

Challenges and dilemmas working with high-conflict families in child protection casework

Cecilie Sudland 

Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Social Work, Child Welfare and Social Policy, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

Correspondence

Cecilie Sudland, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Social Work, Child Welfare and Social Policy, Post Box 4, St. Olavs Plass, Oslo NO 0130, Norway
Email: cecisu@oslomet.no

Abstract

Social workers within child protection services report that families marked by high levels of conflict between separated parents are among the most challenging cases to handle. Few studies however have focussed on how social workers themselves experience and meet with parents involved in hostile martial interactions. This article reports on a qualitative study involving 31 social workers and provides an analysis of their experiences and dilemmas in working with such families. Findings demonstrate that social workers struggle to find ways to help high-conflict families and often find themselves at an impasse. Parents involved in such conflict are highly resistant to change, and social workers struggle to engage with them over concerns about their children. Furthermore, findings suggest that social workers lack organizationally allotted time to assist the parents. I conclude by discussing ways in which emotional support, empowering interventions, and strength-based approaches enable social workers to manage relationships with high-conflict families. More research on this topic is needed to support and promote better practices for social workers to be more effective in assisting high-conflict families.

KEYWORDS

child protection, frozen family cultures, interparental conflict, parental resistance, social workers' communication skills

1 | INTRODUCTION

Many social workers within child protection services (CPS) find their work with children living in families with a high level of conflict between separated parents difficult, exhausting, and frustrating (Jevne & Ulvik, 2012; Saini et al., 2012, 2018). High conflict between parents who have moved apart is characterized by a high degree of anger, hostility, and distrust and by ongoing difficulty between the parents in communicating about the care of their children (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011). Part of what keeps parents in a state of high conflict is their failure to reach a compromise or resolution about the child's

residence, financial support, and daily routines or about methods of child rearing (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011; Gulbrandsen, 2013; Weingarten & Leas, 1987).

When parents are in the process of divorcing in Norway, disagreements regarding parental responsibility and the child's place of residence and contact with each parent are initially handled via mandatory mediation at a local family counselling office,¹ which is part of the country's welfare services (Gulbrandsen & Tjersland, 2017). In predivorce situations, spouses with children under the age of 16 must attend mediation before the separation or divorce can be completed. The family counselling office offers 1 hour of obligatory mediation

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2019 The Authors Child & Family Social Work Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd

and, in the most difficult cases, up to 7 hours of voluntary statutory mediation at no cost to parents. It also provides couples' therapy and individual counselling sessions. Through mediation, parents can negotiate and come to agreements on parental responsibility, custody, and visitation, as well as practical issues in the best interests of the child (Ådnanes, Haugen, Jensberg, Husum, & Rantalaiho, 2011).

The goal of mediation is to settle conflicts, to prepare the ground for good future parental collaboration, and to avoid court resolutions by encouraging parents to take responsibility for the arrangements they make about their child. Divorce is an emotionally challenging process, and in recent years, research has demonstrated the importance of mediators addressing emotional and relational topics, especially when there are high levels of conflict between parents (Gulbrandsen & Tjersland, 2017). Through different empowering interventions, mediators can contribute to conflict resolution, prevent the couples from spiralling downwards into mutual hostility, and prevent situations in which one parent appears as the winner and the other as a loser (Parkinson, 2000; Weingarten & Leas, 1987). When the level of conflict is high, some parents are unlikely to take advantage of traditional counselling services. In addition, studies report that mediators working with high conflict between separating parents experience negative emotional reactions (Lundberg & Moloney, 2010).

Chronic and unresolved conflict between divorced and married parents is associated with negative outcomes for children (Amato, 2010; Bannon, Barle, Mennella, & O'leary, 2018; Buehler, Welsh, & Kazak, 2009; Fosco & Grych, 2010; Rød, 2010). CPS guidelines establish that Norwegian CPS is obligated to investigate and assist families when professionals or parents themselves report marital conflict to be harmful to children's well-being and development or if they report concerns about child neglect and maltreatment in general, thereby necessitating CPS intervention (BLD, 2013). As CPS guidelines state, "The main task of CPS is to ensure that children and young people living under conditions that can harm their health and development receive necessary help at the right time" (BLD, 2013, p. 5).

Social workers in Norway who handle such cases operate in a complex area of two overlapping laws: the Children Act and the Child Welfare Act. In high-conflict cases, the former act establishes the rights and duties of parents pertaining to parental rights, whereas the latter informs social workers of *inter alia* thresholds for intervening in families with the purpose of ensuring children receiving inadequate care. According to the guidelines, CPS employees cannot perform duties assigned to the family counselling offices, such as mediating between parents or determining children's residences or contact arrangements (BLD, 2013). The guidelines establish that the main task of CPS is to investigate how the conflict might affect the child's well-being and whether the family needs CPS support. In such cases, social workers are supposed to educate parents about how interparental conflict may harm the child, help them to focus on the child's needs, and find solutions between themselves to secure the best interest of the child. Even though social workers are not obliged to mediate between parents, the guidelines recommend that CPS provides in-home services to moderate parental conflict. Here, social workers are encouraged to use discretion and creativity in their implementation of an

intervention. Social workers can also recommend that parents cease contact with each other, seek help from a local family counselling office, or testify in custodial court (BLD, 2013).

Thus, an additional challenge for social workers is to define their roles and identify the interventions to be applied. They have also been criticized for failing to deliver adequate support for children exposed to high levels of conflict and for not investigating concerns about abuse, neglect, or inadequate care (Rød, 2010; Rød, Iversen, & Underlid, 2013). Another challenge for social workers is conducting risk assessments of parental conflict and the expected consequences for the child. In diagnosing conflict, studies report that social workers seek to avoid drawing families unnecessarily into the CPS system and to avoid being caught up in one parent's false claims about the other parent (Jevne & Ulvik, 2012). These are challenges for social workers in many countries. For example, Saini et al. (2012, 2018) found that Canadian social workers requested a clearer mandate for the CPS and training to become more skilled in conflict resolution. However, few studies have focussed on how social workers themselves talk about experience and reason about the issue of high conflict levels between parents and how they intervene to help them and their children. Therefore, the research questions guiding this study were how do social workers experience working with high-conflict families and what are their main challenges and dilemmas. Before I engage explicitly with these questions, I will start by providing a general overview of CPS roles and responsibilities and subsequently connect it with social workers' professional knowledge and skills. Understanding child protection practices as products of the interplay between social workers' experience and knowledge framed by the organization they work in is pivotal (Munro, 2018).

1.1 | The aims and challenges of CPS in Norway

In Norway, the aim of CPS is to support the welfare of children and families to prevent abuse and neglect and to protect children from maltreatment (Child Welfare Act, 1992). A strong prevention policy is in place, under which the majority of child protection is carried out via in-home services and voluntary measures to improve the child's situation, such as intensive family support and counselling, in partnership with the family (Skivenes, 2011). The child-centred orientation emphasizes parental responsibilities and children's rights over parental rights (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011). CPS interventions build on a holistic approach and are mainly service-oriented, prioritizing complementary, supportive, and voluntary services with an emphasis on the child and family needs (Skivenes, 2011).

The purpose of the Norwegian social work profession is to help families who face difficulties in life. Ideally, this is implemented through empowering interventions and collaboration with families and prior to deciding how to pursue social casework (Levin, 2004; NOU, 2009). Social workers are expected to start with an analysis of the situation they are faced with (Perlman, 1957). However, studies of the Norwegian CPS as well as similar organizations in other countries show that systemic pressures of the organization influence social

workers' understanding of their professional roles and the way they view client problems (Munro, 2011). Systemic pressures also limit the time available to develop the closeness to the families that is necessary to keep children safe (Ferguson, 2017).

The work of CPS is known to be especially complex (Jansen, 2017). The guidelines state that social workers must be skilled in many different areas. This includes their communication skills and knowledge about how parents react to stressful situations (NOU, 2009). According to CPS guidelines, social workers' ability to perform ethical, use empathy, and act professional in conflict situations is essential. However, the guidelines do not define what communication skills are, and several methods exist side by side within CPS (Jansen, 2017). This means as Forrester, Kershaw, Moss, and Hughes (2008) point out that it is up to social workers and educators to define approaches to achieve effective working partnerships with clients.

2 | METHODS

This article is based on a qualitative study that explores social workers' experiences of CPS interventions and investigation in general, as well as what they considered to be their responsibilities and challenges in the workplace. I recruited participants by emailing 20 different agency managers. Two agency managers, five team managers, and 24 social workers consented to participate. Three participants were males, and two of whom were team managers. The managers supervised social workers, and some of them worked on cases themselves. Half of the practitioners had more than 10 years of experience working in the CPS field, and seven social workers had been employed at the same office for more than 5 years. Twenty eight of them had an educational background in social work, and several had specialized in family therapy, substance abuse, or trauma treatment. Six focus groups and six individual interviews were conducted at the CPS agencies, and each session lasted approximately 70 minutes. The individual interviews were limited to caseworkers. Two focus groups consisted of managers and team managers; one group included a mix of social workers and one agency manager; and three focus groups involved exclusively caseworkers. The research is granted an ethical approval by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data and follows the ethical guidelines for research within the social sciences.

The focus groups and interviews explored different aspects of the participants' views and perspectives in relation to different aspects for their roles, responsibilities, and the challenges they face. All of them were audio-recorded and later transcribed. To contextualize their work (Fog, 1998), I introduced the topic in the opening sessions and asked a series of icebreaker and descriptive questions related to their education and workplace: How long have you been working in this field? What does a normal workday look like? How do you plan your workday? How many social workers are there altogether? In the focus groups, the practitioners compared their experiences and expanded upon each other's ideas and perspectives on working with warring parents. Whereas the focus groups provided broad descriptions of the participants' work and opinions (Morgan, 1997), the interviews

provided deeper insight into their experiences as different topics were discussed. In particular, detailed descriptions of the participants' involvement with separated parents experiencing conflict and their children dominated the focus groups and interviews. Because this topic was so important to the participants, I decided to explore and focus on their descriptions of encounters with this particular type of family.

The analysis process included both open and selective coding, as described by Corbin and Strauss (2015), which involved repeated reading, coding, and classification of the interview transcripts. Throughout the coding process, I was concerned with the interviewees' meaning-making process and how their speech was situated within the structures of social practice (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). More specifically, I focussed on how the participants described their work with warring parents, their use of words and concepts, and the interactions between them within the focus groups. Informed by research from the conflict management literature and strengths-oriented social work, I raised additional analytic questions: How do social workers define their roles? How do they understand parental behaviour? How do they use their communication skills, and in what ways do organizational pressures come into play? The analysis process involved a reduction of the data into four main categories: evaluation of risk and determination of support, how social workers communicate with parents, social workers' emotional reactions, and organizational limitations.

3 | FINDINGS

3.1 | Evaluation of risk and determination of support

In analysing the data, one of the first things that stood out involved the role of CPS and the diffuse organizational relationship between the CPSs and the family counselling offices. Most participants pointed out that CPS had to investigate and assist the families when the family counselling office had failed to mediate between the parents:

In the most extreme cases, where there're still major concerns and after the parents have been through mediation and the family legal system, they can report to CPS.

Overall, it seemed that the social workers faced the most complex cases when the conflict had spiralled into blame and hostility between the parents. Often, the parents had been fighting for many years, and two of the parents told social worker Anna that they regretted having their child. Most parents had already been to mediation at a local family counselling office or had brought their case before the court. Social worker Laura said, "They have been to all the different offices," whereas Anna described the families as "revolving door clients" who had been referred to CPS numerous times. According to the participants, most parents were obsessed with details and disagreed on the child's clothing, delivery times, and more important issues such as holiday arrangements.

Even though 23 of the 31 participants considered parental conflict very harmful to children and believed it was their responsibility to assist the families, these cases seemed to foster uncertainty among them. Especially when the conflict itself appeared to be the main problem, it seemed difficult for social workers to determine the risk of harm and to identify the families who needed support. In one agency, the employees discussed whether they should investigate when the conflict was the main concern, whereas social worker Jill said that they handled these cases “quite rapidly” in terms of short investigations to prevent drawing the families further into the system.

The uncertainty is probably related to the complex relationships between the Children's Act and the Child Welfare Act and the social workers' concept of parenting. In particular, one main challenge appeared to be how they should determine whether the conflict was affecting the parents' psychosocial functioning and parental skills and thereby the child's well-being. Despite the conflict, some parents appeared to be good caregivers for their child, which appeared to challenge social workers' judgements of the parents' behaviour and parental capacity, as well as their assessments of if and how hostile interparental conflict affects the child. Social worker Linda said,

It's difficult to tell which of the parents is better or worse. In some cases, you don't want to take sides, whereas in other cases it's easy to give recommendations if there are substance abuse and other things that can be harmful to children.

Seven social workers had no good answers as to how they should intervene or what kind of help the parents needed. The state guidelines, which encourage social workers to use discretion and creativity in their interventions (BLD, 2013, p. 29), seemed to be unhelpful in these cases. Jill asked, “Should the family therapist help the mother or the father?” On the other hand, Anna said that in one case, she had decided to support the child instead of the parents, helping him express his feelings to his parents. The boy had been exposed to the conflict throughout his life and had frequently been referred to the child protection agency.

3.2 | How social workers communicate with parents

The social workers in this study sought to assume a neutral role while simultaneously trying to contribute to conflict resolution. However, a majority of the participants expressed that it was difficult to assist the parents. Nine of them described the encounters at the agency as tense and said that they could turn into a shouting match driven by the parents' hatred and hurt feelings. They also mentioned that it was challenging to break off the parents' emotional escalation and expressed how demanding it was to be torn between the parents:

We're driven close to insanity at times, going back and forth (referring to the parents' contact agreement). Is it Sunday at five or at twelve or what? That's what it's like at times.

Unlike their work with other types of families described in my transcripts, in which they used empowering interventions by inviting parents to engage in problem resolution, social workers struggled to create what Ferguson (2016) calls a therapeutic space through empathy by supporting, clarifying, containing, and moving on in a therapeutic manner with the parents. Instead, there was a tendency for some social workers, sometimes in their first encounter with the parents, to go straight into promoting preferred courses of action by making recommendations to the parents:

- Lisa I just get straight to the point. How's this harmful for the child? Ask questions about what you want the child to remember at her confirmation. What's the child going to remember when you give your nice speeches about how you handle the life of the child? What do want the child to remember when thinking back on the years growing up?
- Interviewer Mm. How parents influence their children's childhood memories?
- Lisa Yeah, then I remind them. This is what the child will remember. Some weep and are very much in despair.
- Interviewer: Right, but is it your experience that this works?
- Lisa At least it works in the sense that I'm able to hand them the responsibility for it actually being the life of their child that they're dealing with.

To enhance the parents' insight and to make them aware that such conflict is harmful to the children, two social workers confronted the parents about their own unpleasant experiences of being exposed to conflict unfolding at the agency. In one case, Anna told the parents to stop the fight, whereas Kate tried to gain control over the tense situation by telling the parents that she would end the meeting if their battle continued:

- Kate They're not allowed to argue here.
- Interviewer Yeah, what do you say?
- Kate What I've said when they've gone at it, “Now this has escalated.” Then, I've said “You know what, you're not sitting in a government office arguing, are you?” No.
- Interviewer No.
- Kate But you understand ... (referring to the parents' statements). I understand, but we don't argue in here. Then, you should come back for a new appointment when you're not arguing.

In general, it seemed to be a tension between the social workers' advice and the parents' acceptance. As Heather observed, “Parental conflict often overshadows the child's needs.” Charlotte pointed out that parental conflict causes great unease, making it difficult for CPS to assist children. Social worker Eric, who had a family therapy background, stated that parents engaged in such conflict could have a record of past problems, which was necessary to take into account when working with parents engaging in conflict. His work aimed at

helping parents think differently about their situation. Two social workers thought such interventions detracted from the focus on the child's needs and attention to the child in general. Heather stated that she experienced becoming part of the conflict when she explored the parents' perspectives and situations that triggered the conflict. However, she had engaged a family therapist to work in partnership with a family to help the parents work on their communication to dampen the conflict between them. For a year, the therapist alternated between seeing the child and the parents together and separately, which, in this case, seemed to help them communicate and cooperate.

3.3 | Social workers' emotional reactions

Social workers described working with parents involved in intense conflict as particularly challenging. Although five social workers experienced their work as exciting in the beginning, three of them pointed to having a feeling of pessimism and low motivation after a short period of time. Ten social workers stated that being child-focussed and promoting the child's needs were especially demanding in these cases. As team manager, Justin, who supervised caseworkers and worked on cases himself said, "It requires courage to side with the child when the storm is at its peak." Similar to mediators and other social workers within CPS (Lundberg & Moloney, 2010; Saini et al., 2012), the social workers seemed to experience frustration and exasperation. This was related to the parents' actions and attempts to score points against each other. Jennifer said,

Of course, I have first time individual conversations. Then, I usually invite both parents at the same time because I cannot bear to listen to one talking shit about the other. I don't want to waste two hours on that.

In one focus group, social workers joked that they were going crazy, tearing out their hair trying to help the parents to solve their difficulties. Four social workers said they were exhausted, and Jennifer said she felt angry with the parents. As the example below shows, professionals can experience negative emotional reactions when working with warring parents:

- Jennifer I was in a meeting at the family counselling office where the psychologist got so furious so I felt that "Thank God, it's not just me that can get quite mad at these parents."
- Interviewer Yes.
- Jennifer Because she became—You know, she just like (talks in a very loud voice) "You stop right now!"
- Interviewer Yes.
- Jennifer "I'm not stopping you now because I've something to say, but you're just escalating yourselves again and I can't take it."

Intense emotional experiences are unavoidable in child protection cases (Munro, 2009). As observed in other studies (Ferguson, 2016),

the majority of the social workers experienced intense emotions due to their experiences of distress, anger, hope, and despair, as well as the feelings that are projected onto them by the clients. Furthermore, half the participants reported that parents primarily wanted help to change the other parent rather than themselves and that the parents solicited support for their perspectives from CPS. Parents sought support from the social workers mainly to address their concerns about the wrongdoing of the other parent, whereas social workers in my study did not want to take sides. For example, Jill related that they faced difficulties if they discovered parental neglect because the information could potentially fan the flames, allowing the other parent to use the CPS findings to promote his or her perspective. Social workers' fears of being triangulated into the conflict probably kept them more distant in terms of avoiding in-depth work with the parents.

Family system theorists describe triangulation as a psychological and shared process. Triangulation occurs when a third person, such as the social worker or the child, is drawn into the conflict to decrease the tension between the parents. Wang et al. (2017, p. 688) write

Triangulation is a dynamic family process central to family systems theory (Bowen, 1978; Charles, 2001). It is an all-too-common, but a dysfunctional, way for two persons in the family, typically mother and father, to manage their conflicts and tensions by bringing or entangling a third party, often a child, in the process.

Hence, the triangulated third person monitors the distance between the couples by supporting both of them and is eventually caught up in the conflict (Bowen, 1978). Triangulation seems to put the social workers in an especially difficult position during their interactions with the parents because they must balance being empathic listeners with moderating the parents' statements and turn-taking in conversations.

3.4 | Organizational limitations

Organizational limitations seemed to play a central role in social workers' understandings of how they should assist children who are caught in high levels of interparental conflict. The restricted time available for the completion of assessments limited the time available for social workers to have face-to-face encounters with the parents. In almost all the focus groups and interviews, social workers talked about their work conditions and how general work pressure limited their capacity to help families. For instance, Carol described, in the first meeting with warring parents, how she emphasized the formal work procedure, informing parents about the referral and parameters of the investigation, leaving little time to delve into the family's history:

We do have some talks where I'm thinking no, they'll probably never be done talking. We don't have enough time to offer. I cannot be there for four hours listening to daddy talking about the holiday in Turkey again. Yeah, there's this huge need to talk about it.

The cases involved difficult processes of weighing how much time social workers should allot the parents versus the child and how much time they should allocate to the cases in general. As also shown in the previous studies (Saini et al., 2012), my findings indicate that assisting high-conflict families is especially time-consuming and that social workers experienced that parents substantially did not benefit from the CPS interventions. There was also an agreement among them that CPS support should only be maintained as long as it produces results. Four of the agencies determined how long parents should receive support, and there seemed to be a tendency for these cases to be closed when the social workers experienced that CPS support did not promote parental changes. As Heather stated, "We cannot be there forever."

However, Debra pointed out that at her agency, they engaged two family therapists to assist the parents: one focussing on the cooperation between the parents and the other on improving the parent-child relationship. Despite such intensive family support, manager Sophie who supervised caseworkers observed that therapeutic change did not occur:

- Sophie In many of these cases, we have hired family therapists. Skilful, well-educated family therapists with years of experience. But it's difficult to work with split families.
- Interviewer Yes
- Sophie In a way, they get to relieve some pressure at the agency, but the therapists also get caught in the pressure. That one of the parents doesn't want support, because it's the other one who's insane. So if we manage to make them see that. But I think we fall short. So what do we do next? Where do we go from there?

This seemed to be a dilemma for many study participants. Despite their efforts in assisting high-conflict families and their willingness to expend considerable resources, they encountered difficulties in doing so because parents involved in intense conflict seemed to represent what Seltzer and Seltzer (1983) describe as frozen family cultures. In frozen family cultures, the interaction between family members is locked in and characterized by stagnation and inflexibility and is highly resistant to change. Such resistance can be related to the parents' wishing to avoid the pain or their difficulty of changing (Forrester, Westlake, & Glynn, 2012). Research from the mediation field indicates that such work involves parents who come to mediation in a very angry or fragile state (Parkinson, 2000). Carol said,

Many have major inner struggles. At least one of the parents. So it stops itself. You just have to ... it's like that for you, ok. Then we've got to assist the other parent so they can live with it, so the child can live with it. Daddy's like that. What can we do about it?

Eight social workers tried to manage the parents' lack of response to CPS interventions by making threats. In the following example, Kate confronted the parents about their responsibility to change their

actions and told them that the child might be removed if the conflict continued:

We're very clear with the parents. Sometimes it's gone far enough, so I've had to say that if this doesn't get better, the situation for your child is going to be so bad. Then it's possible that we'll have to decide that your child should go to live in a different place to get away from the conflict. Instead, you'll have restrained contact with your child, as the CPS is obliged to let you have. Then you don't have to deal with it. The child won't experience the conflict and gets to live in a pleasant place. That really startles them.

Despite their threats, none of the social workers I interviewed had removed a child from a family due to interparental conflict. For example, Kate stated that the county governor, who audits local activities and instructs and monitors CPS, encouraged social workers to stand by their assessments in their work with high-conflict families.

4 | DISCUSSION

In this article, we have seen how high-conflict cases challenge social workers in different ways, and I have shed light on the difficulties and dilemmas they are faced with. First, my findings revealed that social workers struggle to define whether and how interparental conflict affects parents' parenting abilities and whether conflict itself represents a risk to children's well-being. Dealing with new client groups is challenging for CPS, as social workers struggle to make sense of the parents' actions, by judging them based on social norms and by determining how much of parents' behaviour towards children they should tolerate (Munro, 2008). Second, my findings show that social workers struggle to retain a positive relationship with the parents. As earlier pointed out, CPS guidelines (BLD, 2013) state that social workers should try to make parents attentive to their children's needs by educating parents about how conflict might harm their children. However, parents involved in intense conflict seem to represent distressed families in desperate circumstances, and by not exploring how the parents became vulnerable and what holds their destructive relationships in place (see Featherstone, White, & Morris, 2014), social workers are in danger of making recommendations before the parents are emotionally ready to receive them. As a result, parents are unlikely to acknowledge social workers' interventions.

A key element in positive outcomes is the quality of the relationship developed between the parents who are engaged in conflict and the therapists or social workers (Lundberg & Moloney, 2010). In order for social workers to build trust and succeed in their cooperation, they need communication skills and skilled listening, as well as an awareness of how parents make meaning of their crises (Forrester et al., 2012; Stevens, 2018; Walsh, 2002). Such work involves a holistic approach and supportive services that emphasize family needs and focus on the importance parents attach to their parenting practices. This approach also includes focus on the parents' defence mechanisms as well as focus

on their relationships and intimate lives (Featherstone et al., 2014). Furthermore, this study's findings support the importance for social workers of using long-term supporting and empowering interventions to counter parental resistance and to improve family relationships (Roose, Roetes, & Schiettecat, 2012; Stevens, 2018). Empowering interventions and strength-based approaches highlight professionals' ability to empower parents, build trust, and give positive feedback to overcome parental resistance and to help parents handle future situations more effectively (Forrester et al., 2012; Stevens, 2018). As Neumann (2016) says, social workers are responsible for making the therapeutic relationship with their client function well.

However, my findings show that working with parents engaged in hostile long-lasting conflict is time-consuming and emotionally challenging for social workers and if social workers are not aware of their own thoughts and feelings, they might protect themselves from unbearable feelings by physically and emotionally detaching from those whom they are seeking to help (Ferguson, 2017). Complex situations can disrobe social workers' cognition and fragment thought processes (Ruch, 2007). Therefore, it is important that social workers achieve adequate training and emotional support to help them understand and contain their own emotions and thereby promote clear thinking (Ferguson, 2017; Ruch, 2007). The psychoanalyst Bion (1984) contributed to a theoretical understanding of containment. Containment is a process in which a trustworthy person accepts and processes a person's feelings and returns them in a digestible way that helps them to face, understand, and manage uncertainty and effectively respond in practice (Ruch, 2007). As both Ruch and Ferguson argue, emotionally attuned support can help social workers reflect on negative emotions and transform them into a resource of practice, thereby avoiding unethical social work, as well as emotional exhaustion and burnout (Lundberg & Moloney, 2010; Saini et al., 2018).

5 | CONCLUSION

This study focussed on the interactions that occur between social workers and parents engaged in high-level conflict within the Norwegian CPS. My findings illustrate how parental conflict negatively affects the interaction between social workers and parents. However, social workers' practices in assessing these families should not be dismissed as merely bad practices. I have shown that heavy workloads, a lack of professional knowledge, emotional strain, and organizational constraints prevent many well-intentioned social workers from helping parents to resolve conflict through behavioural change. Hence, these findings provide important knowledge about social workers' experiences and dilemmas working with high-conflict families and suggest how professionals may think and act to facilitate resolution of mutual hostility and conflict between parents. Although there are obvious limitations with regard to generalizing my findings, the knowledge I have accounted for nonetheless contributes to a deeper understanding of the importance of social workers' communication skills and choice of action in their encounters with families in crisis. The study invites more research on how social workers can respond constructively to families' unique needs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to offer my special thanks to the social workers who generously shared their experiences and perspectives for my research. I would also like to extend my thanks to Cecilie Basberg Neumann and Wenche Borgnakke for their guidance and support and to the two reviewers for their careful reading and very helpful suggestions on the manuscript.

ENDNOTE

¹Building on the principle of contractual freedom, the law gives parents the responsibility to come to an agreement. Mediators are supposed to have a neutral role in helping parents to cooperate and negotiate and cannot make decisions on behalf of the parents (the Children Act). According to Official Norwegian Report (NOU, 1998), court resolutions often contribute to conflict spiralling downwards and recommend parents to avoid court resolutions.

ORCID

Cecilie Sudland  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6331-5670>

REFERENCES

- Ådnanes, M., Haugen, G. M. D., Jensberg, H., Husum, T. L., & Rantalaiho, M. (2011). Hva karakteriserer vanskelige saker i foreldremekling, og er meklingsordningen godt nok tilpasset? Resultater fra evaluering av mekling etter ekteskapslov og barnelov. *Fokus på Familien*, 39, 86–115.
- Amato, P. R. (2010). Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 650–666. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00723.x>
- Bannon, S. M., Barle, N., Mennella, M. S., & O'leary, K. D. (2018). Parental conflict and college student functioning: Impact of child involvement in conflict. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 59, 157–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2017.1402654>
- Barne-, likestillings- og inkluderingsdepartementet (BLD) (2013). *Forholdet mellom barnevernloven og barneloven*. Oslo: Barne- likestillings- og inkluderingsdepartementet.
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Bion, W. R. (1984). *Learning from experience*. London: Karnac.
- Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. New York: Arosen.
- Buehler, C., Welsh, D. P., & Kazak, A. E. (2009). A process model of adolescents' triangulation into parents' marital conflict: The role of emotional reactivity. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 23, 167–180. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014976>
- Cashmore, J. A., & Parkinson, P. N. (2011). Reasons for disputes in high conflict families. *Journal of Family Studies*, 17, 186–203. <https://doi.org/10.5172/jfs.2011.17.3.186>
- Charles, R. (2001). Is there any empirical support for Bowen's concept of differentiation of self, triangulation, and fusion? *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 29, 279–292.
- Child Welfare Act. (1992).
- Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. L. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Sage: California.
- Featherstone, B., White, S., & Morris, K. (2014). *Re-imagining child protection: Towards humane social work with families*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Ferguson, H. (2016). What social workers do in performing child protection work: Evidence from research into face-to-face practice. *Child & Family Social Work*, 21, 283–294. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12142>
- Ferguson, H. (2017). How children become invisible in child protection work: Findings from research into day-to-day social work practice.

- British Journal of Social Work*, 47, 1007–1023. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw065>
- Fog, J. (1998). *Med samtalen som utgangspunkt. Det kvalitative forskningsinterview*. København: Akademisk Forlag.
- Forrester, D., Kershaw, S., Moss, H., & Hughes, L. (2008). Communication skills in child protection: How do social workers talk to parents? *Child & Family Social Work*, 13, 41–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2007.00513.x>
- Forrester, D., Westlake, D., & Glynn, G. (2012). Parental resistance and social worker skills: Towards a theory of motivational social work. *Child & Family Social Work*, 17, 118–129. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2012.00837.x>
- Fosco, G. M., & Grych, J. H. (2010). Adolescent triangulation into parental conflicts: Longitudinal implications for appraisals and adolescent-parent relations. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 254–266. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00697.x>
- Gilbert, N., Parton, N., & Skivenes, M. (2011). Changing patterns of responses and emerging orientations. In N. Gilbert, N. Parton, & M. Skivenes (Eds.), *Child protection systems. International trends and orientations* (pp. 243–257). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gulbrandsen, W. (2013). Foreldrekonflikter etter samlivsbrudd: en analyse av samspill og kilder til det fastslående. *Tidsskrift for Norsk psykologforening*, 50, 540–551.
- Gulbrandsen, W., & Tjersland, O. A. (2017). Forskningen på obligatorisk meklings ved samlivsbrudd: Et fremoverrettet tilbakeblikk. *Fokus på Familien*, 01, 6–26.
- Jansen, A. (2017). 'It's so complex!': Understanding the challenges of child protection work as experienced by newly graduated professionals. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 48, 1224–1540. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx127>
- Jevne, K. S., & Ulvik, O. S. (2012). Grensearbeid: Barnevernets møte med foreldrekonfliktsaker. *Fontene Forskning*, 2, 18–32.
- Levin, I. (2004). *Hva er sosialt arbeid*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Lundberg, D., & Moloney, L. (2010). Being in the room: Family dispute resolution practitioners' experience of high conflict family dispute resolution. *Journal of Family Studies*, 16, 209–223. <https://doi.org/10.5172/jfs.16.3.209>
- Morgan, D. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. California: Sage Publications.
- Munro, E. (2008). *Effective child protection*. United Kingdom: Sage Publications.
- Munro, E. (2009). Managing societal and institutional risk in child protection. *Risk Analysis*, 29, 1015–1023. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1539-6924.2009.01204.x>
- Munro, E. (2011). *Munro review of child protection: Final report—A child-centred system*. London: Department for Education.
- Munro, E. (2018). Re-designing organizations to facilitate rights-based practice in child protection. In A. Falch-Eriksen, & E. Backe-Hansen (Eds.), *Human rights in child protection. Implications for professional practice and policy* (pp. 89–110). London: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94800-3>
- Neumann, C. B. (2016). Children's quest for love and professional child protection work: The case of Norway. *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, 15. <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ijsp.2017.08>
- Norges offentlige utredninger (NOU) (1998). *Barnefordelingsaker: Avgjørelsesorgan, saksbehandlingsregler og delt bosted*. Oslo: Barne- og familiedepartementet.
- Norges offentlige utredninger (NOU) (2009). *Kompetanseutvikling i barnevernet*. Oslo: Barne- og likstillingsdepartementet.
- Parkinson, L. (2000). Mediating with high-conflict couples. *Family Court Review*, 38, 69–76. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.174-1617.2000.tb005569.x>
- Perlmán, H. H. (1957). *Social casework: A problem-solving process*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Roose, R., Roets, G., & Schiettecat, T. (2012). Implementing a strengths perspective in child welfare and protection: A challenge not to be taken lightly. *European Journal of Social Work*, 17, 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2012.739555>
- Rød, P. A. (2010). Konfliktfylt barnefordeling—Arena for barnevernet? *Fokus på Familien*, 38, 92–114.
- Rød, P. A., Iversen, A. C., & Underlid, K. (2013). The child welfare service's assessments in custody cases that involve minors. *European Journal of Social Work*, 16, 470–488. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2012.709484>
- Ruch, G. (2007). Reflective practice in contemporary child-care social work: The role of containment. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 37, 659–680. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bch277>
- Saini, M., Black, T., Godbout, E., & Deljavan, S. (2018). Feeling the pressure to take sides: A survey of child protection workers' experiences about responding to allegations of child maltreatment within the context of child custody disputes. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 96, 127–133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.11.044>
- Saini, M., Black, T., Lwin, K., Marshall, A., Fallon, B., & Goodman, D. (2012). Child protection workers' experiences of working with high-conflict separating families. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 1309–1316. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.03.005>
- Seltzer, W. J., & Seltzer, M. R. (1983). Material, myth, and magic: A cultural approach to family therapy. *Family Process*, 22(1), 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.1983.00003.x>
- Skivenes, M. (2011). Norway: Toward a child-centric perspective. In N. Gilbert, N. Parton, & Skivenes (Eds.), *Child protection system. International trends and orientations* (pp. 154–179). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stevens, M. (2018). Parents' experiences of services addressing parenting of children considered at-risk for future antisocial and criminal behaviour: A qualitative longitudinal study. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 95, 183–190. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.10.007>
- Walsh, F. (2002). A family resilience framework: Innovative practice applications. *Family Relations*, 51, 130–137. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2002.00130.x>
- Wang, M., Liu, S., & Belsky, J. (2017). Triangulation processes experienced by children in contemporary China. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 41, 688–695. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025416662345>
- Weingarten, H., & Leas, S. (1987). Levels of marital conflict model. A guide to assessment and intervention in troubled marriages. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 57, 407–417. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.1987.tb03550.x>

How to cite this article: Sudland C. Challenges and dilemmas working with high-conflict families in child protection case-work. *Child & Family Social Work*. 2020;25:248–255. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12680>