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Disrupting Post-Separation Parental Conflict: The Role of Critical Reflection in Conflict Resolution

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Abstract

Persistent interparental conflict lasting two or more years after separation is a phenomenon that has been difficult to understand and manage professionally. Research has found that parental capacity is dramatically reduced due to engagement with the legal system, and ultimately, there are developmental consequences for children that may endure across their life course. Despite the plethora of studies and resources dedicated to the study of persistent parental conflict, there are very few studies involving parents with a lived experience, as the research to date is predominantly comprised of outsider commentary. This paper presents a critical reflection of a lived experience of persistent interparental conflict utilizing Jan Fook's (2023) critical incident model. The data for this research is drawn from the analysis of critical incidents - narrative accounts provided by practitioners reflecting on significant events. Here, these accounts reveal how discourses (legal, medical, familial) shape assumptions driving persistent conflict, and illustrate how participation in oppressive systems is misaligned with the best interests of families. The paper's findings outline how parents can recognize and navigate the discursive influences shaping their conflict, thereby enhancing cooperative co-parenting. Societal discourses perpetuating these conflicts are explored, highlighting the need for systemic change. Finally, restorative approaches prioritizing relationships and advocating for broad participation and empathetic understandings, including the need for solutions that genuinely uphold children's best interests, are highlighted.

Keywords: Co-parenting, Critical Reflection, Family Law, Persistent Postseparation Parental Conflict, Qualitative Research, Restorative approaches

Introduction

Parental separation can be a profoundly challenging experience for children and parents, especially if interparental conflict persists [1-3]. In Australia, the responsibility of managing post separation family disputes falls within the domain of family dispute resolution (FDR) practitioners, necessitating families to mediate before seeking a judicial determination from the family court [4]. Many FDR practitioners are social workers who work with families to make agreements as "co-parents" for their children's ongoing care, when it is safe to do so, and many families engage in this process and avoid litigation. However, for some families, despite attempts at mediation, counselling, or court-ordered services, interparental conflict can persist, sometimes years after separation [5]. This is significant because persistent parental conflict is complicated to manage professionally, can impair parental capacity, and can lead to developmental problems for children over their life course [5].

The challenges of navigating the postseparation space are well documented by social work/psychology literature, and it is not surprising that conflict does persist [5-7]. Parents are expected to navigate their recovery from losses and successfully transition into a co-parenting role, where they continue to share responsibility for the upbringing of their children [7]. Co-parenting is said to be successful when parents prioritize their child's needs over conflict, can consider each other's strengths and limitations, respect each other's right to be in the child's life and the responsibilities that brings, and manage their disagreements – including being able to self-soothe [8]. In contrast, parents involved in persistent conflict find cooperating difficult due to high levels of mistrust and ongoing communication problems shaped by hostility and anger and characterized by recurrent legal disputes [8]. Amidst these dynamics, and despite evidence that fathers independently contribute to their child(ren)'s wellbeing and development, their roles are often underrepresented in parenting research, as Cabrera et al. [9] highlight. As those authors note, this underrepresentation is also evident in post-separation literature, where a focus on mothers as primary caregivers, and fathers as economic providers sideline their contributions.

Amidst the extensive body of literature addressing persistent interparental conflict, a unified understanding or approach to this phenomenon remains elusive. The term encompasses various situations that exhibit some overlap but also diverge significantly [5]. Consequently, the lack of a unified framework challenges child

welfare social workers and the justice system alike. In addition, there is a scarcity of literature exploring the meaning-making processes of separated parents based on lived experiences [6]. Discussions on policy, research, and interventions following separation frequently rely on external perspectives, where separated parents are either discussed, debated, or spoken for by outsiders [8]. Consequently, the voices and lived experiences of separated parents often become obscured in this narrative, a knowledge gap this research addresses, while advocating critical reflection as a method for social workers to effectively disrupt and transform harmful dynamics in persistent parental conflict, thereby improving co-parenting relationships.

Persistent Interparental Conflict

Interparental conflict frequently arises among separating or divorcing parents, stemming from disputes over property/possessions and, most prominently, disagreements concerning child contact [1, 5, 10]. While most conflicts tend to settle after a period of psychological adjustment, for some families, this will extend beyond two years in what is considered persistent conflict [5]. Regardless of the reasons for the initial conflict, as hostilities intensify, the disputes are often characterized by high litigation rates and involvement of the legal system to regain perceived losses, resulting in pervasive mistrust and criticism of each other's behavior and approaches to parenting [1].

The separation process is typically marked by a period of mourning, which is necessary for healthy psychological adjustment [11]. This experience is unique for each individual, and differences in coping strategies and context can mean that some parents struggle to accept the changing circumstances. Smyth and Moloney [12] describe this need for staying connected to the relationship as a form of "negative attachment", where hostile exchanges and destructive forms of communication define their relationship. An example of this is Gottman's [13] research on destructive ways of engaging in relationship conflict [14], which he describes as - criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Dialogue is hampered when parents interpret comments as a "criticism" and respond "defensively" or with "contempt" rather than engage in healthier enquiry forms. Conversely, they may "stonewall" and shut down any further attempts at appropriately engaging in the conflict, increasing the potential to turn co-parenting interactions into a hostile battlefield steeped in shame.

The damaging effects of exposure to persistent interparental conflict are far-reaching for both children and parents alike [1, 7]. Unfortunately, many parental relationships never recover from this experience [5]. Stress generated through financial insecurity and the emotional impact of recovering from loss is compounded by constant exposure to a hostile environment [15]. Physiologically, constant exposure can trigger chronic inflammatory and stress responses in an individual's organs and cardiovascular system [16], and emotional effects such as anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbance issues have been widely described [17]. However, the most profound impact is often seen in the developmental consequences for children, leading to behavioral, social and emotional outcomes across their lifespan [1, 2, 5, 18]. There is also a greater risk for children living with persistent interparental conflict to come to the attention of statutory child protective services, particularly if the parents have engaged with the legal system [19].

Engaging with the Family Court

Motivations for parents seeking a judicial resolution of their dispute are based on how they have constructed their parental relationship postseparation and their feelings of justice/injustice [6]. Stolnicu et al. [8] found that the feelings of injustice may stem from the breakdown of the marriage/relationship and the yearning to relieve the discomfort they feel from sitting in the conflict. They believe that engaging the court will end the conflict and give them justice and the relief they seek. When this does not occur, feelings of further injustice can lead to judicial escalation, which can be inflamed or calmed by lawyers depending on their skill level or ethical position.

Rather than resolve the conflict, the legal system's adversarial nature, lawyer's behavior, and the court's procedures serve to escalate and prolong disputes [10, 20, 21]. Within the family legal system, specific practices (e.g., legal strategies such as positioning, depersonalizing, name-calling, blaming and accusing), discursive technologies, and structured procedural systems must be adhered to for matters to be heard by the court [21]. One example of a discursive technology is the affidavit, which parties employ to enter evidence. Although affidavits are meant to comprise sworn written testimony to promote a shared understanding of the context at hand, the professional strategies employed by legal practitioners often act "to move the parties away from a shared understanding and resolution to the problem by claiming ownership and objectifying (alienating) the other party" [20].

The aftermath of a judicial decision can sometimes leave a parent feeling wronged, which may lead to a hardening of their stance and decision-making, often as a means of retaliation. In this way, the parent uses the judge's decision to justify inflexibility in the co-parenting relationship [8]. The legal rights-based approaches to parenting are also influenced by Father's Rights Groups (FRGs). Jordan [22] argues that FRGs claim that family violence is gender-neutral and "draw on men's rights narratives in claiming that the state and society are dominated by a feminist agenda that marginalizes men" (p. 85). This is despite evidence from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [23], which shows women are disproportionately victimized by physical violence, sexual violence, emotional abuse, and threats of assault. Indeed, male partners, both past and present, pose the greatest threat in terms of violence perpetrated against women [23]. While positioning their members as "victims" of an unjust system, these groups are desperately trying to affect a return to a socially conservative, patriarchal way of life, wherein the rights of the father take precedence over safety, financial obligations, and positive parenting [24].

In summary, the postseparation context is undeniably complex. This research provides a lived experience example of how participation in dominant discourses (legal, medical, familial) can drive persistent conflict. It further provides a positive contribution to the literature on postseparation parental conflict by illustrating how we participate in our own oppression by surrendering our agency to systems (such as the legal system) that set us up to fail. In addition, the research offers an example of how to disrupt ongoing conflict post-separation, by offering alternatives for engaging proactively in conflict.

Approach

Critical Reflection as a Research Method

Critical reflection has traditionally been considered a teaching [25, 26] or professional development tool [27] and more recently used as a research method to identify and challenge dichotomous and hegemonic assumptions relating to power and identity [27, 28]. As Morley [28] notes, the method can be characterized as a process of self-reflection on the formation of internalized dialogue, which can subsequently be deconstructed, challenged, and reconstructed to inductively generate new theories and free us from restrictive ways of knowing. This method engages not only at the level of "self", but also attending to the dominant structural and cultural influences shaping experiences through reflective questioning. By employing critical reflection in qualitative inquiry [28], researchers and practitioners can recognize how they may have engaged in power dynamics and enable them to resist their unwitting participation in oppressive discursive constructions such as patriarchy or capitalism [26], or those that may be influencing persistent conflict.

Methodology

This study's primary research question is: *How can critical reflection build the agency of parents to engage positively in conflict after separation?*

In responding to this question, Author One presents his critical reflection from a parent's perspective of a persistently conflictual co-parenting relationship and as a student undertaking his Honor's research. Author Two is an educator/supervisor of the Honor's research and an FDR practitioner. Both authors have backgrounds in social work.

Subsidiary questions include (in line with Fook's [26] framework):

1. What assumptions contribute to participation in traditional, dominant approaches to parenting disputes?

2. How did I construct my identity as partner/father and how did this contribute to the ongoing conflict?

3. How did binary oppositional ways of thinking shape the conflict and what alternatives for action were generated after the binaries were dismantled?

4. How has reconstructing this experience led to better outcomes for our son and what learnings can be found for others in ongoing conflict?

This study employs critical reflection as an exploratory method of inquiry to scrutinize the above research questions. The method invites participants to recognize implicit assumptions shaped by discursive influences, highlighting dichotomous and linear ways of thinking, which may result in unwitting participation in one's own subjugation [28]. A critically reflective research method is informed by a comprehensive amalgamation of post-structural theories, critical theories, pedagogic frameworks, and reflexive practices, including the ability to empower participants through developing alternatives for action [25, 29]. As a research methodology, critical reflection has the capacity to "change the way people understand and construct their social worlds and their place within it" [28], by challenging the basis of those constructions and highlighting personal agency. While similar to auto-ethnographic approaches, a critically reflective methodology instead emphasizes the evaluation and transformation of personal and professional practices through deep scrutiny of one's own assumptions and biases [26, 28,29].

The primary author employs the critical incident method, outlined by Fook [26], as a research method [28] in his Honor's research to disrupt the persistent conflict he was engaged within and transform his co-parenting relationship. The second author supervised the research, facilitated and prompted reflective questioning, identified emergent themes, and guided discussions on the findings and contributions to social work knowledge and practice, thereby providing "a more comprehensive and holistic analysis given that critical reflection relies to some degree on the generation of multiple perspectives" [28]. This collaborative process ensured that the analysis remained rigorous and critically focused.

As employed here, Fook's [26] method occurs over three stages: the construction, the deconstruction, and the reconstruction. Step one necessitates the selection of a critical incident, which is a construction of an event from Author One's experience. In the second step, Author One is tasked with situating the "self" as the research topic and *deconstructing* his critical incident, by exposing his narrative to a series of critically deconstructive questions posed by Author Two. The goal of step two was to expose the impacts of implicit assumptions shaping his postseparation conflict and consider how participation in discourses may have perpetuated existing power hierarchies, which ultimately worked against his best interests. Following, as part of step three Author One's incident is *reconstructed*, allowing him to resist the dominant discourses shaping his engagement in harmful forms of conflict and enabling alternative ways of respectfully "staying with" conflict to be considered [30]. As per Fook's framework [26], the reconstruction is similarly facilitated by way of critical questioning, with the goal of emphasizing any marginal or suppressed perspectives towards a transformative, reconceptualized appreciation [26], which held significant benefits for Author One and his family.

Ethics approval was deemed unnecessary due to the self-reflective nature of this paper, which addresses conflict in a generic context.

Limitations

A limitation of employing critical reflection as a methodology is its inherently subjective nature and its reliance on the specific contexts in which it is applied. The findings of this research are deeply rooted in my own experiences as a divorced father navigating post-separation co-parenting challenges. These insights, while valuable, are not universally applicable or easily replicable by other researchers. Therefore, this study does not aim to produce a generalized "how-to" guide for practice within family law contexts.

Critical Incident

At the time of writing, I did not have any pre-formed analysis in mind. The reflective process involved revisiting the experience without preconceived interpretations, allowing the deconstruction phase to shape my understanding. This ensured transparency, as the analysis emerged organically through the deconstruction and reconstruction, rather than being influenced by prior conclusions.

As a separated father and co-parent, I gained firsthand exposure to a comprehensive array of family court processes, including mediation, family report writers, and litigious law firms over eight years. The resultant social, financial, emotional, and psychological burdens of attending to these processes mirror those described in the literature. This critical incident is chosen to explore and expose dominant discourses that guided my beliefs and actions at the time, as they likely perpetuated a conflict that worked against the best interests of my former spouse, our child, and myself.

Following the initial exhilaration of welcoming our son into the world, my relationship with my wife unexpectedly deteriorated. Our relationship had not historically been conflictual. Although my wife's pregnancy had been challenging, I was not prepared for our parenting relationship to be this way. Being a new parent was confusing and frustrating and I remember distinctly feeling of little significance to my child (who was breast-fed). The conflict continued to build over the months, but friends had assured me it was the "baby blues" and that things would "settle" with time.

By the time my own parents visited from Canada a few months later, our home was not a welcoming place for them. Conscious of not provoking conflict, they spent much less time with their grandson than intended. Not long after their departure my wife moved out of our family home with our son and ceased communicating with me. I was devastated, and not knowing when or how I would see my son inevitably led to further conflict.

What followed was a profoundly contentious eight-year child contact dispute. During this time, my legal representative handled most inter-party communication, planned statements and affidavits, and organized all matters pertaining to attendance upon family report writers, mediators, and court. As the matter slowly progressed, I became cognizant of the approach's increasing damage to my co-parenting relationship, yet I maintained the employment of my family law representative to resolve the matter promptly. However, as became evident, pursuing the litigious approach did not expedite resolution, but emboldened and perpetuated our conflict.

This paper is an exploration of dominant discourses that shaped Author one's assumptions and fueled the entrenched conflict.

Although there is mention of a third party (ex-spouse) there is no commentary on their behavior as the author takes full responsibility for his thoughts and actions.

Findings

The dominant discourses shaping engagement in the conflict were identified as:

•   Biomedical discourses shaping explanations of childbirth

•   Gendered discourses of parenting

•   Legal rational discourses shaping parenting arrangements

Analysis

Theme One: The Influence of Biomedical Discourses

This theme examines the influence of dominant biomedical discourses that characterize "the birthing body as a site of unpredictability, loss of control and risk" while concurrently pathologizing normal emotional responses to childbirth [31]. It also highlights how implicit assumptions influenced the conflict and prevented a deeper understanding of my former spouse's lived experience. The reconstructive section uncovers alternative strategies that enable healthier relationship dynamics.

Deconstruction questions:

•   Why did you assume things would "settle", i.e., what discourse shaped this belief?

•   How did you construct your parenting work in a binary way (normal vs abnormal) and how did this construction contribute to the conflict?

Conceivably, I assumed matters would "settle" because I believed postpartum blues/baby blues were a "normal" part of the child-birthing experience and would self-correct with time as hormones rebalanced. Consequently, by normalizing my former spouse's distress through a biomedical discourse (depression/anxiety) and assuming it to be transient in nature, I created a profound barrier to true understanding, a more compassionate response, and/or help-seeking.

Assuming my wife's emotional responses were entirely due to hormonal imbalances (discursively considered, "that's the hormones talking"), I began to see her as disembodied from her former self as she was now just a "sum of her hormones" rather than trying to connect with her on a deeper level. Resultantly, I was not able to comprehend her struggle, as I did not listen to her position, influenced as I was by biomedical explanations of mothering and childbirth. I did not listen to what it was she really needed.

Without realizing, I had also constructed an intangible timeline of when things should return to "normal", based on biomedical discourses. This influenced the way I engaged in conflict. For example, using Gottman's [13] work on harmful forms of conflict – criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling - I heard her comments to me as criticism (rather, her "hormones" were critiquing my parenting) and then engaged in defensiveness and stonewalling. Invariably, this behavior closed down rather than opened up the conversations we needed to have.

Reconstruction question:

•   How would recognizing the discursive influences and breaking apart the normal/abnormal binary enable you to engage differently?

Had I instead focused on the subjective lived experience [32] of my wife's postpartum reality, a more considered, compassionate response could have been realized. Resisting biomedical discourses would have allowed me to see my wife as also in a place of "unknowing" as parenthood was unfolding upon us as partners rather than combatants. This could have led to a conversation about my wife's wellbeing rather than thinking things would return to "normal". In retrospect, numerous opportunities presented themselves for inquiring about her wellbeing and collaboratively building upon existing strengths to enhance this.

The ways I engaged in conflict would also have changed. While conflict in relationships may be seen as unavoidable, the pivotal factor lies in how parties choose to *manage* said conflict [33]. Again, drawing on Gottman's [13] work, had I not heard my wife's comments as "criticism", a deeper connecting conversation could have eventuated. I would have replied with curiosity rather than contempt. This would have enabled us to build a parenting relationship (a new "normal") and acknowledge gains and losses that were not anticipated before our son's birth. Likewise, compromises could have been reached if defensiveness had been supplemented with taking responsibility for one's part in conflict creation [14]. Finally, had I engaged in psychological self-soothing rather than stonewalling, issues could have been discussed openly, honesty, and respectfully [8].

Theme Two: Gendered Discourses Relating to Parenting

Despite shifts in employment practices, societal policies, and various initiatives, deeply ingrained societal norms around gender-specific roles in caregiving and parenting persist, along with typified socially sanctioned expectations on gendered emotional expression [34]. This theme explores how adherence to such ideals can contribute to conflict escalation. The reconstruction highlights the advantageous possibilities of implementing alternative approaches after releasing binary thinking.

Deconstruction questions:

•   What were your assumptions about parenting?

•   How did you construct your identity as a "father"?

•   What fears did you hold about parenting your son and how were they shaped by patriarchal discourses?

As a sole male child, I presumed that our son would eventually need me more than his mother for socialization purposes – to provide generativity and positive, masculine ways of being, doing, and knowing. I, therefore, assumed my role was of greater import than hers. In doing so, I reinscribed patriarchal discourses in masculine/feminine parental care. This, of course, was just my construction shaped by masculine discourses, as the literature clearly shows that "children raised in two-mother families do equally as well as those raised by two heterosexual parents" [35].

I constructed my paternal identity in binary terms [26] as that of a "good father" - a man who wants to be heavily involved in the life of their child), not a "bad father" - a disinterested, absent dad. I did not wish my fatherhood to be marked by absence. I assumed that because she left, she would be averse to such an arrangement. I also constructed a narrative that I would be unable to be a "good father" without a 50/50 (or greater) time arrangement. Therefore, the fear of "losing out" and being a "bad father" led me to the only conceivable solution - to fight.

The "fight" ultimately led to contact with FRGs, following the suggestion of a family member. Tantalizingly, FRGs offer an appealing alternative to self-introspection, by instead capitalizing on fabricated notions of male victimization – especially within the domain of the family legal system [36]. Certainly, fathers going through divorce and separation deserve support but by choosing FRG assistance, I opened myself up to an environment that as Flood [24] notes, serves only to "fix men in positions of anger and hostility, rather than helping them to heal". My contact with FRGs further propelled my belief in the appropriateness of a judicial response to my relationship breakdown, fueling an adversarial mindset that deepened my sense of "injustice".

Reconstruction questions:

- If you were to let go of your gendered assumptions, how would that free you up to become the man/father you want to be?
- How would you be able to "self soothe" and let go of the idea of "needing to fight"?

In terms of supports I needed at the time, I should have reached out to a service providing positive masculinity support – I had constructed masculine "fighting" as what I needed as relief for my suffering rather than learning to self-soothe. However, I could not perceive my need for increased, positive, masculine social contact at the time. Instead, I opted to privilege "traditional ideals and social norms… [wherein] men are seen as solitary, emotionally restricted individuals capable of remaining healthy without relying on others", much to the detriment of myself and those I cared about [37].

Constructing myself as a "fighting fit father" meant reproducing stereotypical, culturally sanctioned forms of masculinity. Recognizing the damaging effect of hegemonic forms of masculinity, Pease [38] notes "that if men deny their own feelings and pain, they will not be able to acknowledge the pain of others", which holds significant consequences for my professional pursuits and my roles as a parent [39]. As a man enlisting in a caring profession, I am obligated to discard hegemonic forms of masculinity that have disempowered me and prioritize what Victor Seidler [40] refers to as "caring masculinities". For pro-feminist men, such as myself, these compassionate masculinities entail unsettling culturally endorsed, disempowering archetypes by displaying counterhegemonic and emotionally open identities, to prevent perpetuating these harmful narratives to the detriment of society as a whole [38]. To achieve such a transformation, I must dynamically represent it. Certainly, I have the agentic capacity, critical backing, and willpower to do so.

Theme Three: Legal Rational Discourses Shaping Parenting Arrangements

This theme underscores how gendered beliefs and patriarchal discourses influenced our family court involvement. Legal rationality constitutes normative frameworks, and to participate, you need specific knowledge and understanding of the law, which privileges legal argument in legal concepts such as "best interests of the child" [41]. The reconstruction section uncovers strategies to transcend such influences and prioritize a child-centered approach to co-parenting.

Deconstruction questions:

- What assumptions shaped your engagement with the legal system?
- How did the binaries of rational/irrational and legal rights/ relationships manifest in your experience of conflict?

In terms of assumptions, I led myself to believe that my (now) former spouse would be averse to my seeing our son in the way that I believed he needed. Hence, accepting legal advice to force her hand emerged as an appropriate option. I constructed her position as "irrational" and my own as "rational" in the binary of feminine/ masculine responses, for example, stereotypically feminine qualities such as irrationality, emotion, and subjectivity and my own stance guided by hegemonically masculine qualities of rationality, reason, and objectivity [10]. If I constructed her as irrational enough to disallow my parental involvement, I also believed that only the rational power of the court could make her shift.

Hiring a lawyer presented itself as the most favorable method to achieve those ends. Because I sought legal counsel, my former spouse did too. As such, countless hours were spent providing material for litigation and affidavits, reliving and revisiting traumatic events, and defending and attacking simultaneously. In doing so, I constructed our parenting relationship in legal, rather than relational terms. Serving the court, rather than each other [21].

Reconstruction questions:

- How could letting go of harmful masculinist discourses enable you to reach your goals of being integral to your child's life?
- What cultural/systemic changes do we need to make if children's best interests are to be realized?

Had I instead viewed our separation as an ongoing social and emotional process, as opposed to a discrete legal event, I could have prioritized the relationship over the "fight" for justice. While our family law case did not ultimately progress to trial, it was consistently pursued as the likely outcome. Mediation had not shifted the conflict, and I did not believe that it would. Ostensibly, this was a result of selecting and maintaining the employment of a litigious family law firm. Once I let go of the legal battle, everything changed.

If I had laid aside my gendered assumptions, I would have been able to focus on our son's true best interests, namely, working towards relational reparations between myself and his mother. While full reconciliation may not have been possible, I could have chosen a restorative practice approach to manage the conflict, rather than a litigious approach. Although a relatively new concept in Western legal systems, restorative practices focus on restoring the harm done to relationships – a concept that appeals to many separated families. Daicoff [42] describes the benefit of restorative practices as they relate to matters of family law, whereby parents are enabled to listen deeply and respond respectfully to each other. Unlike the traditional, individualized, and adversarial Western justice models, restorative practices promote interpersonal connections and reinforce the importance of working together for the family. When appropriate, children and extended family members involved with their care are invited to participate [42].

Discussion

This paper presents a firsthand account of persistent interparental conflict and how it was disrupted by critical reflection. The commitment to change included disengaging with the legal system and seeking a restorative process to begin to heal from the harm that had resulted from such a weaponized approach to postseparation parenting. The findings from this research highlight the role of discourses (legal, gendered, familial) in driving persistent conflict and the limitations of rational approaches to conflict resolution, which are focused on intervention at the level of individual communication difficulties. While it has been shown that healthy communication is essential to working with conflict [13], it does little to identify the discourses involved in the initial conflict nor build parental agency when conflict persists [43].

The perceived loss of parental agency makes connection with the legal system seem inevitable [8]. This research describes how legal discursive practices are in opposition to the collaboration and empathy required for successful co-parenting and act to intensify the conflict and further erode parental agency. This research should not be read as an insistence that family courts must be avoided. Undeniably, many matters may necessitate judicial oversight, especially when there are safety concerns for women and children arising from domestic violence. Expanding family options would mean embedding restorative practices in the Australian justice system, in line with other Western countries.

Further highlighted in this research are the socio-culturally ingrained, gendered assumptions constituted through biomedical and parenting discourses [44]. This research shows how we participate in these discourses unwittingly, for example the binary way we construct good/bad parenting, and how engagement in these beliefs keeps us connected to an outcome or a "fight" that does not serve us or our children. Entrenched in hegemonic notions of masculinity and furthered by FRGs, such presumptions can compound complexity and perpetuate hostility in an already challenging landscape [45].

Finally, this research has demonstrated that conflict can be generative, "a necessary by-product of change" [46]. Understanding that our contribution to the conflict is in how we construct the situation offers an empowering path forward in that agency exists in the deconstruction and reconstruction of events. Engaging in difficult but mindful conversations means having an awareness of power dynamics and discursive influences and can lead to tangible reductions in stress. Mayer [30] describes this as "staying with conflict" in that we normalize the differences in parenting perspectives and choose to engage in ongoing and respectful conversations about our children. There will never be a point where our conflict is "resolved" as the parenting relationship endures over the life course. Most importantly, there are tangible outcomes for children.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The research presented offers several insights into the field of social work. It underscores the importance of critical reflection as a transformative tool in disrupting persistent interparental conflict and highlights how legal interventions can exacerbate conflict and disempower parents, ultimately undermining the wellbeing of families. Social workers are urged to advocate for restorative approaches that focus on the harm caused by persistent postseparation conflict and truly prioritize outcomes based on children's best interests.

Moreover, the study emphasizes the role of discursive influences in shaping conflict and perpetuating harmful gendered assumptions. Social work practitioners are called upon to challenge these assumptions and engage in mindful conversations that acknowledge power dynamics and discursive influences. By normalizing differences in parenting perspectives and promoting ongoing respectful dialogue, social workers can facilitate tangible reductions in stress and promote positive outcomes for children.

The research also highlights the need for "increased, positive, masculine social contact", instead of FRGs, in the emotionally challenging time postseparation. By recognizing the societal expectations placed on men to remain stoic and the impact of masculine norms on conflict dynamics, social workers can provide tailored support to assist in the identification of and deconstruction of these harmful discourses, as this paper has demonstrated. Social workers could also have a role in connecting men to the self-nurturing and positive social supports that might be required. Overall, the research underscores the transformative potential of critical reflection in reshaping approaches to persistent postseparation parental conflict. It calls upon social work practitioners to advocate for systemic change, challenge harmful discourses, and prioritize the wellbeing of families and children in their practice. By embracing these principles, social workers can play a pivotal role in promoting peaceful co-parenting relationships and mitigating the adverse effects of enduring conflict on families.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the value of this research lies in its demonstration of how critical reflection can disrupt persistent interparental conflict by addressing underlying legal, gendered, and discursive influences that exacerbate conflict and disempower parents. It highlights the limitations of traditional conflict resolution approaches and advocates for restorative practices that focus on healing and collaboration, rather than legal entanglement. For conflict to reach its generative potential, it requires us to engage in critical reflection.

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Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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