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ABSTRACT

The use of the term ‘high conflict’ to describe a wide range of family dynamics after separation and divorce has increased significantly over the years. At the moment, no consensus on the definition of high conflict exists. Lack of definitional clarity hinders the ability for legal and mental health professionals to assess, identify, and effectively intervene with this population. Based on a rapid evidence assessment of 65 empirically based social science studies relevant to high conflict, this article positions high-conflict separation and divorce using an ecological transactional model to better understand risk factors and indicators associated with these families. Authors propose a more comprehensive definition that captures the complexity and interactions of various risk factors and indicators on multiple levels. Positioning high-conflict families using an ecological model identifies several points of intervention professionals can use and the fundamental need for collaboration among stakeholders for effective intervention.

Separation and divorce have become commonplace in today’s society. The vast majority of separating couples with children can resolve their feelings of anger toward their ex-partners in a timely manner and transition successfully toward positive coparenting relationships (Bacon & McKenzie, 2004; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). In approximately 10% to 15% of families, interparental conflict can continue to define the separated couple despite the passage of time (Amato, 2001; Grych, 2005; Shifflett & Cummings, 1999; Stewart, 2001). Families in high conflict continue to draw the attention of both scholars and professionals as the field continues to debate its prevalence, etiology, and the most effective treatment approaches for these families. Notwithstanding the widespread focus on high-conflict families in the literature, there remains no consensus on the conceptual basis for its application to the field of separation and divorce.
Despite definitional and assessment challenges of unresolved high conflict within separated families, research studies have consistently reported the negative consequences of high conflict for parents and their children (Amato, 2001, 2010; Booth & Amato, 2001; Kelly, 2000; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Kelly & Lamb, 2000). Empirical evidence has found that children from low-conflict divorced homes show better functioning and overall well-being than children from intact families fraught with high conflict (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Buehler et al., 1997; Coleman & Glenn, 2010; Cummings, George, McCoy, & Davies, 2012; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Johnston, Roseby, & Kuehnle, 2009; Kelly, 2000; Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008). Protracted litigation and conflict due to child-related disagreements appear to be the most harmful on children and the parent–child relationships (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Camara & Resnick, 1988, 1989; Emery, 1982; Grych, 2005; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991; Stewart, 2001). These children have been shown to exhibit higher levels of anxiety (Amato, 2001; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996), depression (Amato, 2001; Buchanan et al., 1996), anger and aggression (Amato, 2001; Amato & Afifi, 2006; Hetherington, 1999), low self-esteem (Hetherington, 1999), delinquency (Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 1999; Kelly, 2000; Kelly & Emery, 2003), academic decline (Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 1999; Kelly, 2000), deterioration in the parent–child relationship (Amato, 2001; Amato & Afifi, 2006; Fosco & Grych, 2010), and overall maladjustment (Kelly, 2012).

A significant challenge in interpreting this evidence is that most studies are unable to differentiate the nature and severity of families that exhibit low versus normal versus high levels of conflict and few studies have considered what factors should be used to distinguish between levels of conflict. The various definitions of high conflict mirror the diversity of theoretical frameworks applied to assess the presence and severity of conflict within families postseparation. For instance, some definitions focus solely on the individual level of analysis with emphasis placed on personality traits and disorders, mental health concerns, or the individual characterology of parents. Others focus on larger systemic issues and institutions that exacerbate parental conflict, such as the adversarial legal system or professionals who take sides in the dispute. The lack of consensus on the definition of associated factors of high conflict make it difficult to effectively intervene with these families.

**Purpose and significance of review**

This article highlights findings from a review of empirical studies on high conflict. Framed within an ecological transactional framework, the review identifies several associated risk factors, indicators, and consequences of high-conflict postseparation and frames these within layers of analysis to
shed light on the various systems that contribute to the presence and severity of conflict within families. Moving toward a more complex understanding can help guide the assessment of high conflict and can contribute to matching services that better meet families’ needs.

Authors of this study are mental health clinicians with significant combined experience working with high-conflict families across multiple roles and settings (i.e., forensic, child protection, and therapeutic). It is with this experience that researchers formulated the original research question to help better understand this population, gain a deeper understanding of factors precipitating and perpetuating high conflict, and identify more effective interventions.

**Method**

Rapid evidence assessment (REA; Davies, 2004) was used as a systematic review method for identifying and retrieving existing research empirical studies related to high-conflict separation and divorce. REA is a useful method for capturing the empirical evidence in a specific area as the method provides a timely, thorough, and robust synthesis of diverse evidence (Regehr, Stern, & Shlonsky, 2007).

Electronic databases selected to search for empirical studies related to high-conflict separation and divorce included PsycINFO, Medline, Sociological Abstracts, Social Science Abstracts, and Social Work Abstracts. The primary search terms for information retrieval included (terms were adapted based on controlled vocabulary of each database) (exp conflict/or exp “conflict (psychology)” or high conflict.mp. or exp Domestic Violence/or exp violence or exp emotion/or exp anger/or exp alienation or preoccupation.mp. or family conflict.mp. or marital conflict.mp. or interpersonal relationships.mp.) and (exp Divorce/or divorce.mp. or relationship termination or marital separation or divorced persons).

**Screening process**

Based on the electronic search strategy, 3,220 titles and abstracts were retrieved. All titles were imported into a data management program and screened by two independent raters based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) the population was related to separated persons, divorced persons, or both; (b) the study was related to factors associated with high interparental conflict; and (c) the study was an empirical study. To ensure inclusion of the maximum number of studies, both published and unpublished works were considered eligible, as well as both quantitative and qualitative studies. The search was restricted to studies in the English language. From the 3,220 titles, 621 titles (19%) passed the first level of screening. Full articles were retrieved
of these 621 titles and screened based on whether the article provided a definition for high conflict, discussed prevalence of high conflict, assessed factors associated with high conflict, or included a measure of conflict. Based on this second more comprehensive screening process, 65 articles were included in the final analysis.

**Data analysis framework**

Major findings across the included studies were analyzed within an ecological transactional approach as a way to organize the various definitions, understandings, risk factors and predictors, and indicators of high-conflict families. First used in discussions of child maltreatment, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model sought to highlight the interaction among human characteristics, personal development, and the environments in which individuals find themselves. Later, Belsky (1980) and Cicchetti and Rizley (1981) expanded the ecological framework by detailing its four parts: ontogenetic development (individual), microsystem (family), exosystem (community), and macrosystem (culture), while highlighting their reciprocal interactions. In the context of high-conflict families, the analogous systems include an individual’s own ontogenetic development (biological, psychological and emotional, behavioral, cognitive), interpersonal systems (parent–child relationship, family, friends, kin, other members of social networks), organizations (schools, child welfare, police, other institutions and community resources), and one’s physical environment (social location, laws, legislation, etc.).

Framing the evidence within an ecological transactional model provides a more comprehensive approach for understanding high conflict. The benefit of the ecological transactional model is that it does not view factors of high conflict as being mutually exclusive from each other; rather, significant overlap among risk factors, indicators, and consequences are anticipated. For instance, preexisting mental health issues can predispose a parent to high conflict, can contribute to the perpetuation of high conflict, and can have significant implications on parenting capacity, the parent–child relationship, and overall parent and child adjustment problems.

**Results of using the ecological transactional model to define high conflict**

Using the ecological transactional model, this research highlights three domains to be considered for understanding high conflict. The first domain includes the risk factors, or predictors, that point to the likelihood of high conflict developing based on preexisting factors. The second domain includes the indicators, or actual signs, that high conflict is occurring. Consistent with
the definitional framework, these risk factors and indicators are considered within their ontogenetic, microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem levels. The third domain includes the consequences that result from the presence of high conflict within families after separation and divorce (see Figure 1).

Based on results from this review, ontogenetic risk factors include personality disorders, mental health issues, insecure attachments, and substance misuse. Microsystem risk factors include negative parental behaviors, time, attachment insecurities, power differentials, and financial dependency. Exosystem risk factors include extended family taking sides, also known as “tribal warfare” or “cheerleaders” (Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Johnston et al., 2009) as well as professionals taking sides serving as negative advocates. Other exosystem risk factors include the involvement of child welfare, police, or other professional institutions (e.g., lawyers, children’s legal representation, child advocates, etc.). Macrosystem risk factors include the law and legislation, culture, religion, and traditions.

The second domain includes the indicators: the demonstrable signs that high conflict is occurring. According to the results, ontogenetic indicators include anger and hostility, rigid views, and substance use while caring for the child. Microsystem indicators include chronic fighting and lack of or ineffective coparent communication, diffuse parent–child boundaries, irregular parent–child contact, and difficulty or failure to fulfill child support obligations. Exosystem indicators include entrenched litigation, tribal

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**Figure 1.** Ecological transactional model for understanding risk factors, indicators, and consequences of high-conflict divorce and separation.
warfare, and multiple involvements of services. Macrosystem indicators include conflict about religion and a prolonged legal process.

**Ontogenetic development: personality disorders and individual schemas**

**Personality disorders**

When the locus of conflict is ascribed to an individual, personality disorders and extreme personality traits are said to define and contribute to high-conflict divorces. The presence of personality disorders and psychopathology such as pathological narcissism, envy, entrenched hatred, borderline personality, paranoid personality, counterdependence, primitive defenses, and sociopathic or antisocial personality traits have all been found to be prevalent within parents involved in high conflict (Baum, 2004; Baum & Shnit, 2003; Donner, 2006; Eddy, 2007; Friedman, 2004; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Levite & Cohen, 2012; Renner & Leibetseder, 2000; Siegel & Langford, 1998).

Ex-partners with narcissistic personalities are believed to be preoccupied with their own needs and desires while remaining oblivious or indifferent to the needs and wishes of their children or ex-spouse (Baum & Shnit, 2003; Eddy, 2007; Friedman, 2004; Johnston & Roseby, 1997). These individuals often have difficulty taking responsibility or accountability for their own behaviors and instead blame others for the conflict. These individuals are considered unable to see or respond to their children’s needs and wishes as being distinct, separate, and perhaps different from their own. Seeking child custody might satisfy their own need or desire to seek revenge or wound his or her ex-spouse. Relief and gratification might stem from hurting the other parent as opposed to achieving the best possible parenting plan for the child (Donner, 2006).

Other examples of personality disorders associated with high-conflict couples are counterdependence, primitive defenses, and borderline personality. Counterdependent parents are described as being self-sufficient, independent, and in control of their lives, but with extreme underlying rigidity. These parents might dictatorially refuse to compromise or cooperate without feeling a sense of capitulation (Friedman, 2004). In other cases, parents might project retaliation, thereby spurring more contempt toward that person, in effect establishing a vicious cycle that is initiated both internally and externally (Cohen & Levite, 2012). This manner of splitting and projecting is demonstrative of primitive object relations and indicative of insufficient coping mechanisms to deal with the painful feelings associated with loss. Instead these primitive defenses serve as protection from the pain, frustration, rage, ambivalence, and hatred (Levite & Cohen, 2012).

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is also commonly associated with high conflict. BPD is characterized by an individual with a high fear of abandonment, idealization of self and devaluation of other, impulsive...
behavior, and sudden, intense, and extreme anger (Eddy, 2010). Having these personality traits is likely to exacerbate conflict as a way of satisfying one’s own needs.

Self-differentiation refers to an individual’s ability to express feelings and thoughts while keeping his or her emotional impulses in check. This includes the ability to make planned decisions and respond with flexibility even during stressful times (Baum & Shnit, 2003, 2005). Individuals with poor self-differentiation might act and react impulsively and rigidly and are often emotionally dependent on others (Baum & Shnit, 2003). These individuals might use conflict to retain pseudo-independence and emotional engagement with the other person. When situations become stressful, they often view others as hostile (Baum & Shnit, 2003). In these examples, the locus of the conflict, that is the primary originator or influence of conflict, resides within the individual personality factors.

**Mental health concerns**

At the ontogenetic level, there is also a strong association between high-conflict parents and the presence of mental health disorders and unresolved emotional issues (Bonach, 2005; Booth & Amato, 2001; Fischer, De Graaf, & Kalmijn, 2005; Neff & Cooper, 2004; Radovanovic, 1993; Rutter, 2005; Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989). It has been reported that parents with mental health problems and personality problems generally have more difficulty maintaining friendships, more trouble maintaining amicable contact with their ex-partners, and greater difficulty regulating emotions, both positive and negative (Johnston et al., 2009).

Mental health issues might have been present previously, but exacerbated by the family breakdown, creating higher risk of high conflict postseparation. Wade and Pevalin (2004) reported that transitioning out of marriage is linked to a higher prevalence of poor mental health postseparation, although poor mental health also precedes marital disruption.

Using secondary analysis of 10,264 respondents to the British Household Panel Survey, Wade and Pevalin (2004) documented that 46% of separated adults had elevated rates of mental health problems compared to 12.3% remaining married. In a large national sample of 2,033 parents, Booth and Amato (2001) reported that the combination of divorce and higher levels of conflict were negatively associated with psychological well-being. Similarly, the Sbarra, Emery, Sbarra, and Emery (2005) study highlighted that nonacceptances of coparenting relationships was positively associated with higher levels of parents’ depression, suggesting that the presence of mental health problems is positively correlated with ongoing conflict between the parties.

Due to the cross-sectional design of these studies, it is unclear whether the parents experienced mental health problems during the marriage or whether
these problems developed after the divorce. Nevertheless, it highlights the mental health finding as a risk factor among high-conflict parents.

**Insecure attachments**
According to object relations theory, an individual’s internal schemas developed from his or her own interpersonal experiences can be linked to a propensity to become high-conflict parents. Schemas are networks that embody constellations of recurring emotional experiences, interpretations, and behaviors that constitute personality traits, behavioral dispositions, mood, attitudes, and dispositions (Prescott, 2006). Traits of high-conflict couples within this lens include distorted self-image (low or grandiose), difficulty relating to others, difficulty initiating or completing tasks, rigid thinking, polarized views, inability to resolve conflict, and an inability or fear of loss. Possessing these character traits contributes to chronic interpersonal conflict, insecure attachments, and a poor tolerance for separation (Prescott, 2006). The locus of the conflict continues to be within the ontogenetic development, but rather than ascribing to personality disorders, it is due to one’s cognitive schemas.

High conflict has also been described as a disorganized adult attachment response (Saini, 2007). Through this lens, high conflict is conceptualized in terms of parents’ responses to feared or actual loss or separation from an adult attachment figure (e.g., ex-spouse). In this model, emotional and behavioral patterns deemed adaptive during marriage, such as seeking proximity, can be understood as maladaptive in the postdivorce context (Greenberg, 2006).

**Substance abuse**
Another individual factor that can exacerbate high-conflict divorce is the presence of substance use, overuse, and misuse (Gilmour, 2004; Johnston, 1994; Radovanovic, 1993). In Johnston and Campbell’s (1988) cross-sectional study, one fourth of 160 parents in the clinical sample had substance abuse problems. In Depner, Cannata, and Simon’s (1992) study of 93% of all disputes regarding custody and access during a 2-week period, results show that 36% of the sample expressed concerns about exposing the child to the other parent because of his or her substance abuse.

**Microsystem**
When the locus of conflict resides within the interpersonal system, the conflict encompasses the parental subsystem, the parent–child subsystem, and the parents’ larger social networks including extended family, kin, friends, and neighbors (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007; Trinder, Kellet, & Swift, 2008).
Negative parental behaviors

With the locus of conflict embedded in the parental subsystem, the conflict in this system is characterized by a hostile coparent relationship. Conflict might occur as a response to feeling hurt, shamed, or humiliated by the ex-spouse, or by the separation and divorce process itself (Hopper, 2001). This could be demonstrated by parental negative behaviors such as reacting with anger and distrust toward the other parent, difficulty communicating or refusing to speak with the other parent over the care of the children, engaging in verbal disputes and conflict during child(ren)’s exchanges or arguing violently in their child(ren)’s presence, talking negatively about the other parent and his or her family to the child(ren), insisting that children carry verbal or written communications between homes about late support payments or missed visits, and physically assaulting each other in their children’s presence (Stewart, 2001; Wesolowski, Nelson, & Bing, 2008).

In more recent research, Malcore, Windell, Seyuin, and Hill (2010) assessed level of conflict between coparents and predictors of conflict based on a sample of 147 women and 133 men who participated in a treatment program specifically geared toward high-conflict separated and divorced parents. A multiple regression analysis revealed that parents’ ability to agree, the inclusion of children in the parental conflict, and parental communication were significant predictors of high conflict. These predictors reliably predicted the number of times coparents returned to court.

Literature further shows high-conflict parents often involve and enmesh children in the conflict (Johnston et al., 2009). Crossing these boundaries can include questioning the child about the other parent; using the child as a messenger, exposing the child to negative interparental conflict, exposing the child to inappropriate content of adult disputes (e.g., financial matters), and using the child to provide inappropriate emotional and practical support to a parent. This type of behavior is not only damaging to a child’s emotional well-being, but facilitates loyalty binds in children and strained parent–child relationships (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, & Braver, 2004; Trinder, Kellet, & Swift, 2008). In the 17-year longitudinal study of 2,033 adults, Amato and Afifi (2006) found that children with parents in high conflict were more likely than other children to feel caught between their parents. Fosco and Grych’s (2010) longitudinal study examined the relations between triangulation, appraisal of conflict, and parent–child relations in a sample of 171 adolescents. Results revealed interparental conflict was related to higher levels of adolescents’ triangulation, feelings of threat, blame, and lower levels of coping efficacy. Adolescents reported the highest levels of triangulation in families with intense, frequent, and poorly resolved interparental conflict.

There is growing evidence that points to the overlap of high-conflict divorce and parental alienating behaviors such as bad mouthing the other
parent, withholding child access in response to interparental conflict, poor parent–child boundaries, and making the child feel guilty or afraid of visiting the other parent. Although parental alienation occurs in high-conflict situations, not all high-conflict cases involve alienation (Fidler, Bala, & Saini, 2013).

**Domestic violence**

In the past decade, the literature has moved toward differentiating high conflict from intimate partner violence (IPV; Jaffe, Crooks, & Bala, 2009; Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, & Bala, 2008; Johnston, 2006). Although research has found some overlap wherein violence or a history of violence can be one factor when describing high-conflict divorce (Dalton, Carbon, & Olsen, 2003; Ehrenberg, 1996; Gilmour, 2004; Johnston, 1997; Sanford & Rowatt, 2004), it is important to distinguish high conflict from IPV. IPV involves a pattern of control, power and coercion, and domination and humiliation through the use of threat, violence or fear of violence, emotional abuse, or other coercive means (Johnston, 2006). IPV is markedly different from high conflict and must be treated as such.

**Time**

Although time might not heal all wounds, in a divorce, time is essential. The literature indicates it takes approximately 2 to 3 years for couples to recover from the initial disruption of divorce, emotionally disengage from each other, and learn new ways to communicate and coparent effectively (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

**Financial concerns**

Ongoing connections to the other parent due to economic ties have been found to be a factor for the potential of high conflict (Fischer et al., 2005). Conflict can also be based on how parents deal with the division of finances after separation, including issues of child support, division of property, and other shared monetary responsibilities. These conflicts can be further fueled based on the parents’ level of income disparity.

In Bonach’s (2005) study of 135 respondents, conflicts were related to the connection between access to the child by the noncustodial parent and the payment of child support. Specifically, results showed that satisfaction with child support arrangements was one of the strongest predictors of the quality of the coparenting relationship postdivorce and parent–child contact, particularly a father’s contact (Amato, 2010). Similarly, Hutson (2007) found that the average amount of child support received in a month among low-income families was related to coparent conflict during transitions. In high-conflict cases, it is not uncommon for one of the parents or both to be dissatisfied with the financial support arrangements (Drapeau, Gagné, Saint-Jacques, Lépine, & Ivers, 2009; Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999; Madden-Derdich,
The hostility of the divorce proceedings and satisfaction with financial support were found to have indirect effects on the coparental relationship through their direct effects on interparental conflict.

**Exosystem**

Couples form social bonds through common friends and their children. Ex-partners who shared most of their friends and leisure time while together during are generally more dependent on each other than ex-partners who maintained separate social lives while together (Kalmijn & Bernasco, 2001).

Visser et al.’s (2017) study of 136 divorced parents found that higher levels of perceived network disapproval were significantly related to more coparenting conflicts and lower levels of forgiveness. In a second study of 110 high-conflict separated parents referred for clinical intervention, authors also found that higher levels of perceived social network disapproval were significantly related to more coparenting conflicts.

Friedman (2004) argued that conflict is embedded in and encouraged by the larger system, including extended family and friends, support groups with their own political agenda, therapists, and attorneys within the adversarial legal process. Johnston and Roseby (1997, 2009) used the terms *tribal warfare* and *cheerleaders* to describe how parents draw their larger social network, including extended family, significant others, new partners, professionals, and mental health professionals into the conflict to entrench their own political agendas. The entrenchment of professionals into the conflict further contributes to the impasse and parental conflict.

**Macrosystem: legal (read adversarial) systems and power differentials**

**Structure of legal system**

Conflict played out in the courtroom could be fueled by the adversarial nature of the legal system and by the procedures and practices of attorneys who serve as its functionaries. Within the organizational social system, the legal system can reinforce or exacerbate high conflict via the requirement of filing affidavits in support of their application and parenting plan requests. Kelly and Emery (2013) cite that the legal adversarial process dictates positional and dichotomous thinking about parental deficiencies and discourages communication and cooperation between parents regarding their children’s needs. Similarly, Bonach (2005) found that less hostile legal proceedings were one of the strongest predictors of a better quality coparenting relationship.

High-conflict parents are identified by high rates of litigation and relitigation (Goodman et al., 2004; Johnston, 1997), appealing decisions, frequent requests to vary orders, and enforcement actions for noncompliance with court orders (Goodman et al., 2004).
The term *entrenched litigation* generally refers to court proceedings that remain unresolved despite the passage of time and where parents are unwilling or unable to come to agreement (Nowlin, 2006). Contested issues might include the child’s residential schedule, disputes over major decisions, spousal and child support contributions, and how money is spent on the child, among others (Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). Whereas Emery (1994) suggested that hostile divorce proceedings are an indication of unresolved emotional issues related to the termination of the marital relationship, from the macro perspective, it is the limitation of the family court system to appropriately respond to the emotional turmoil experienced by these parents. In other words, the limitations of the judicial process to solve family problems (e.g., adversarial nature of the court, the use of emotionally harmful affidavits, court delays, etc.) often facilitate or exacerbate high conflict.

Baum (2003) randomly selected 100 divorced parents (50 couples) from the registers of the social service departments of several cities in the central region of Israel and found that higher levels of conflict were associated with more difficult legal proceedings and the parents were involved in litigation longer than low-conflict parents. In a comparison of 71 families randomly assigned to either divorce mediation or traditional litigation to resolve their custody disputes, Sbarra et al. (2005) reported that litigation participants reported more conflict at the follow-up. High-conflict parents have less control over settlement negotiations (Bay & Braver, 1990) and are generally less content with the court process (Hopper, 2001).

**Religion and culture**

Religious and cultural differences can manifest themselves into high-conflict situations, which are particularly difficult for mental health and legal professionals to help resolve given that there are no singular answers to these conflicts and often no consensus on how the system should deal with deeply rooted differences in religion and culture within the context of separation and divorce (Elrod, 2001; Yeager, 2009)

**Police, child protection, and involvement of other social services**

Police and child protection services are commonly involved with the high-conflict population at the organizational social system level (Houston, Bala, & Saini, 2017). Allegations of child maltreatment in the context of high-conflict child custody disputes are common (Johnston, Lee, Olesen, & Walters, 2005; Saini et al., 2012; Trocmé & Bala, 2005). Without early identification and appropriate interventions for this vulnerable population, child protection services run the risk of causing further harm to families by
causing high-conflict families to fall into the proverbial cracks of the social service system by not adequately responding to the emotional harm of children caught in high-conflict situations (Saini, Black, Fallon, & Marshall, 2013; Saini et al., 2012).

**Consequences of high conflict**

Given the strong link of high conflict and negative emotional and psychological adjustment in children, one must consider the impact high conflict has on children and their families. High conflict can affect parents’ emotional and psychological well-being, create parenting problems, limit parents’ ability to be attuned to their children, and affect the parent–child relationship.

Evidence is clear that children from couples who are engaged in separations with high levels of conflict can suffer from long-lasting implications on their psychosocial adjustment (Lansford, 2009). Although children whose parents divorce might be better off than those children whose parents stay together in a high-conflict marriage, the impacts of a high-conflict divorce are significant (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001). Amato (2001) found that children who lived in divorced high-conflict families had similar outcomes as those who were in high-conflict intact families.

Research into the adjustment of children after divorce has shown that parental conflict is the most significant predictor of a child’s well-being following divorce (Amato, 2010; Amato & Keith, 1991; Vareschi & Bursik, 2005). Moreover, the frequency and intensity of the conflict greatly influences the child’s well-being. Couples with frequent conflict show that their children exhibit more problematic behaviors (both internalizing and externalizing; Amato, 2005; Amato & Keith, 1991; Vareschi & Bursik, 2005). Research has shown the best adjustment of children involves parents who exhibit cooperative and nurturing behaviors during their divorce, both to one another and toward their children (Vareschi & Bursik, 2005).

**Parenting problems**

Scholars have suggested that hostility and preoccupation are prominent emotional reactions between high-conflict parents. In Hetherington and Kelly’s (2002) study of nearly 1,400 families and more than 2,500 children, divorced parents were generally less competent in their parenting than parents in nondivorced families. When parents are caught in high conflict, their focused attention toward the conflict can debilitate their overall parent functioning, thereby making them less able to protect their children from the conflict (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000).

Sandler et al. (2008) found that the level of conflict between the parents and the warmth of the relationship of each parent helped to distinguish
children’s levels of internalizing problems, whereby children who did not receive warmth from either parent had the highest level of internalizing problems. Children with at least one parent who provided warmth had lower levels of internalizing problems, even if they had a negative relationship with the other parent. This “compensation effect” suggests that a warm relationship with at least one parent can compensate for the lack of a warm relationship with the other parent (Sandler et al., 2008). Children had the lowest internalizing problems when they had positive and warm relationships with both parents, suggesting that children do best when their parents are able to protect them from conflict and meet their needs for warmth, attention, affection, support, and affirming parent–child relationships (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Booth, Scott, & King, 2010; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001).

Strained parent–child relationships

There is substantial evidence that high-conflict divorce negatively influences parent–child relationships (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Amato & Rezac, 1994; Buchanan et al., 1991; Camara & Resnick, 1988, 1989; Emery, 1982; Kline et al., 1991; Long, Slater, Forehand, & Fauber, 1988). Being placed in the middle can result in feelings of anxiety, distress, and loyalty conflicts between the parents. It can also affect the parent–child relationship and facilitate the formation of alliances (Buchanan et al., 1991; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Child maladjustment

High conflict has been linked to children’s maladjustment due to the negative effects of chronic high conflict on children as they experience feelings of chronic stress, insecurity, and agitation (Davies & Cummings, 1994); shame, self-blame, and guilt (Grych & Fincham, 1992); a chronic sense of helplessness (Davies & Cummings, 1994); fears for their own physical safety (Davies & Cummings, 1994); and a sense of rejection, neglect, unresponsiveness, and lack of interest in their well-being (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Fantuzzo et al., 1991; Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990; Johnston, 1995). Other problems might include poor academic achievement; poor social relationships; conduct and social difficulties; emotional difficulties such as depression, fear, anxiety, and substance abuse; and poor adult relationships (Brandon, 2006; Faircloth & Cummings, 2008; Grych, 2005; Lindsey, Colwell, Frabutt, & MacKinnon-Lewis, 2006).
Discussion

A comprehensive view of high conflict

By reviewing and analyzing the high-conflict literature and positioning it within an ecological transactional model, it is evident that high conflict is not situated in any one particular system, but rather is a complex, multifaceted integration of several systems surrounding the family, the former couple, and the children. As such, no one definition offers the panacea that embodies all aspects of the complexity of conflict and no one specific factor provides greater insight into the development of high conflict over others. Rather, a multifaceted definition of high conflict should include a variety of typologies and dimensions of high conflict depending on the system identified as the locus of the conflict. Using an ecological transactional model, this review provides the basis for understanding the risk factors and indicators within a comprehensive framework.

Limitations

Studies included in this review have several methodological flaws that limit the generalizability of the results across diverse populations. There is a tendency in the literature to oversample previously married heterosexual couples or not specify the status of the previous couple relationship. The heterogeneity of previous relationship status among separated parents requires further attention to uncover potential unique factors for never-married relationships, common-law relationships, and same-sex relationships, among others. Separated families are a heterogeneous group, yet many studies fail to control for demographic data, such as the child’s age at separation, the child’s gender, socioeconomic status of both parents following separation, cultural and religious factors, the parents’ level of education, and current marital status. The literature on high conflict is further limited by the absence of control groups to compare findings to matched intact families. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether factors found to be related to high conflict are unique to the divorced populations. As well, after review of the current state of the literature, it was noticed that high conflict has been studied and examined as an independent variable used to predict other factors, such as a child's emotional well-being (e.g., mental health, academic performance, etc.). Therefore, there remains a lack of evidence that considers high conflict as the dependent variable in attempt to identify factors that predict the presence and severity of high conflict among separating and divorcing couples.
**Need for comprehensive assessment and measures for high conflict**

Legal and mental health professionals working with the high-conflict population should familiarize themselves with the interacting systems that frame and exacerbate high conflict. Positioning high conflict within an ecological transactional model provides professionals in the field with a more systematic method to assess the conflict, the various factors at play, and their interactions critical for a comprehensive understanding. Identification of risk factors or indicators among several systems provides professionals with several points of entry for treatment and intervention to occur to achieve optimum success. To have a more robust understanding of the ecology of the conflict, mental health practitioners involved with high-conflict families should consider exploring these questions:

1. How long has the family been in litigation?
2. If the family is still involved in litigation, what are the issues in dispute?
3. What role do extended family or new relationships have in the conflict?
4. If other professionals are involved, what role do they have in the conflict (e.g., negative advocate, cheerleader)?
5. How do each parent’s attachment style, personality, or characterological traits contribute to the conflict and coparental relationship?
6. How does the conflict affect the parent–child relationship due to comprised parenting or overall parental well-being?
7. What is the impact of the families’ culture or religion on the conflict?

Exploring these questions during the course of an assessment can assist practitioners in providing tailored and more effective treatment interventions or recommendations for high-conflict families in need.

**Need for coordinated services**

Based on the review of the research, it is evident that the presence of high conflict or facets of conflict are seldom encountered exclusively in one system; rather, multiple systems are often at play. Consequently, no one specific intervention exists that can address all of the factors identified in this review. It is recommended that professionals who engage with high-conflict families commence by determining the multiple systems and factors that could be contributing to the perpetuation of the conflict. Following the identification of the systems at play, professionals should consider the various treatment modalities available to help resolve the conflict. Rather than an all-encompassing treatment approach for children and high-conflict
families, legal and mental health professionals should consider various services that focus on different systems. Treatment options might include the following:

(1) Individual counselling (for both parents and the children).
(2) Specialized counselling (e.g., counselling specifically focusing on anger management, substance use, mental health, parenting, etc.).
(3) Coparent counseling to help develop a disengaged, yet cooperative coparent relationship.
(4) Parent education programs.
(5) Family counseling, particularly in cases where strained parent–child relations are present.
(6) Dispute resolution mechanisms.

Due to the complexity of these high-conflict cases, coordinated services among service providers are strongly recommended. Coordinated services help prevent treatment providers from working in silos and inadvertently contributing to the conflict. In other cases, coordinated services can help shine light on other potential factors at play, which might require changes to the treatment approach as a whole. As such, having a team lead or case manager, such as a parent coordinator, with open communication and exchange of information between professionals to coordinate service or consolidate treatment gains is likely to garner the most success.

**Future research**

This study provided a framework for understanding the complexity of high-conflict divorce and separation. Future research should build on the knowledge gained from this study by testing the relevance of the findings to specific populations. More emphasis is needed on the heterogeneous populations experiencing conflict, including differences in culture, marital status, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Research is needed to explore unique differences to examine these findings in the context of separated, never-married parent relationships and separated same-sex parent dyads.

The majority of studies included court-based samples, including parents who were entrenched in litigation. Further research is needed to explore findings and potential differences among other high-risk groups, such as parents involved in community-based programs, clinical populations, and those involved in child protection settings.

Further, given the voluminous amount of literature in the area of high conflict, researchers should consider using explicit, systematic, and comprehensive methods for conducting review of the evidence, thus moving away
from nonsystematic literature reviews. There are now several established
guidelines and best practices for conducting systematic review of the litera-
ture to guide this endeavor (see, e.g., Paterson, Thorne, Canam, & Jillings, 2001).

Finally, although a number of measures have been used to measure
conflict, many have been developed exclusively for research purposes. More
research is needed to empirically validate these measures to distinguish the
level and severity of interparental conflict so parents can be referred to the
most appropriate intervention modalities based on the factors related to
conflict.

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