended durations of time (Nuru, 2023).

Third, existing studies have primarily focused on spousal conflict and parenting concerns during the conflictual post-divorce period, largely overlooking the complex nature of stressors involved in this process, such as the legal system, courts, and involved professionals (Tabor, 2019). Consequently, it remains unclear what actors and how play a role in enduring divorce and how they support or prevent divorcees in their transitional process. Resilience and transformative experiences are not solely determined by individual efforts and processes but are significantly influenced by the availability of resources and the broader social context (Treloar, 2019). There remains a need for further research to identify the perceived stressors and to understand if and in what ways individuals overcome them.

Based on the literature review and the gaps identified in existing research on conflictual divorce and self-transition, the following **research questions** were formulated:

- How does the transition of the "self" through the enduring conflictual divorce occur and develop?
- What characteristics come forward in various dimensions of enduring conflictual divorce: process, attitudes, actions, interconnections, and social environment?
- What are the factors that support or prevent the timely self-transition of divorcees amidst the enduring conflictual divorce, their interconnection, and the coping resources and strategies they use to deal with these factors?

The object of the study - the transition of the "self" through the enduring conflictual divorce.

Study aim - to construct a grounded theory about the transition of the self amidst

the enduring conflictual divorce, revealing the experiences of divorcees.

Study Significance

In this study, we adopt a processual perspective to examine conflictual divorce, with a specific focus on the moment the divorce is taking place. By studying the experiences of individuals enduring an ongoing divorce, we enhance the accuracy of their recall and minimize potential errors in reporting (Francia et al., 2019). Employing a longitudinal approach in this study enables us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the change (or static) process over time, providing a more accurate perspective on the transitions.

Our approach involves examining divorce from the perspective of the individuals themselves. By doing so, we shift the focus away from the externally constructed gaze that often negatively characterizes divorcees. Through our findings, we highlight the dual nature of self-strengthening strategies and support resources, which can either aid or hinder divorcees in their journey toward self-redefinition and conflict resolution. The complexities of the divorce experience are influenced not only by personal dynamics but also by external factors that shape the divorce process.

Our study uncovers the intricacies of the enduring conflictual divorce self-transition experience, with a focus on the dynamic process within the liminal space. Using the term of subjunctivity we underline multiple ways individuals engage with the uncertain and conflictual reality they face.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Qualitative Longitudinal Research Approach

Due to objective and subjective criteria, we have chosen to employ the constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; 2008) to systematically gather data, analyze it, and conceptualize a theory about the transformation of the self amid enduring conflictual divorce. This methodology involved a comprehensive and systematic collection of data to develop insights. Although the resulting theory highlights shared experiences among divorcees, it acknowledges that each individual's journey is uniquely shaped by factors such as mindset, career decisions, living situations, relationships with family and friends, and more.

Furthermore, we also employed Longitudinal qualitative research (LQR) as an emerging methodology in health behavior research fields (Glanz et al., 2008; Polit & Beck, 2017). Because human experiences rarely consist of concrete, time-limited events but evolve and change over time, the use of LQR offers an innovative option to capture this natural history. The advantage of LQR over cross-sectional designs is that it provides a unique understanding of experiences across time, including turning points, critical time points in transitions, as well as the facilitators or challenges that support or undermine behaviors aligned with life course transitions (SmithBattle et al., 2018; Tuthill et al., 2020).

2.2. Participant Selection and Data Collection

With the goal of the study in mind, we established the following main selection criteria:

1. Divorce Situation: We aimed to recruit individuals who were either living apart and not in the same household or had officially filed for divorce at least six months prior.
2. Marital status: Legally married.
3. Citizenship: Lithuanians residing in Lithuania.

The research utilized applied theoretical sampling and sampling across different cohorts, which is a commonly employed strategy in longitudinal research as it enables researchers to examine variations in experiences at different time points (Neale, 2021; Nilson, 2014). In our study, we followed the progress of roughly assigned three cohorts over the course of up to two years: individuals who had experienced divorce 6-12 months, 12 to 24 months, and more. We used semi-structured interviews, which is a widely employed data collection method in qualitative research.

We have created the questions in the T1 guide as participant-oriented, non-leading, and formulated in a clear manner (Turner, 2010). They were designed to be single-faceted and open-ended (Cridland et al., 2015; Chenail, 2011). As the research followed a CGT approach, the researcher continually refined the data collection instrument to enhance the emerging categories, particularly prior to conducting follow-up (T2) interviews. This iterative process involved adapting and redesigning the instrument to accommodate the evolving understanding of the data. During the recruitment process, we ensured transparency and provided potential interviewees with comprehensive details about the study. This included information on the study's objectives, participant requirements, timeline (e.g., recruitment cut-off and data collection phases), and anticipated benefits for participants (Dickson-Swift, James et al, 2008; Dockett et al, 2009).

We conducted initial interviews (T1) with a total of 21 individuals, consisting of five males and 16 females. The participants' ages ranged from 28 to 64. The average duration since the beginning of their divorce process was 2.1 years. All of the participants had children with their divorcing spouses, and the ages of the children varied. Additionally, two participants were (former) spouses of two other participants.

T1 was conducted online using the most convenient communication channel for each participant. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours and were recorded in audio format. After a minimum interval of six months from the T1, we reached out to the divorcees via email or text messages to inquire about their willingness to participate in the second round of interviews (T2). Out of the original cohort, a total of sixteen individuals (consisting of four males and twelve females) agreed to share their stories during T2 interviews. During the second interview, five participants disclosed that they had already divorced. T2 interviews typically lasted up to one hour and utilized the same teleconferencing method as the initial interviews.

2.3. Data Coding and Analysis

The data analysis followed the steps of the Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) methodology, including primary coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding, as outlined by Charmaz (2006; 2008). According to CGT, data collection and analysis are iterative processes (Charmaz, 2006). The analysis involved examining the data between interviews, across different participants, and longitudinally within each individual's narrative. Distinguishing between main and minor categories was an iterative process that involved multiple immersions in the data. We approached the main categories by asking various questions: What are their characteristics? How do they encompass the minor categories? How are the main categories interconnected? How do they contribute to a theoretical statement? What is the significance of this statement?

We organized the data with specific analytic questions in mind, such as how participants' thoughts about their divorce transition changed over time, what emerged or increased over time, what was cumulative, what decreased or ceased, and what remained constant or consistent (Saldana, 2003). The researcher compared all obtained codes with each other until she discovered a central category that explains the interrelationships between all other categories raised during focused coding and substantive codes (Charmaz, 2006). We detected the central category - restricted self-transition. The central category was associated with theoretical concepts: the in-between-ness/ liminality metaphor. In this way, a substantive grounded theory has been developed. It's important to note that the result of constructivist GT should not be considered as an objective description of the investigated phenomena. Instead, it should be viewed as an interpretation or approach to the phenomenon as presented by the author of the dissertation (Charmaz, 2008; 2012). The emphasis is on providing an interpretive portrait of the studied phenomenon rather than attempting to present an exact representation. Throughout the whole process, we engaged in memo writing, which is essential for fostering the researcher's reflexivity and preventing preconceived notions about the data.

2.4. Enhancing Methodological Rigor

Charmaz's (2006) criteria of credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness were used to evaluate the quality of the emerging substantive grounded theory. Throughout our study, we have on an ongoing basis reflected on these criteria to ensure the quality of the study.

We conducted this study adhering to the Code of Ethics for Scientific Research in Belgium and the Lithuanian Code of Ethics for Scientists. Mykolas Romeris University's research ethics committee granted ethics approval (Protocol No. 6/-2021). Protection of participants' rights was regarded as a fundamental aspect of conducting research, and the issues of informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality were of paramount importance (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2009).

3. FINDINGS

Through ongoing reflective coding, we identified main categories, which collectively form the grounded theory of "strained liminality." Self-transition through divorce follows the process of temporal self-disruption, moving towards the pursuit of inner (re)balance, and strained in-between or in the liminal space. Strained liminality, as the central metaphor, illustrates the entire divorce journey, highlighting how self-transition is constrained by multiple factors, including resources, and strategies used amidst the period of heightened vulnerability and uncertainty.

3.1. Temporal Self-Disruption as the Initiation of the Liminal Space

The beginning of the divorce depicts the ***loss of the totality of the self***, the end of the world, and the collapse of everything people had built, hoped, and dreamed of. People realize that "everything in life is falling apart," that "the foundation of the house has been broken, and it is floating now." Self-disruption is largely experienced through the collapse of the future-directed dream, which serves as a silver line connecting the past-self with the future-self and providing inner coherence. At the core of this disruption lies the idyllic imagination, a forward-looking vision of being part of a happy, traditional family. Losing the long-held vision of reaching old age with a chosen partner and having grandchildren is more painful than losing the partner itself.

> *I feel like you're standing with a suitcase and going out on that country road, you don't know where you're going. You want to shrug it off and run away. You want to not even get up in the morning, fall asleep in the evening, go to sleep, and not get up, you are not even interested (Martin, 43).*

Self-disruption is also linked to ***losses of specific self-aspects*** that exacerbate the disruption. The loss of the traditional parental role and the role of an exclusive partner emerge as the two most significant aspects of these losses. Given the high value attributed to these self-aspects, the intensity of emotional reactions is likewise pronounced. The ability to fulfill the role of a parent within a functioning co-parenting relationship is disrupted, leaving divorcees with numerous unanswered questions. The perception of officially no longer being a parent is sometimes considered easier than existing as a half-parent or as an ambiguous figure without a defined parental role. *Being an exclusive partner* within a traditional family setup entails a significant disruption. The relational aspect of one's self is wounded and requires extensive healing. The loss of a partner while still maintaining emotional and physical ties with them initially leads to an overwhelming pain.

Further into the divorce process, self-disruption also occurs through ***indirect losses***. They refer to the diminished health and well-being of divorcees' parents and children as a result of the ongoing conflictual divorce process. When parents or children become emotionally involved in the divorce, it often takes a toll on their own health or well-being. As a result, disruptions in the lives of close family members mutually influence and amplify the amount and intensity of losses experienced. One mother

poignantly discussed the loss of her daughter's potential due to her being prevented by her former husband from providing the care she believes her daughter deserves.

> *She became entirely not herself. She was charismatic, a stageperson, and had a lovely singing voice. And now she is completely broken… She is crouched, bent over… She is a dead girl (Angela, 38).*

3.2. Seeking Internal (Re)balance as the Ultimate Goal of the Divorce Journey

The transition of self throughout an enduring divorce is a journey towards finding internal (re)balance—a renewed sense of self filled with clarity and stability. This quest for balance unfolds in two dimensions, each with its distinct orientation: forward-looking and backward-looking on the gains so far.

The process begins by looking forward and embracing the ***pursuit of enduring inner peacefulness***, which encompasses both the need for higher self-coherence and the resolution of divorce-related conflicts. It involves striving to find a sense of harmony within oneself amidst the ongoing challenges. Peace is viewed as the ultimate goal, surpassing even the resolution of the divorce itself. Debra (64) emphasized her longing for peace, stating, "I want to live peacefully. I want to die in good health." The concept of inner peace also involves the absence of conflict related to the divorce, which in turn facilitates higher levels of inner clarity and stability. Overcoming the fear of domestic conflicts and tense atmospheres emerges as one of the primary emotions that hinder individuals from attaining inner equilibrium and the freedom to take action. The desire to be free from fear serves as a motivating force propelling divorcees forward.

The divorce journey entails a process of backward-looking introspection, where individuals reflect on the ***self-gains achieved thus far***, recognizing and appreciating the progress they have made. These self-gains serve as sources of hope and strength, establishing a solid foundation for the future. *Rebuilding the "old" self* emerges as a process aimed at attaining internal balance and counteracting the negative repercussions of divorce. One participant expressed this process, stating, "The old me is coming back. Only much wiser, putting boundaries to others, because before I have never had any boundaries for others" (Julie, 47). Through the (re)turn towards self, individuals experience a profound sense of *self-liberation*. This liberation arises from breaking free from dysfunctional family dynamics, particularly in cases involving financial and emotional violence. People express gaining freedom from "the dependency and no life, living his life," which is paired with many adverse emotional reactions.

Over time, individuals come to recognize the *strength they have acquired* through the divorce process itself. The divorce journey fosters the growth of courage within individuals. Drawing strength from backing up on *self-righteousness*, individuals strive to achieve higher inner balance. They emphasize their focus on what they perceive as rightfully theirs and demonstrate a readiness to confront any obstacles in pursuit of their goals. They emphasize the importance of having no regrets or remorse in the future for not taking certain actions to fight for their objectives.

3.3. Stuck Between Losses and Gains in Restricted Self-Transition

The transition between internal losses and gains comes forward as the core space divorcees find themselves amidst enduring conflictual divorce. It points towards multiple restrictions that divorcees face when moving along their self-change process.

Moving through the increasingly unprotected space entails experiencing being attacked from multiple sources. The ongoing violent attacks by a former spouse are perceived as the main force that hinders progress toward achieving a more effective and timely self-balance. Participants use specific words to describe their experiences, such as to "eat me alive," to "make sure that I suffer," or to prove that "I was nobody and will be nobody." Seeking support and protection, individuals turn to officials for assistance. However, their experiences often fall short of expectations, as many encounter institutional indifference or even feeling attacked by social workers, child protection agencies, police officers, and alike. Peter (46) referred to this phenomenon as "institutional violence," leading to a loss of trust in the institutions and the professionals working within them. With time passing by, recognizing the limitations of the country's legislation, divorcees come to the realization that they must primarily rely on themselves to navigate the complexities of their divorce. Overall, the sense of alienation and not being understood contributes to a feeling of being unsafe and unprotected.

> There is no protection in Lithuania. Absolutely not. I, for example, feel terribly insecure. Nobody protects me. Lawyers defended me for the first time and said something for me that was written on paper. And in other ways, no one is protecting me (Angela, 38).

Hanging in the Unknown. Living amidst an environment characterized by persistent attacks, neglect, and invalidation hampers individuals' ability to experience true freedom and actively shape their futures with clarity and predictability. Instead, they find themselves trapped in a perpetual state of waiting and enduring chaos, which with the passing of time takes on the characteristics of *absurdity*. The absurdity is rooted in the lack of coherence and logic of being attacked and feeling the need to defend oneself, despite not harboring guilt or wrongdoing.

> I have such a feeling that I have not done absolutely anything wrong, yet I am attacked, and I have to protect myself. This is where the feeling of absurdity comes from (Daisy, 47).

Divorcees experience that the divorce process acquires a life of its own, detached from the individuals involved. This entanglement, coupled with the absence of clear boundaries and a definitive end, ensnares individuals in the present moment, leaving them *unable to make sense of or exert influence* over the ongoing situation. The inability to bring closure to something they earnestly desire to complete generates feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. Like soldiers engaged in an unending war, people navigate a landscape fraught with uncertainties, constantly waiting for a reprieve from the chaos that surrounds them. The inner journey towards emotional rebalance remains ongoing. The flurry of actions and engagements does little to change the stagnant circumstances. It becomes a messy and frustrating passage of time, filled with

administrative tasks and legal maneuvers, prolonging the suffering and exacerbating the frustration of those involved.

3.4. Self-Strengthening Strategies: the Ways of Engaging with Distinct Stages of Transition

Divorcees employ self-strengthening strategies to navigate the challenging transition from self-fragmentation to regaining internal balance. These strategies serve as a bridge between different stages of self-transition, each influenced by the pervasive uncertainty of the liminal space.

At the early stage of divorce, individuals are primarily focused on protecting themselves and their interests, thus they frequently employ ***protective strategies***. Divorcees often resort to *distancing themselves from the source of harm,* typically their former spouse or institutions, as a self-protective measure. In situations where distancing oneself from the perceived sources of threat is not possible or counterproductive, divorcees resort to *derogating their opponents*. These strategies establish a mode of self-as-protecting, enabling divorcees to engage with the volatile reality they face while safeguarding their fragmented well-being.

> *Does distancing deepen the conflict or reduce it? I think it reduces because it would continue going deeper, and there would be no end to it because he decided not to change (Helena, 47).*

Over time, divorcees start ***engaging in speculative strategies*** about different facets of their identity and circumstances. They contemplate and evaluate their self-perception, seeking clarity and a more coherent sense of self to counteract inner doubts. Additionally, they engage in reserved contemplation of future possibilities, strategizing approaches to address challenges, and resorting to waiting as a coping mechanism for managing ambiguous circumstances. *All-consuming waiting* is a significant aspect of engaging with the prolonged divorce process, characterized by heightened speculation and uncertainty about the future. People carefully consider the potential outcomes of their actions, striving to assert their agency in navigating the complex divorce process. This ongoing speculation reflects their determination to find clarity and meaning in the enduring conflictual transitional process.

With time, individuals reach a point where they adopt a more reflective engagement with their volatile reality. They recognize the absurdity and seemingly never-ending nature of their situation. In response, individuals ***engage in reflective strategies***, such as a profound search for the meaning of being in the divorce, which serves as an important coping strategy. Through the process of *future-directed meaning-making*, divorcees strive to find significance and coherence in the actions they undertake, ultimately allowing them to create a more stable and clear self. One prominent aspect of meaning creation among divorcees is the *establishment of themselves as moral individuals*. The data gathered indicates that divorcees find meaning by emphasizing moral integrity, honesty, and the trustworthiness of their goals. Fighting for their values, perceived truth, and what they believe to be rightfully theirs is a common theme.

The [divorce] result is not that important to me. I know that the fight is going according to my conscience. I do not admit less because, in my view, that is the right way, and that is it. For the rest, it will be as it will be (Helena, 47).

3.5. Navigating the Multifaceted Nature of Resources

The utilization of resources plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' engagement during various stages of transition. These resources can have diverse effects, ranging from supporting individuals in attaining higher levels of inner coherence to keeping individuals in a restricted transitional space.

Family and Friends: Foundations of Strength or Sources of Uncertainty. Family, including parents and children, as well as friends, play a vital role in providing support during the challenging process of a conflictual divorce, especially in its initial tumultuous stages. The strong bond with parents and their emotional, financial, and even legal assistance *serves as a solid foundation* during the most difficult times. However, the presence of certain parents and the reactions of children become an obstacle in the divorce process, hindering divorcees from achieving inner rebalance. They contribute to increased uncertainty and speculation. Divorcees particularly struggle to comprehend their children's refusal to communicate or engage with them, leading to frustration and pain. Paul, a father of two, doubted "whether I will be needed [for the] children, or only the money when they are in need."

Financial Resources: Empowering Self-Protection while Extending Conflict. The availability of funds not only ensures financial security for the divorcee and the newly formed family structure but also enables the engagement of a competent private lawyer who serves as a key participant in the litigation proceedings. However, from another side, the financial burden of covering divorce-related expenses adds significant stress, further exacerbating the sense of uncertainty and instability.

I work a lot. Last year I was working just to support my daughter and to pay for lawyers. Nothing else at all. From 6 in the morning to 9 in the evening with breaks, of course, but the fatigue was terrible (Daisy, 47).

Individuals many years into the divorce speculate that the availability of financial resources can contribute to the prolonged nature of the divorce process. According to Reberta (27), "if he [former husband] did not have money to pay a lawyer and do all kinds of things, there would be fewer conflicts."

Religion: Strengthened through Prayer vs. Challenging Moral Validity. During difficult moments, individuals seek solace and support from God through prayer, turning to their religious beliefs for comfort and guidance. Religion serves as a guiding force and a source of moral values, shaping their outlook on how to live their lives and navigate the challenges of divorce. On the other hand, deeply religious individuals grapple with the uncertainty of how their divorce aligns with Christian norms and how to navigate the dissolution of their holy sacrament of marriage. People emphasize the conflicting messages between the teachings of respect and love for one another advocated by the church and the aggressive behavior of their spouses who are involved in

the church. This dissonance leaves them perplexed and distrustful towards the church.

(Non-)Initiator Status: Challenging the Perceived Simplicity of the Phenomenon. The status of being an initiator or non-initiator in divorce is a complex and contentious issue, filled with doubts and uncertainties that hinder individuals from finding clear answers. While society tends to view being the initiator as the resource, divorcees question this assumption. While the surface understanding of the initiator is based on observable actions such as physical departure or initiating the divorce process, deeper exploration reveals a complex and ambiguous reality. Divorcees engage in introspection, questioning their roles and the reasons for the end of their marriage, resulting in a state of liminality where clarity and answers are elusive.

3.6. Grounded Theory of Strained Liminality: Self-Transition of Individuals through their Enduring Conflictual Divorce

Through the application of the CGT methodology, we have identified that the core process of self-redefinition unfolds in three distinct yet interrelated phases of the self, creating particular types of self to engage with them: losing-protecting, in-between-pondering, and gaining-reflecting. The process is marked by restricted self-transition, navigated with the help of diverse strategies and resources.

At the initial stage, divorce brings about various losses and disruptions to one's sense of self. As the process unfolds, individuals find themselves in an in-between state, reflecting on their experiences and seeking new life conditions. The final stage of gaining-reflecting is mainly centered around creating a morally true self by making meaning of the divorce experience. Throughout this challenging journey, individuals find strength in their financial stability, supportive family, and engaging activities. The outcome of the divorce becomes not the primary concern; what matters most is staying true to one's conscience and making decisions aligned with personal growth and conflict resolution. Throughout this challenging journey, the concept of strained liminality emerges as the overall uniting aspect, representing the state of enduring tension and uncertainty that divorcees navigate on their path toward self-redefinition and healing.

4. DISCUSSION

Fluctuating between temporal self-disruption and (re)build. The divorce journey commences with a phase of temporal self-disruption, characterized by the experience of multiple losses. Parting with these valued self-aspects can be exceptionally challenging, akin to losing a cherished piece of one's identity (Maddux et al., 2010). The losses experienced can be also likened to *symbolic deaths*, representing the ultimate separation of an individual from their past-future self (Carel, 2007; Pedersen, 2016). In this context, the former self ceases to exist, and the emergence of a new self remains in a state of becoming. However, not all losses are perceived as detrimental but have a *positive effect* and present individuals with emerging potentialities and possibilities

(Du Toit, 2017). Amidst the multiple losses, individuals continue to (re)create themselves to align with their evolving self-perceptions, separating from their former partner and past marriage. This ongoing self-evolution contributes to the formation of a more coherent and stable self-structure.

Restricted self-transition amidst the ongoing volatile absurdity as the central aspect of strained liminality. Alongside the experiences of losing or reconstructing certain dimensions of the self, individuals often perceive themselves as suspended in a state of temporal limbo. Turner (1969/2017) refers to these individuals as "liminal people," as they occupy a "neither here nor there" status, existing in an in-betwixt and in-between state. As divorcees' existence in this liminality is filled with a sense of unprotectedness and being trapped in absurdity, to better encapsulate these aspects, we have introduced the term *"strained liminality."* We posit that in situations riddled with inner uncertainty, the world can cease to appear meaningful, the guiding framework collapses, and individuals experience the meaninglessness of their circumstances (Camus, 1955/2018; Sartre, 1956/2015). When levels of enduring ambiguity remain high, it can occasionally engender feelings of absurdity, akin to what Camus (1955/2018) referred to as "the divorce between a man and his life," or, in other words, a sense of self-incoherence. The constrained process of self-transition during enduring conflictual divorce becomes a central facet of strained liminality. In response, individuals adopt various strategies to distance themselves from this volatile situation and bolster their own resilience and well-being.

Dual effect of Strategies and Resources: promoting and/or preventing self-redefinition. *Moral-based meaning-making* becomes a central strategy, which propels individuals into a more contemplative mode of existence. Discovering purpose amid the challenges of an enduring divorce proves to be a vital cornerstone, enabling divorcees to confront the heightened existential stressors that accompany such a situation. In essence, proactive engagement in meaning-making, particularly within the context of enduring divorce, acts as a guiding beacon, illuminating the path forward. However, the complete embrace of one's own values, perspectives, and beliefs about the truthfulness of the situation carries adverse consequences. When individuals firmly anchor themselves in a particular interpretation of events, it becomes challenging to disengage from the conflict, thus contributing to its perpetuation (Rovenpor et al., 2019).

With this research we also acknowledge the *duality of the resources*, arguing that whether a particular aspect becomes a resource or a challenge heavily depends on the individual and the broader situational and circumstantial factors within the person's (new) family structure. No resource can be definitively labeled as helpful or unhelpful in the self-transition journey of divorcing individuals without considering their complete divorce context.

CONCLUSIONS

The developed grounded theory of "strained liminality" offers a framework to understand the process of self-transition during enduring conflictual divorce. This process is depicted as a continuous journey with interconnected phases that create an in-between space for individuals. The transition is influenced by numerous internal and external factors, making it highly multifaceted and constrained. Strained liminality characterizes enduring conflictual divorce as a process marked by uncertainty and volatility. However, it also provides opportunities for personal development and growth, allowing individuals to redefine themselves within the process and see themselves anew.

Our findings encourage readers to consider conflictual divorce as a multifaceted and evolving phenomenon, intricately entangled with numerous inner conflicts on multiple levels. The focus of attention should be directed toward the unique circumstances of each individual going through divorce, as well as the broader institutional, legislative, and even political contexts. Divorcees often feel abandoned in their efforts to resolve ongoing disputes, which can be an overwhelming task, particularly in light of the emotional labor and inefficiencies present at the institutional and legislative levels.

List of Scientific Publications Related to Dissertation

1. Butkutė, L., Mortelmans, D., & Sondaitė, J. (2023). Exploring Self-Concepts of Longer-Term Divorcees in Lithuania. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *64*(1), 1-30. https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2023.2179833
2. Butkutė, L., Mortelmans, D., & Sondaitė, J. (2023). Entangled in the Web of Conflicts: Prolonged Divorce from the Divorcees' Perspective. *European Journal of Psychology Open.* https://doi.org/10.1024/2673-8627/a000042
3. Butkutė, L., Mortelmans, D., & Sondaitė, J. (2023). Restricted Self-Transition: a Journey of Divorcees through Lasting Marital Dissolution in Eastern European Society. *Europe's Journal of Psychology, 19*(3). https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.9619

MYKOLO ROMERIO UNIVERSITETAS

ANTVERPENO UNIVERSITETAS

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GRINDŽIAMOJI ĮTEMPTO LIMINALUMO TEORIJA: BESISKIRIANČIŲJŲ SAVASTIES VIRSMAS BESITĘSIANČIŲ KONFLIKTIŠKŲ SKYRYBŲ METU

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prof. dr. Sarah Van de Velde (Antverpeno universitetas, Belgijos Karalystė, socialiniai mokslai, sociologija, S 005);
prof. habil. dr. Vilma Žydžiūnaitė (Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, socialiniai mokslai, edukologija, S 007).

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1. ĮVADAS

Tyrimo aktualumas

Nors konfliktai yra neatsiejama skyrybų proceso dalis, daugelis porų randa būdų, kaip sumažinti jų intensyvumą (Amato, 2000; Jiménez-García ir kt., 2019). Tačiau kai kurie įsivelia į konfliktišką skyrybų procesą, galintį tęstis ilgus metus (Lebow, 2019; Crabtree ir Harris, 2020). Statistika atskleidžia, kad maždaug 10–25 proc. skyrybų būdingi ilgalaikiai ir įsisenėję konfliktai (Kelly, 2012; Perrig-Chiello ir kt., 2015). Konfliktiškose skyrybose daug pykčio, priešiškumo ir nepasitikėjimo tarp besiskiriančių partnerių, kas dažnai priveda prie intensyvių nesutarimų dėl vaikų globos, nuolatinių bendravimo sunkumų. Kai kurie ekspertai skyrybas apibrėžia kaip konfliktiškas, kai sutuoktinių konfliktai tęsiasi ilgiau nei 2–3 metus (Haddad et al., 2019).

Į konfliktiškas skyrybas žvelgiama kaip į vis didėjančią ir ypač sudėtingą problemą, ypatingai jose dalyvaujančių asmenų bei visos visuomenės atžvilgiu (Ferguson, 2021), todėl ši problema reikalauja tarpdisciplininio įvairių specialistų dėmesio (Hald ir kt., 2020; Judge ir Deutsch, 2016). Trūksta mokslinių tyrimų apie asmenų, esančių ilgai trunkančiose ir konfliktais persmelktose skyrybose, psichologinius ir emocinius išgyvenimus. Tyrimai yra būtini siekiant suprasti vidinius žmonių pokyčius šio proceso metu. Kadangi patys besiskiriantys asmenys yra vieni svarbiausių informacijos šaltinių, jų asmeninės patirties geresnis supratimas gali būti neįkainojamas gerinant pagalbos teikimo sistemas ir atliepiant asmenų poreikius (Johnston, 1994; Kelly ir Emery, 2003). Šiame tyrime daugiausia dėmesio skiriame savasties tapsmui vykstant ilgalaikiam konfliktiškam santuokos nutraukimo procesui, kol dar neįvyko teisinės skyrybos ir asmenys vis dar yra teisiškai susituokę.

Nepaisant plačiai diskutuojamo neigiamo konfliktiškų skyrybų poveikio asmenims ir jų vaikams, dalis tyrimų rodo, kad jis ne visada ilgalaikis ar žalingas. Žmonių gebėjimas prisitaikyti prie skyrybų keliamo streso skiriasi (Hetherington ir Kelly, 2002; Kalmijn, 2017). Nemažai išsiskyrusių asmenų patiria teigiamų pokyčių, įskaitant aiškesnę savasties sampratą, didesnį atvirumą, sąmoningumą ir asmeninį augimą (Costa ir kt., 2000; Prati ir Pietrantoni, 2009; Zittoun, 2008). Tyrimai taip pat rodo, kad skyrybų konfliktiškumo lygis ir trukmė gali būti tiesiogiai nesusiję su depresyviais jausmais ar pasitenkinimu gyvenimu (Symoens ir kt., 2013). Apskritai skyrybos gali būti sudėtingas procesas, tačiau jos taip pat gali suteikti asmeninio augimo ir savarankiškumo siekio galimybių, kurios turėtų būti giliau nagrinėjamos. Be to, konfliktiškos skyrybos nėra vien tik sutuoktinių nesutarimų pasekmė. Jas taip pat gali paaštrinti teisinė sistema ir profesionalios paramos trūkumas (Bertelsen, 2021). Tinkamos pagalbos trūksta tiek dėl sunkumų ją gauti, tiek ir dėl to, kad specialistai ribotai supranta šią besiskiriančiųjų grupę. Tai suponuoja visapusiškesnio požiūrio, kuris apimtų teisinę sistemą, specialistus ir paramos tinklą, reikalingumą. Tokio požiūrio pagrindu būtų galimai efektyviau sprendžiamos problemos, su kuriomis susiduria besiskiriantieji. Konfliktiškų skyrybų tyrimai pasaulyje bei Lietuvoje yra nepakankamai išplėtoti, neįtraukiami patys besiskiriantieji, jų patirtys, nepaisant to, kad daugėja bylų, susijusių su ginčais dėl vaikų globos.

Tyrimo problema

Nepaisant plačiai duskutuojamų negatyvių padarinių, susijusių su konfliktiškomis skyrybomis, empirinių tyrimų šioje srityje yra stebėtinai mažai ir jie pasižymi nemažais trūkumais (Haddad ir kt., 2016). Literatūroje vis dar nedaug įžvalgų apie tai, kas vyksta su asmenimis ilgai trunkančių konfliktiškų skyrybų metu, ir kaip jie suvokia patiriamus sunkumus bei pokyčius (Treloar, 2019; Crabtree ir Harris, 2020; Huff ir kt., 2020). Dažnai skyrybas išgyvenančių asmenų balsas nėra išgirstas ar išklausytas, todėl sudėtinga visapusiškai suvokti jų patirtį ir taikyti tinkamas intervencines priemones (Bertelsen, 2021). Naujausi kokybiniai tyrimai (pavyzdžiui, Bergman ir Rejmer, 2017; Cashmore ir Parkinson, 2011; Gulbrandsen ir kt., 2018; Jevne ir Andenæs, 2017; Treloar, 2019) kvestionuoja vyraujančią nuostatą, kad konfliktiškas skyrybas patiriantys skyrybų dalyviai susikoncentravę tik į besitęsiančius konfliktus, kurie aplinkinių suvokiami kaip giliai įsišaknniję, beprasmiški arba sutelkti į nereikšmingus klausimus. Jie pažymi, kad toks suponuotas vaizdinys gali būti klaidingas besiskiriančiųjų patirties interpretavimas, kas betarpiškai veikia bendravimą su šia asmenų grupe bei jiems teikiamos pagalbos pobūdį.

Antra, mokslininkai pabrėžia, kad svarbu suprasti, kaip besiskiriantys asmenys iš naujo apibrėžia save konfliktiškų skyrybų proceso metu (Hopper, 2001; Jimenez-Garsia ir kt., 2018). Skyrybų metu žmonės įgyja naujų socialinių teisių ir pareigų, kuria naratyvus, socialiai įprasminančius jų skyrybas, taip įvesdami tvarką chaotiškame skyrybų procese. Šie aspektai yra labai svarbūs, tačiau palyginti mažai ištirti. Reikalingi tyrimai, kurie padėtų geriau suprasti pereinamąjį laikotarpį, bei kaip besiskiriantieji patiria savasties kaitą besitęsiančiame santykių nestabilume (Nuru, 2023).

Trečia, atliktuose tyrimuose daugiausia dėmesio skiriama sutuoktinių konfliktams ir tėvystės rūpesčiams po skyrybų. Mažai atsižvelgiama į kitus stresorius, tokius kaip teisinė sistema, teismai ar procese dalyvaujantys specialistai (Tabor, 2019). Lieka neaišku, kokie veikėjai ir kokiu būdu vaidina vaidmenį besitęsiančiose skyrybose, kaip jie padeda ar trukdo besiskiriantiesiems šiuo pereinamuoju laikotarpiu. Atsparumas pokyčiams susijęs ne tik su asmeninėmis individo pastangomis ir vidiniais procesais, bet taip pat ir su pagalbos šaltinių prieinamumu bei jo platesniu socialiniu kontekstu (Treloar, 2019). Tolesni tyrimai reikalingi, kad būtų galima geriau apčiuopti patiriamus stresorius ir suprasti, kokiais būdais jie susiję su besiskiriančiųjų patirtimis.

Remiantis literatūros apžvalga ir esamų konfliktiškų skyrybų bei savasties tapsmo tyrimų spragomis, buvo suformuluoti šie **tyrimo klausimai:**

- Kaip vyksta ir vystosi savasties virsmas ilgalaikių konfliktiškų skyrybų metu?
- Kokie ypatumai išryškėja įvairiose ilgalaikių konfliktiškų skyrybų dimensijose: procese, nuostatose, veiksmuose, tarpusavio ryšiuose, socialinėje aplinkoje?
- Kokie veiksniai palaiko arba trukdo savalaikį savasties virsmą ilgai trunkančių konfliktiškų skyrybų metu, koks jų tarpusavio ryšys, kokius įveikos šaltinius ir strategijas besisikiriantys asmenys naudoja, kad susidorotų su šiais veiksniais?

Tyrimo objektas – savasties virsmas ilgalaikių konfliktiškų skyrybų metu.

Tyrimo tikslas – sukurti grindžiamąją teoriją apie savasties virsmą ilgalaikų

konfliktiškų skyrybų metu, atskleidžiant besiskiriančiųjų patirtis.

Tyrimo reikšmė

Šiame tyrime, nagrinėdami konfliktiškas skyrybas, taikome į procesą orientuotą perspektyvą, ypatingą dėmesį skirdami periodui kai skyrybos vis dar vyksta. Kai asmenys apie savo patirtis reflektuoja čia ir dabar, didėja jų išgyvenimų tikslumas ir mažinamos galimos prisiminimo klaidos (Francia ir kt., 2019). Taikydami longitudinį tyrimo metodą, galime visapusiškiau suprasti pokyčių (arba statiškumo) procesą bėgant laikui, todėl pateikiame tikslesnę savasties virsmo perspektyvą.

Mūsų tyrimas apima skyrybų nagrinėjimą iš pačių besiskiriančiųjų perspektyvos. Taip mes perkeliame dėmesį nuo išoriškai konstruojamo rakurso, dažnai neigiamai apibūdinančio išsiskyrusius ar besiskiriančius asmenis. Remdamiesi tyrimo išvadomis pabrėžiame dvejopą savęs stiprinimo strategijų ir palaikymo šaltinių pobūdį, galinčių padėti arba trukdyti besiskiriantiems asmenims jų kelyje į aiškesnį savęs apibrėžimą ir konfliktų sprendimą. Sudėtingai skyrybų patirčiai įtakos turi ne tik asmeninė dinamika, bet ir su skyrybų procesu susiję išoriniai veiksniai.

Šiame tyrime atskleidžiamos ilgalaikės konfliktiškų skyrybų savasties virsmo patirties subtilybės, daugiausia dėmesio skiriant dinamiškam procesui liminalinėje erdvėje. Pasitelkdami subjunktyvumo terminą nurodome būdus, kuriais asmenys įsitraukia susidurdami su neapibrėžta ir konfliktiška tikrove.

2. METODOLOGIJA

2.1. Kokybinė longitudinė tyrimo metodologija

Atsižvelgdami į objektyvius ir subjektyvius kriterijus, pasirinkome taikyti konstruktyvistinę grindžiamąją teoriją (KGT) (Charmaz, 2006; 2008), kuri padėtų sistemingai rinkti duomenis, juos analizuoti ir konceptualizuoti teoriją apie savasties virsmą besitęsiančių konfliktiškų skyrybų metu. Ši metodologija apima išsamų ir sistemingą duomenų rinkimą, kurių pagrindu siekiama plėtoti įžvalgas. Nors sukurtoje teorijoje pabrėžiama bendra išsiskyrusiųjų patirtis, taip pat pripažįstama, kad kiekvieno asmens kelionė unikali, ir ją lemia tokie veiksniai kaip mąstysena, karjeros sprendimai, gyvenimo situacija, santykiai su šeima ir draugais ir kt.

Taip pat taikėme longitudinį kokybinį tyrimą (LKT) (longitudinal qualitative research), kaip besivystančią metodologiją socialinių tyrimų srityje (Glanz ir kt., 2008; Polit ir Beck, 2017). Žmogaus patirtis retai kada susideda iš konkrečių, laike apibrėžtų įvykių. Ji laikui bėgant vystosi ir keičiasi, tad LKT naudojimas suteikia novatorišką galimybę užfiksuoti šį natūralų virsmo procesą. LKT pranašumas, palyginti su skerspjūvio tyrimais, yra tas, kad jis suteikia unikalų supratimą apie patirtis laike, įskaitant lūžio taškus, kritinius pereinamojo laikotarpio momentus, taip pat veiksnius ar iššūkius, kurie palaiko arba silpnina asmens patyrimą vykstant pokyčiams (SmithBattle ir kt., 2018; Tuthill ir kt., 2020).

2.2. Tyrimo dalyvių atranka ir duomenų rinkimas

Atsižvelgdami į tyrimo tikslą, nustatėme šiuos pagrindinius atrankos kriterijus:

1. Skyrybų situacija: siekėme surasti asmenis, kurie bent šeši mėnesius gyveno atskirai ne tame pačiame namų ūkyje, arba buvo oficialiai pateikę skyrybų prašymą.
2. Šeiminė padėtis: teisiškai susituokę.
3. Pilietybė: Lietuvoje gyvenantys lietuviai.

Tyrime taikyta taikomoji teorinė atranka ir atranka iš skirtingų kohortų, dažnai naudojama longitudiniuose tyrimuose, nes leidžia ištirti patirties skirtumus skirtingais laikotarpiais (Neale, 2021; Nilson, 2014). Dviejų metų laikotrapyje stebėjome pokyčius trijose grupėse: asmenų, kurių skyrybos tęsėsi 6–12 mėnesių, 12–24 mėnesius ir ilgiau. Naudojome pusiau struktūruotą interviu, kuris yra plačiai taikomas duomenų rinkimo metodas kokybiniuose tyrimuose.

T1 klausimynui klausimus kūrėme kiek galima labiau orientuotus į tyrimo dalyvius, nekreipiančius iš anksto numatyta kryptimi ir kuo aiškiau suformuluotus (Turner, 2010). Klausimai buvo sudaryti taip, kad būtų lengvai suprantami ir atviri (Cridland ir kt., 2015; Chenail, 2011). Kadangi tyrime taikytas KGT metodas, laikas nuo laiko tobulinome duomenų rinkimo klausimyną, kad stiprintų atsirandančias kategorijas, ypač prieš atliekant tolesnio etapo (T2) interviu. Šis procesas apėmė instrumento adaptavimą, kad jis atitiktų besikeičiantį duomenų supratimą. Atrankos proceso metu siekėme užtikrinti kuo didesnį skaidrumą pateikdami potencialiems tyrimo dalyviams išsamią informaciją apie tyrimą. Informaciją apėmė tyrimo tikslus, reikalavimus dalyviams, proceso eigą (pvz., atrankos pabaigos ir duomenų rinkimo etapus) ir numatomą naudą dalyviams (Dickson-Swift, James ir kt., 2008; Dockett ir kt., 2009).

Pirminiame interviu (T1) dalyvavo 21 asmuo: penki vyrai ir 16 moterų. Dalyvių amžius svyravo nuo 28 iki 64 metų. Vidutinė trukmė nuo jų skyrybų proceso pradžios buvo 2,1 metų. Visi dalyviai su buvusiu sutuoktiniu turėjo vaikų. Vaikų amžius buvo įvairus. Be to, du dalyviai buvo kitų dviejų dalyvių (buvę) sutuoktiniai.

T1 vyko internetu, naudojant kiekvienam dalyviui patogiausią bendravimo kanalą. Vidutiniškai interviu truko apie 1,5 valandos ir buvo įrašyti audio formatu. Praėjus ne mažiau kaip šešiems mėnesiams nuo T1, el. paštu arba trumpąja žinute kreipėmės į tyrimo dalyvius pasiteirauti apie jų norą dalyvauti T2. Šešiolika asmenų (juos sudarė keturi vyrai ir dvylika moterų) iš pradinės dalyvių grupės sutiko pasidalyti savo istorijomis per T2 interviu. Interviu metu paaiškėjo, kad penki dalyviai jau išsiskyrė. T2 interviu paprastai truko iki vienos valandos ir juose buvo naudojamas tas pats telekonferencijos metodas kaip ir pirminiuose interviu.

2.3. Duomenų kodavimas ir analizė

Duomenų analizė atlikta pagal konstruktyvistinės grindžiamosios teorijos (KGT) metodikos etapus, įskaitant pirminį kodavimą, fokusuotą kodavimą ir teorinį kodavimą, nurodytus Charmaz (2006; 2008). Remiantis KGT, duomenų rinkimas ir

analizė yra tarpusavy susiję/besikeičiantys procesai (Charmaz, 2006). Analizės metu duomenys buvo nagrinėjami įvairiais aspektais: lyginami to paties asmens skirtingi interviu, interviu tarp skirtingų tyrimo dalyvių, bei asmenų pasakojimai longitudiniu aspektu. Pagrindinių ir šalutinių kategorijų išskyrimas buvo tarpusavyje besikeičiantis procesas, kurio metu pasinėrimas į duomenis vyko keletą kartų. Pagrindinės kategorijos buvo išskiriamos užduodant įvairius klausimus: Kokios yra kategorijų savybės? Kaip jos apima šalutines kategorijas? Kaip pagrindinės kategorijos tarpusavyje susijusios? Kaip jos prisideda prie teorinio apibūdinimo? Kokia šio apibūdinimo reikšmė?

Duomenis sisteminame atsižvelgdami į konkrečius analitinius klausimus, pavyzdžiui, kaip laikui bėgant keitėsi dalyvių mintys apie virsmą skyrybų lakotarpiu, kas laikui bėgant atsirado ar ko padaugėjo, kas kaupėsi, kas sumažėjo ar nutrūko ir kas išliko pastovu ar nuoseklu (Saldana, 2003). Lyginome visus gautus kodus tarpusavyje, kol išsikristalizavo pagrindinė kategorija, paaiškinanti visų kitų fokusuoto kodavimo metu iškeltų kategorijų ir kodų tarpusavio ryšius (Charmaz, 2006). Išgryninome centrinę kategoriją – apsunkintą tapsmą. Pagrindinė kategorija buvo susieta su teorine koncepcija: tarpiškumo/liminalumo metafora. Taip buvo sukurta tyrimo duomenimis paremta grindžiamoji teorija. Svarbu pažymėti, kad konstruktyvistinės GT rezultatas neturėtų būti laikomas objektyviu tiriamų reiškinių aprašymu. Priešingai, jis turėtų būti vertinamas kaip disertacijos autorės pateikta interpretacija ar požiūris į tiriamą reiškinį (Charmaz, 2008; 2012). Akcentuojamas interpretacinio tiriamo reiškinio portreto pateikimas, o ne bandymas pateikti tikslų vaizdą. Viso proceso metu buvo rašomos atmintinės, kurios yra labai svarbios skatinant tyrėjos refleksyvumą ir mažinant išankstinę nuomonę apie duomenis.

2.4. Metodologinės kokybės užtikrinimas

Vertinant tyrimo duomenimis grįstos grindžiamosios teorijos kokybę buvo naudojami Charmaz (2006) patikimumo, originalumo, rezonavimo ir naudingumo kriterijai. Viso tyrimo metu nuolat atsižvelgėme į šiuos kriterijus, kad užtikrintume tyrimo kokybę.

Tyrimą atlikome laikydamiesi Belgijos mokslinių tyrimų etikos kodekso ir Lietuvos mokslininkų etikos kodekso. Mykolo Romerio universiteto mokslinių tyrimų etikos komitetas suteikė etikos leidimą (protokolo Nr. 6/-2021). Dalyvių teisių apsauga buvo laikoma esminiu tyrimo atlikimo aspektu, o informuoto asmens sutikimo, anonimiškumo ir konfidencialumo klausimams buvo skirtas itin didelis dėmesys (Ryan, Coughlan, Cronin, 2009).

3. RADINIAI

Refleksyvaus besitęsiančio kodavimo pasekoje išskyrėme pagrindines kategorijas, kurios sudaro „įtempto liminalumo" grindžiamąją teoriją. Savasties virsmas skyrybų metų prasideda nuo laikino savasties žlugimo, judant link vidinės pusiausvyros (at) kūrimo, o visa tai įsiterpę "tarp" arba, kitaip tariant, liminalioje erdvėje. Įtemptas

liminalumas, kaip pagrindinė metafora, iliustruoja visą skyrybų kelionę, pabrėžiant, kaip virsmą riboja daugybė veiksnių, įskaitant paramos šaltinius, ir strategijas, naudojamas šiuo padidėjusio pažeidžiamumo ir netikrumo laikotarpio metu.

3.1. Laikinas savasties žlugimas kaip liminalinės erdvės pradžia

Skyrybų pradžia vaizduojama kaip **savasties visumos praradimas**, pasaulio pabaiga, visko, ką žmonės buvo sukūrę, ko tikėjosi ir apie ką svajojo, žlugimas. Žmonės supranta, kad „viskas gyvenime griūva", kad „namo pamatai sugriuvo ir dabar jo šipuliai plūduriuoja". Savasties sutrikimas daugiausia išgyvenamas žlugant į ateitį nukreiptai svajonei, kuri tarnauja kaip gija, jungianti praeities „aš" su ateities „aš" ir teikianti vidinę darną. Šio žlugimo pagrindas – idiliškas įsivaizdavimas, į ateitį nukreipta vizija, kuri apima buvimo laimingos, tradicinės šeimos dalimi. Ilgai puoselėtos vizijos sulaukti senatvės su pasirinktu partneriu ir susilaukti anūkų praradimas yra skausmingesnis nei paties partnerio netektis.

Jaučiuosi taip, tarsi stovėčiau su lagaminu ir išeičiau į užmiesčio kelią, kuriame nežinai, kur eini. Norisi nusisukti ir bėgti tolyn. Norisi net neatsikelti ryte, užmigti vakare, eiti miegoti ir nesikelti, tau net neįdomu (Martin, 43).

Savasties žlugimas taip pat susijęs su **konkrečių savasties aspektų praradimais**, kurie dar labiau sustiprina žlugimo išgyvenimą. Iškyla du svarbiausi šių praradimų aspektai: tradicinio tėvų vaidmens ir išskirtinio partnerio vaidmens praradimas. Atsižvelgiant į tai, kad šiems savasties aspektams priskiriama didelė vertė, emocinių reakcijų intensyvumas taip pat ryškus. Sutrinka gebėjimas atlikti tėvo (čia ir toliau turima omenyje taip pat arba mamos) vaidmenį bendrai esančiuose tėvystės (co-parenting) santykiuose, kas išsiskyrusiems asmenims kelia daugybę neatsakytų klausimų. Kartais oficialiai įteisinti nebuvimą tėvu atrodo lengviau nei būti pusiau tėvu (ar mama) arba būti dviprasmiška figūra, neturinčia apibrėžto tėvo (mamos) vaidmens. *Būti išskirtiniu/vieninteliu partneriu* tradicinėje šeimoje asmenims taip pat reiškia didelį praradimą. Santykių aspektas savastyje sužeidžiamas, ir jo gyjimui reikia ilgo laikotarpio. Partnerio praradimas, kai su juo ypatingai pradžioje vis dar palaikomi intensyvūs emociniai ir fiziniai ryšiai, kelia didžiulį skausmą.

Toliau vykstant skyrybų procesui, savasties žlugimas pasireiškia ir per **netiesioginius praradimus**. Jie susiję su dėl besitęsiančio konfliktiškų skyrybų proceso pablogėjusia besiskiriančiųjų tėvų ir vaikų sveikata bei gerove. Kai tėvai ar vaikai emociškai įsitraukia į skyrybų procesą, tai dažnai atsiliepia jų pačių sveikatai ar gerovei. Dėl to artimų šeimos narių gyvenimo sunkumai daro įtaką ir stiprina besiskiriančiųjų patiriamus praradimus bei jų intensyvumą. Viena mama jautriai kalbėjo apie dukters galimybių praradimą dėl to, kad buvęs vyras neleido jai suteikti priežiūros, kurios, jos manymu, dukra nusipelnė.

Ji tapo visiškai ne sava. Anksčiau ji buvo charizmatiška, mėgo sceną, turėjo nuostabų dainingą balsą. O dabar ji visiškai palūžusi... Pritūpusi, sulinkusi... Ji – negyva mergaitė (Angela, 38 m.).

3.2. Vidinės pusiausvyros (at)kūrimas kaip galutinis skyrybų kelionės tikslas

Savasties virsmas per nesibaigiančias skyrybas yra kelionė siekiant (at)kurti vidinę pusiausvyrą – savęs kaip atsinaujinusio(s) pajautimą, kupiną aiškumo ir stabilumo. Šis pusiausvyros ieškojimas vyksta dviem kryptimis, kurių kiekviena turi savitą orientaciją: žvelgiant į ateitį ir žvelgiant atgal į iki šiol pasiektus laimėjimus.

Procesas prasideda žvelgiant į ateitį ir siekiant **ilgalaikės vidinės ramybės.** Šis siekis apima didesnio savasties darnumo poreikį ir su skyrybomis susijusių konfliktų išsprendimą. Asmenys stengiasi atrasti savyje harmonijos jausmą nuolatinių iššūkių akivaizdoje. Ramybė laikoma galutiniu tikslu, pranokstančiu net patį skyrybų sprendimą. Debra (64 m.) pabrėžė savo ramybės troškimą taip: „Noriu gyventi ramybėje. Noriu mirti sveika." Vidinės ramybės sąvoka taip pat apima su skyrybomis susijusių konfliktų nebuvimą, o tai savo ruožtu padeda pasiekti didesnį vidinį aiškumą ir stabilumą. Baimės dėl buitinių konfliktų ir įtemptos atmosferos įveikimas iškyla kaip viena iš pagrindinių emocijų, trukdančių asmenims pasiekti vidinę pusiausvyrą ir laisvę veikti. Troškimas išsivaduoti nuo baimės yra motyvuojanti jėga, skatinanti išsiskyrusius asmenis judėti pirmyn.

Kelionė per skyrybas taip pat apima į praeitį nukreiptos introspekcijos procesą, kurio metu asmenys apmąsto **iki šiol pasiektus savasties atradimus (self-gains)**, pripažįsta ir vertina padarytą pažangą. Šie įgyjimai yra vilties ir stiprybės šaltinis, suteikiantys tvirtą pagrindą ateičiai. *Buvusio „aš" atkūrimas* tampa procesu, kurio tikslas – pasiekti vidinę pusiausvyrą ir mažinti neigiamas skyrybų pasekmes. Viena tyrimo dalyvė šį procesą apibūdino taip: „Buvusi aš grįžta. Tik daug išmintingesnė, nustatanti ribas kitiems, nes anksčiau niekada jų neturėjau" (Julie, 47 m.). Per atsigręžimą (grįžimą) į save asmenys patiria gilų *savęs išlaisvinimo* jausmą. Šis išsilaisvinimas atsiranda pasitraukus iš disfunkcinės šeimos santykių, ypatingai susijusių su finansiniu ir emociniu smurtu. Žmonės teigia išsilaisvinantys iš „priklausomybės ir kito žmogaus gyvenimo", kuris siejamas su daugybe neigiamų emocinių reakcijų.

Laikui bėgant asmenys pajaučia *stiprybę, kurią įgijo* per patį skyrybų procesą. Skyrybų kelionė skatina vidinės drąsos augimą. Semdamiesi stiprybės iš *savo teisumo* pajautimo, asmenys siekia didesnės vidinės pusiausvyros. Jie pabrėžia besikoncentruojantys į tai, kas jiems teisėtai priklauso. Jie teigia esantys pasirengę kovoti su bet kokiomis kliūtimis siekiant savo tikslų. Asmenys pabrėžia, kaip jiems svarbu ateityje nesigailėti dėl to, kad nesiėmė visų galimų veiksmų kovodami už savo tikslus.

3.3. Įstrigę tarp praradimų ir atradimų apsunkintame savasties virsme

Judėjimas pirmyn-atgal tarp vidinių praradimų ir atradimų išryškėja kaip centrinė erdvė, kurioje atsiduria besiskiriantieji besitęsiančių konfliktiškų skyrybų metu. Ši erdvė atsiskleidžia kaip apimanti daugybę apribojimų, su kuriais išsiskyrusieji susiduria savasties kaitos proceso metu.

Judėjimas didėjančio nesaugumo erdve susijęs su tuo, kad asmenys patiria

puolimą iš daugelio išorės šaltinių. Nuolatiniai suvokiami kaip smurtiniai buvusio su-
tuoktinio išpuoliai laikomi pagrindinė jėga, trukdanti judėti link veiksmingesnio ir
savalaikiškesnio savasties balanso. Tyrimo dalyviai vartoja konkrečius išsireiškimus
savo patirčiai apibūdinti arba įrodyti, pavyzdžiui, „nori suvalgyti mane gyvą", „pada-
ryti taip, kad kentėčiau", ar įrodyti, kad „buvau niekas ir būsiu niekas". Ieškodami pa-
laikymo ir apsaugos, jie kreipiasi pagalbos į specialistus. Tačiau tai dažnai nepateisina
lūkesčių, nes daugelis susiduria su institucijų abejingumu ar net jaučiasi puolami pačių
socialinių darbuotojų, vaiko teisių apsaugos tarnybų, policijos pareigūnų ir pan. Peter
(46) šį patyrimą pavadino „instituciniu smurtu", dėl kurio prarandamas pasitikėjimas
institucijomis ir jose dirbančiais specialistais. Laikui bėgant, pripažindami šalies teisės
aktų ribotumus, besiskiriantieji suvokia, kad, norėdami įveikti skyrybų iššūkius, gali
pasikliauti daugiausia tik savimi. Apskritai atstūmimo ir buvimo nesuprastu (-a) jaus-
mas prisideda prie nesaugumo ir neapgintumo jausmo.

Lietuvoje nėra jokios apsaugos. Visiškai. Aš, pavyzdžiui, jaučiuosi siaubingai nesau-
gi. Niekas manęs nesaugo. Pirmą kartą mane gynė teisininkai, kurie už mane pasakė
kažką, kas buvo parašyta ant popieriaus. O kitais atžvilgiais manęs niekas negina
(Angela, 38 m.).

Kabėjimas nežinomybėje. Gyvenimas aplinkoje, kuri išgyvenama kaip nuolatinis
puolimas, ignoravimas ir nesupratimas, trukdo asmenims patirti laisvę ir aktyviai, aiš-
kiai ir nuspėjamai formuoti savo ateitį. Vietoj to žmonės jaučiasi įstrigę nuolatinėje
laukimo ir besitęsiančio chaoso būsenoje, kuri bėgant laikui įgauna absurdo bruožų.
Absurdo pajautimas kyla iš sąsajų ir logikos stokos, kai esi puolamas ir jauti poreikį
gintis, nors nesijauti kaltu ar neteisiu.

Aš jaučiu, kad nepadariau absoliučiai nieko blogo, tačiau esu užpulta ir turiu gintis.
Iš to kyla absurdo jausmas (Daisy, 47 m.).

Besiskiriantieji teigia, kad skyrybų procesas įgyja savo gyvenimą, tam tikra pra-
sme atsietą nuo jame dalyvaujančių asmenų. Šis susivėlimas, apimantis aiškių ribų ir
galutinės pabaigos nebuvimą, įkalina žmones dabarties akimirkoje, *negalinčiais per-*
prasti esančios situacijos ar ją įtakoti. Negalėjimas užbaigti to, ką norisi užbaigti, su-
kelia bejėgiškumo jausmą. Kaip kariai, dalyvaujantys nesibaigiančiame kare, žmonės
keliauja nežinomybės kupinu keliu, nuolat laukdami atokvėpio nuo juos supančio
chaoso. Vidinė kelionė link emocinės pusiausvyrą (at)kūrimo tęsiasi. Veiksmų gausa
menkai keičia situaciją, kuri suvokiama kaip paini ir varginanti laiko tėkmė, kupina
administracinių veiksmų ir teisinių manevrų. Neigiami išgyvenimai tęsiasi, o besiski-
riančiųjų nusivylimas didėja.

3.4. Savęs stiprinimo strategijos: būdai, kaip (iš)būti skirtinguose
pereinamojo laikotarpio etapuose

Skyrybas išgyvenantys asmenys naudoja save stiprinančias strategijas, kad įveiktų
apsunkintą perėjimą nuo savasties žlugimo iki vidinės pusiausvyros (at)kūrimo. Šios
strategijos tarnauja kaip skirtingus tapsmo etapus jungiantys tiltai, kurių kiekvieną
įtakoja liminalinėje erdvėje tvyrantis neapibrėžtumas.

Ankstyvaisiais skyrybų etapais asmenys visų pirma orientuojasi į tai, kaip apsaugoti save ir savo interesus, todėl taiko ***apsaugines strategijas***. Išsiskyrę asmenys kaip savisaugos priemonės dažnai griebiasi *atsiribojimo nuo žalą keliančio šaltinio*, paprastai buvusio sutuoktinio ar institucijų. Tais atvejais, kai atsiriboti nuo numanomų grėsmės šaltinių neįmanoma arba tai duoda priešingą rezultatą, besiskiriantieji griebiasi *oponentų menkinimo*. Šios strategijos sukuria savisaugos būseną, leidžiančią išbūti nuolat besikeičiančioje realybėje, ir apsaugoti savo įrančią gerovę.

Ar atsiribojimas gilina konfliktą, ar jį mažina? Manau, kad mažina, nes jis ir toliau gilėtų, ir jam nebūtų galo, nes jis nusprendė nesikeisti (Helena, 47 m.).

Laikui bėgant besiskiriantieji pradeda taikyti **spekuliatyvias strategijas** apie įvairius savo tapatybės ir susiklosčiusių aplinkybių aspektus. Jie svarsto ir vertina savęs suvokimą, kad aiškesnis ir nuoseklesnis savęs supratimas atsvertų vidines abejones. Be to, jie pradeda svarstyti apie ateities galimybes bei strateguoti galimus būdus iššūkiams spręsti. Asmenys taip pat ieško atsparos laukime, padedančio rasti išeičių dviprasmiškose aplinkybėse. *Visa apimantis laukimas* yra svarbus aspektas, susijęs su užsitęsusiu skyrybų procesu, kuriam būdingos įvairios spekuliacijos ir padidėjęs netikrumas dėl ateities. Žmonės svarsto apie galimas savo veiksmų pasekmes, siekdami padidinti savo veiksmingumą besitęsiančio sudėtingo skyrybų proceso metu. Šios nuolatinis spekuliacijos ir pergalvojimas atspindi besiskiriančiųjų pasiryžimą surasti aiškumą ir prasmę virsmo procese.

Laikui bėgant asmenys pasiekia tašką, kai pradeda labiau reflektuoti apie savo nuolat besikeičiančią tikrovę. Jie suvokia situacijos absurdiškumą ir jos nebaigtinumą. Reaguodami į tai, jie ***imasi apmąstymo strategijų***, tokių kaip buvimo skyrybų procese prasmės ieškojimas, pasitarnaujančio kaip svarbi įveikos strategija. Per *į ateitį nukreiptą prasmės kūrimo* procesą, besiskiriantys asmenys stengiasi rasti savo atliekamuose veiksmuose reikšmę ir nuoseklumą, kas galiausiai leidžia jiems susikurti stabilesnį ir aiškesnį „aš". Vienas iš svarbių besiskiriančiųjų prasmės kūrimo aspektų yra *savęs kaip moralios asmenybės įtvirtinimas*. Surinkti duomenys rodo, kad besiskiriantieji prasmę randa pabrėždami moralinį integralumą, sąžiningumą ir savo tikslų patikimumą. Visa apimanti tema yra kova už savo vertybes, suvokiamą tiesą ir tai, kas, jų manymu, teisėtai priklauso jiems.

Man [skyrybų] rezultatas nėra toks svarbus. Žinau, kad kova vyksta pagal mano sąžinę. Nepripažįstu mažiau, nes, mano nuomone, tai yra teisingas kelias, ir viskas. Visa kita bus, kaip bus (Helena, 47 m.).

3.5. Orientavimasis įvairialypiuose pagalbos šaltinių aspektuose

Pagalbos šaltinių panaudojimas atlieka svarbų vaidmenį, formuojantį asmenų įsitraukimą įvairiuose savasties virsmo etapuose. Šie šaltiniai gali turėti skirtingą poveikį, pradedant pagalba siekiant aukštesnės vidinės darnos ir baigiant buvimo pereinamajame laikotarpyje užtęsimo.

Šeima ir draugai: stiprybės pamatas ar netikrumo šaltinis. Šeima, įskaitant tėvus ir vaikus bei draugus, atlieka svarbų vaidmenį teikiant palaikymą sudėtingo konfliktiškų skyrybų proceso metu, ypač pirmaisiais jo etapais. Stiprus ryšys su tėvais ir jų emocinė, finansinė ir net teisinė pagalba *matomas kaip tvirtas pagrindas* sunkiu metu. Tačiau kartais tėvų ir vaikų reakcijos tampa kliūtimi skyrybų procese, trukdančia besiskiriantiems pasiekti vidinę pusiausvyrą. Jie prisideda prie didesnio netikrumo ir spekuliacijų. Skyrybas išgyvenantys asmenys ypač sunkiai suvokia savo vaikų atsisakymą bendrauti, todėl patiria nemažai nusivylimo ir skausmo. Paul, dviejų vaikų tėvas, abejojo, „ar būsiu reikalingas [vaikams], ar jie bendraus tik dėl pinigų, kai jų prireiks“.

Finansiniai ištekliai: įgalinantys savigyną, bet ilginant konflikto tąsą. Lėšų turėjimas ne tik užtikrina finansinį saugumą skyrybose esančiam asmeniui ir naujai susikūrusiai šeimai, bet ir įgalina pasisamdyti kompetentingą advokatą, vieną iš centrinių teisinio skyrybų proceso dalyvių. Tačiau, žvelgiant iš kitos pusės, su skyrybomis susijusių išlaidų padengimo našta kelia didelį stresą, dar labiau sustiprina netikrumo ir nestabilumo jausmą.

Aš daug dirbu. Praėjusiais metais dirbau tik tam, kad galėčiau išlaikyti dukrą ir sumokėti už advokatus. Daugiau nieko. Nuo 6 val. ryto iki 9 val. vakaro, žinoma, su pertraukomis, bet nuovargis buvo siaubingas (Daisy, 47 m.).

Asmenys, jau keletą metų esantys skyrybose, samprotauja, kad finansinių išteklių prieinamumas gali prisidėti prie skyrybų proceso tąsos. Pasak Rebertos (27), „jei jis [buvęs vyras] neturėtų pinigų mokėti advokatui ir daryti visokių dalykų, būtų mažiau konfliktų“.

Religija: sustiprinti maldos ar kvestionuojamas moralinis pagrįstumas. Sunkiais momentais asmenys per maldą ieško paguodos ir paramos iš Dievo, atsigręždami į savo tikėjimą paguodos ir krypties. Religija besiskiriantiems tarnauja kaip kryptį teikianti jėga ir moralinių vertybių šaltinis, formuojantis požiūrį į tai, kaip toliau gyventi įveikiant skyrybų iššūkius. Kita vertus, giliai tikintys asmenys susiduria su nežinomybe, kaip jų skyrybos dera su krikščioniškomis normomis ir kaip elgtis santuokos sakramento iširimo klausimu. Žmonės kalba apie prieštaringą informaciją, kurią suponuoja disonansas tarp bažnyčios propaguojamų mokymų apie pagarbą ir meilę vienas kitam, ir jų sutuoktinių, dalyvaujančių bažnytinėje veikloje, agresyvaus elgesio. Dėl šio neatitikimo jie jaučiasi suglumę ir nepasitiki bažnyčia.

(Ne)iniciatoriaus statusas: reiškinio įsivaizduojamo paprastumo kvestionavimas. Iniciatoriaus ar neiniciatoriaus statusas skyrybų atveju yra sudėtingas ir prieštaringas klausimas, kupinas abejonių ir neaiškumų. Nors visuomenė linkusi laikyti buvimą iniciatoriumi stiprybės šaltiniu, besiskiriantys šia prielaida abejoja. Žiūrint paprastai, iniciatoriumi tampa tas, kuris inicijuoja skyrybas arba išsikrausto gyventi atskirai. Gilesnis žvilgsnis atskleidžia sudėtingą ir dviprasmišką tikrovę. Išsiskyrusieji apmąsto skirtingas šio reiškinio puses, kvestionuoja savo bei sutuoktinio vaidmenis, santuokos pabaigos priežastis, taip išgyvendami liminalią/ribinę būseną be aiškumo ir atsakymų.

3.6. Įtempto liminalumo grindžiamoji teorija: savasties virsmas besitęsiančių konfliktiškų skyrybų metu

Taikydami KGT metodologiją nustatėme, kad pagrindinis savasties virsmo procesas vyksta trimis skirtingomis, tačiau tarpusavyje susijusiomis fazėmis, kurių metu sukuriami tam tikri savasties tipus: praradimo-gynimo, tarpinis-spekuliacinis ir įgijimo-refleksijos. Šiam procesui būdingas apsunkintas virsmas, įveikiamas pasitelkiant įvairias strategijas ir pagalbos šaltinius.

Pradiniame etape skyrybos sąlygoja įvairius praradimus ir savasties žlugimą. Procesui įsibėgėjant, asmenys atsiduria tarpinėje būsenoje, apmąstydami savo patirtį ir ieškodami naujų galimybių. Paskutiniame įgijimo-refleksijos etape daugiausia dėmesio skiriama moraliai užtikrinto savęs kūrimui, įprasminant skyrybų patirtį. Eidami per šią sudėtingą kelionę žmonės remiasi pasiektu finansiniu stabilumu, šeimos narių palaikymu ir įvairia įtraukiančia veikla. Galutinis skyrybų rezultatas nebėra pagrindinis rūpestis. Svarbiausia tampa išlikti ištikimam savo sąžinei ir priimti sprendimus, nukreiptus į asmeninį augimą ir konflikto išsprendimu. Šioje kelionėje įtempto liminalumo sąvoka išryškėja kaip visa vienijantis aspektas, atspindintis nuolatinės įtampos ir netikrumo būseną, kurią besiskiriantieji išgyvena kelyje į savasties (at)kūrimą ir gijimą.

4. APTARIMAS

Svyravimas tarp laikino savasties žlugimo ir (at)kūrimo. Skyrybų kelionė prasideda laikino savasties žlugimu, kuriam būdingas daugybinių netekčių patyrimas. Atsisveikinimas su šiais vertingais savasties aspektais gali būti nepaprastai sunkus, panašus į brangios tapatybės dalies praradimą (Maddux ir kt., 2010). Patirtus praradimus taip pat galima prilyginti *simbolinei mirčiai*, reiškiančiai galutinį individo atsiskyrimą nuo praeities ir ateities savasties (Carel, 2007; Pedersen, 2016). Šiame kontekste buvęs „aš" nustoja egzistuoti, o besiformuojantis naujas „aš" lieka virsmo būsenoje. Tačiau ne visi praradimai suvokiami neigiamai, kai kurie turi *teigiamą poveikį* ir suteikia gimstančių potencialų ir galimybių (Du Toit, 2017). Tarp daugybės praradimų asmenys toliau (at)kuria save taip, kad kuo labiau atitiktų savo besikeičiantį savęs suvokimą, atsiribodami nuo buvusio partnerio ir santuokos. Šis besitęsiantis tapsmas padeda formuotis aiškesnei ir stabilesnei savasties struktūrai.

Apsunkintas tapsmas vykstančio besikeičiančio absurdo fone kaip centrinis įtempto liminalumo aspektas. Kartu su tam tikrų savasties dimensijų praradimo ar (at)kūrimo patirtimi asmenys dažnai suvokia save kaip kabančius laikinumo būsenoje. Turner (1969/2017) tokius asmenis vadina „liminaliniais žmonėmis", nes jie egzistuoja „nei čia, nei ten", tam tikroje tarpinėje būsenoje. Kadangi besiskiriančiųjų buvimas šiame liminalume yra persmelktas neapgintumo ir įstrigimo absurde jausmo, siekdami geriau atspindėti šiuos aspektus, įvedėme terminą "*įtemptas liminalumas*". Teigiame, kad vidinio netikrumo kupinose situacijose pasaulis praranda prasmingumą, žlunga orientacinė sistema, o individai patiria savo situacijos beprasmybę (Camus,

1955/2018; Sartre, 1956/2015). Kai dviprasmiškumo lygis išlieka aukštas, kartais gali kilti absurdo jausmas, panašus į tai, ką Camus (1955/2018) vadino „žmogaus ir jo gyvenimo išsiskyrimu", arba, kitaip tariant, savasties nedarnumu. Apribotas virsmo procesas, vykstant ilgalaikėms konfliktiškoms skyryboms, tampa pagrindiniu įtempto liminalumo aspektu. Reaguodami į tai, asmenys imasi įvairių strategijų, kad atsiribotų nuo šios besikeičiančios situacijos ir sustiprintų savo atsparumą bei gerovę.

Dvigubas strategijų ir pagalbos šaltinių poveikis: skatinantis ir (arba) sunkinantis savasties (at)kūrimą. *Moraliniu požiūriu pagrįstas prasmės kūrimas* tampa pagrindine strategija, naudojama labiau kontempliatyvesnėje egzistavimo fazėje. Tikslo atradimas, nuolat susiduriant su nesibaigiančių skyrybų iššūkiais, tampa kertiniu akmeniu, padedančiu besiskiriantiesiems susidoroti su padidėjusiu egzistencinius stresorius, lydinčius šią situaciją. Aktyvus įsitraukimas į prasmės kūrimą, ypač ilgalaikių skyrybų kontekste, veikia kaip švyturys, nušviečiantis kelią pirmyn. Tačiau visiškas savo vertybių, perspektyvų ir įsitikinimų apie situacijos tikrumą priėmimas turi ir neigiamų pasekmių. Kai asmenys tvirtai laikosi tam tikros įvykių interpretacijos, tampa sudėtinga atsiriboti nuo konflikto, tuo prisidedant prie jo tęstinumo (Rovenpor ir kt., 2019).

Šiuo tyrimu taip pat pabrėžiame *pagalbos šaltinių dvilypumą*, teigdami, kad tai, ar konkretus aspektas tampa resursu, ar iššūkiu, priklauso nuo žmogaus ir platesnių situacinių bei aplinkybinių veiksnių sukurtoje (naujoje) šeimos struktūroje. Nė vieno pagalbos šaltinio negalima įvardyti kaip resursinio, neįvertinus viso besiskiriančiojo situacijos konteksto.

IŠVADOS

Sukurta grindžiamoji „įtempto liminalumo" teorija siūlo struktūrą, padedančią suprasti virsmo procesą ilgai besitęsiančių konfliktiškų skyrybų metu. Šis procesas vaizduojamas kaip nenutrūkstama kelionė per tarpusavyje susijusius etapus, kurie sukuria erdvę "tarp". Virsmas yra įtakotas daugybės vidinių ir išorinių veiksnių, todėl jis yra labai įvairialypis ir apribotas. Įtemptas liminalumas apibūdina ilgalaikes konfliktiškas skyrybas kaip procesą, kuriam būdingas neapibrėžtumas ir nepastovumas. Tačiau jis taip pat suteikia asmeninio tobulėjimo ir augimo galimybių, leidžiančių šio proceso metu iš naujo apibrėžti ir naujai pamatyti save.

Mūsų radiniai skatina skaitytojus į konfliktiškas skyrybas žvelgti kaip į įvairialypį ir besikeičiantį reiškinį, sudėtingai persipynusį daugybe vidinių konfliktų įvairiais lygmenimis. Dėmesys turėtų būti kreipiamas į individualias kiekvieno skyrybas išgyvenančio asmens aplinkybes, taip pat į platesnį institucinį, teisinį ir net politinį kontekstą. Skyrybas išgyvenantys asmenys dažnai jaučiasi palikti likimo valiai sprendžiant besitęsiančius konfliktus, o tai gali būti per sunki užduotis, ypatingai turint omenyje emocinį krūvį ir neveiksmingumą instituciniame bei teisiniame lygmenyse.

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GROUNDED THEORY OF STRAINED LIMINALITY: SELF-TRANSITION OF INDIVIDUALS THROUGH THEIR ENDURING CONFLICTUAL DIVORCE: daktaro disertacija. – Vilnius: Mykolo Romerio universitetas, 2024. P. 214.

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Despite the adverse consequences associated with conflictual divorce, there is a dearth of understanding regarding how individuals navigate the enduring process of marital dissolution, perceive encountered difficulties, and undergo inner changes. Consequently, this study aims to elucidate the experiences of divorcees by developing a grounded theory that delineates the transition of the self amidst a protracted conflictual divorce. This involves an exploration of its defining characteristics that either facilitate or impede its timely occurrence. Employing a constructivist grounded theory and a longitudinal qualitative research approach, we systematically collected and analysed data through two waves of interviews with 16 females and five males who had either been living separately or had officially initiated divorce proceedings at least six months prior. The findings reveal that the process of self-transition during divorce follows a trajectory of temporal self-disruption, progressing towards the pursuit of inner (re)balance. However, this journey is markedly strained within the liminal space, characterised by an elevated perception of being assailed by multiple external sources and trapped in perpetual, absurd uncertainty. The resourcefulness of supporting means and self-strengthening strategies is intricate and contingent upon an individual's broader situational and circumstantial context. The identified elements coalesce to form the grounded theory of "strained liminality." This theory elucidates a process of identity reconstruction wherein the transition to a new, clearly defined self remains incomplete or significantly protracted, as individuals find themselves entangled in an ambiguous and highly conflictual space necessitating resolution and closure. Drawing from these findings, the study offers practical recommendations and implications for various involved specialists and individuals undergoing divorce.

Nepaisant neigiamų pasekmių, siejamų su konfliktiškomis skyrybomis, trūksta žinių apie tai, kaip besiskiriantieji patiria ilgai besitęsiantį santuokos iširimo procesą, suvokia iškilusius sunkumus ir išgyvena vidinius pokyčius. Remiantis besiskiriančių asmenų patyrimu, šiuo tyrimu buvo siekiama sukurti grindžiamąją teoriją, atspindinčią savasties tapsmą užsitęsusių konfliktiškų skyrybų metu, bei apimančią procesą lengvinančius ir sunkinančius elementus. Taikant konstruktyvistinės grindžiamosios teorijos ir tęstinio kokybinio tyrimo metodologijas, buvo sistemingai renkami ir analizuojami duomenis, gauti dviejų bangų pusiau struktūruotų interviu metu su 16 moterų ir 5 vyrais. Šie asmenys gyveno ne kartu arba buvo oficialiai inicijavę teisinį skyrybų procesą ne mažiau nei prieš šešis mėnesius. Rezultatai atskleidė, kad skyrybų metu savasties tapsmo procesas prasideda laikinu savasties žlugimu, ir judama link didesnio vidinio balanso (at)kūrimo. Tačiau ši kelionė užstringa liminalinėje erdvėje, kuri išgyvenama per suvokiamą nuolatinę grėsmę, kylančią iš daugybinių išorės šaltinių, bei pakibimą besitęsiančiame

absurdiškame neapibrėžtume. Galimybė pasinaudoti pagalbos šaltiniais bei savęs stiprinimo strategijomis yra nevienareikšmiška ir priklauso nuo žmogaus individualios situacijos konteksto. Elementų visuma suponuoja konstruktyvistinę grindžiamąją „įtempto liminalumo" teoriją, atspindinčią savasties (at)kūrimo procesą, kai perėjimas prie naujo, aiškiai apibrėžto "aš" lieka užsitęsęs dviprasmiškoje konfliktiškoje erdvėje, reikalaujančioje išsprendimo ir uždarymo. Remiantis šiomis išvadomis, pateikiamos praktinės rekomendacijos įvairiems su konfliktiškomis skyrybomis susijusiems specialistams ir besiskiriantiesiems.

Ondanks de nadelige gevolgen die gepaard gaan met hoog-conflictuele echtscheidingen, bestaat er een gebrek aan inzicht in de manier waarop individuen omgaan met een langdurig proces van huwelijksontbinding, welke moeilijkheden ze ervaren en hoe zij innerlijke veranderingen ondergaan tijdens het proces. Het doel van deze studie is om de ervaringen van gescheiden mensen te begrijpen door een Gefundeerde Theorie te ontwikkelen die de transitie van het zelf te midden van een langdurige hoog-conflictuele echtscheiding schetst. Dit omvat een verkenning van de kenmerkende elementen die tijdig professioneel optreden vergemakkelijken of belemmeren. Gebruikmakend van een constructivistisch gefundeerde theorie en een longitudinale kwalitatieve onderzoeksdesign, hebben we op systematische wijze gegevens verzameld en geanalyseerd via twee interviewrondes met 16 vrouwen en 5 mannen die apart leefden van elkaar of ten minste zes maanden daarvoor officieel een echtscheidingsprocedure waren gestart. De bevindingen laten zien dat het proces van zelf-transitie tijdens echtscheiding een traject volgt van tijdelijke zelfverstoring, en evolueert in de richting van het nastreven van innerlijk (her)evenwicht. Deze evolutie vindt duidelijk plaats binnen de liminale ruimte, gekenmerkt door een verhoogde perceptie van te worden aangevallen door meerdere externe bronnen en verstrikt te raken in voortdurende, absurde onzekerheid. De vindingrijkheid van hulpmiddelen en zelfversterkende strategieën is ingewikkeld en afhankelijk van de bredere situationele en indirecte context van een individu. Al deze elementen komen samen en vormen de Gefundeerde Theorie van 'gespannen liminaliteit'. Deze theorie belicht een proces van identiteitsreconstructie waarbij de overgang naar een nieuw, duidelijk gedefinieerd zelf onvolledig of aanzienlijk langdurig blijft aanslepen, omdat individuen verstrikt raken in een dubbelzinnige en zeer conflictueuze ruimte die oplossing en afsluiting noodzakelijk maakt. Op basis van deze bevindingen biedt het onderzoek praktische aanbevelingen en implicaties voor verschillende specialisten die een hoog-conflictuele echtscheiding begeleiden of ex-partners die ze doormaken.

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