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Latent profiles of divorce adaptation in high conflict settings: Relations with parental and child adjustment

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Abstract

Divorce has important consequences for the family unit and is often experienced as stressful. Factors such as parental gender, time since divorce, and the age of the children contribute to considerable variability in how individuals adapt, under scoring the need to study adaptation through a profile-based approach. This study examines the diversity of post-divorce adaptation and its association with mental health symptoms in high-conflict families.

A sample of 257 divorced parents using family visitation centers in Spain (mean age = 40.3, SD = 6.91) completed measures assessing adaptation to divorce, as well as parental and child psychological symptoms. A person-centered latent profile analysis (LPA) identified three distinct adaptation profiles. Parents characterized by lower levels of coparenting and higher conflict exhibited greater psychological symptomatology. In contrast, children with parents demonstrating an overall adaptation to divorce showed the most favorable outcomes.

These findings highlight the heterogeneity of the adaptation process following divorce. Conflict with the ex-partner and the willingness to engage in cooperative coparenting emerged as critical factors associated with family well-being.

Keywords Divorce · Interparental conflict · Adaptation to divorce · Latent profile analysis

Introduction

Adaptation to divorce refers to the process through which the family system adjusts to the social, psychological, emotional, and relational changes resulting from marital dissolution (Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020). However, adaptation to divorce is not a uniform process, but a dynamic one, characterized by heterogeneity (Gloor et al., 2021). Individuals vary widely in how they adjust to the emotional, social, and relational changes brought about by marital dissolution. Understanding this variability is therefore essential for identifying the mechanisms that foster positive adjustment.

Previous research suggests that most individuals adapt well following divorce (Sbarra & Whisman, 2022). From a Divorce-Stress-Adjustment (DSA) perspective (Amato, 2000), post-divorce outcomes depend on how individuals experience and manage the stressors associated with marital dissolution. Divorce can thus lead to a variety of negative and positive consequences, and individual adaptation may differ considerably. The DSA model highlights that the effects of divorce depend on mediating factors (such as individual coping abilities or social support) and moderating factors (such as gender, socioeconomic status, or who initiated the divorce) that influence individuals' capacity to adapt (Amato, 2010). Another important factor is the presence of children. Divorce can be more distressing when children are involved, with feelings of guilt toward their children (Kalmijn, 2020) and lower emotional well-being associated with having little or no contact with children (Kalmijn, 2023). Parents, particularly those with older children, tend to experience more difficulty initially, along with quicker recovery trajectories (Leopold & Kalmijn, 2016). Another important point is that parents must also navigate coparenting arrangements, which can significantly influence both their own adjustment and that of their children (Millings et al., 2020). Thus, this process entails both intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges, as parent need to accept

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the divorce and reorganize both interparental and parent–child relationships.

While the DSA model perspective emphasizes the importance of personal and contextual factors in shaping post-divorce outcomes, empirical research has revealed that these outcomes can be both positive and negative. Divorce is frequently linked to a range of negative outcomes and increased emotional distress, including higher mortality rates (Sbarra, 2015), worse self-reported health and more physical symptoms (Pellón et al., 2024), and symptoms of depression and anxiety (Hald et al., 2020). Financial strain is also a common consequence, particularly for women (Akpan & Ezeume, 2020; Mortelmans, 2020). In addition, post-divorce challenges often extend to the parent–child relationship, with reports of diminished trust and communication and increased feelings of alienation (Smith-Etxeberria & Eceiza, 2021) or to the work sphere, with reduced job performance during the divorce, followed by improved engagement and performance once the divorce is finalized (Wanberg et al., 2023). This pattern of initial decline, following an improvement, and generally returning to prior levels has been reported for outcomes such as well-being and health (Ding et al., 2021), and life satisfaction (Van Scheppingen & Leopold, 2020).

Divorce can also lead to positive outcomes. Despite initial uncertainty, parents often experience that their sense of parental self-efficacy increased over time through improved child communication and structured routines (Rix et al., 2021). This positive adaptation is also evident in professional contexts, with significant portions of divorcees reporting enhanced career focus and energy (Wanberg et al., 2023). This variability highlights the necessity of identifying the pathways of adaptation that characterize the post-divorce experience.

In line with the DSA model, demographic and temporal factors can moderate post-divorce adjustment. Gender and the time since the divorce have been linked to variations in adaptation. Wilder (2016) found that being female and the time since the divorce were associated with more favorable adaptation outcomes. However, other studies suggest that gender differences in post-divorce adaptation tend to diminish over time (Leopold, 2018). Mothers have been found to face greater health risks than fathers in the aftermath of divorce, particularly in terms of physical health outcomes (Pellón et al., 2024). However, this finding is not consistently supported across the literature. Although Strizzi et al. (2021) noted higher initial stress and somatization among women, long-term outcomes in psychological well-being and physical health show no significant gender differences. Parent–child relationships may also be shaped by gender differences following divorce. Smith-Etxeberria and Eceiza (2021) found that trust and communication were more adversely impacted in father–child relationships than in mother–child relationships.

The literature also highlights the negative impact of divorce on children, including academic difficulties, and behavioral and emotional maladjustment (Amato, 2014; van Dijk et al., 2020), physical health issues (Pellón et al., 2024), or challenges in forming intimate relationships in adulthood (D'Rozario & Pilkington, 2021). Meta-analytic evidence links parental divorce to increased risks of depression, anxiety, substance use, and suicidal ideation (Auersperg et al., 2019). These associations, particularly regarding psychological distress, have weakened recently, potentially reflecting shifting social norms and reduced stigma.

However, for some individuals, interparental conflict persists even after at least one of the parents has accepted the divorce; these cases are typically referred to as high-conflict (Deck et al., 2023), and destructive conflict seems to be prevalent. This type of conflict, which includes the use of verbal hostility, physical aggression, non-verbal anger, and withdrawal, is a central construct in Emotional Security Theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Destructive interparental conflict is among the most significant risk factors for children's well-being (van Dijk et al., 2020), as it erodes the family's foundational emotional security. The detrimental impact of such conflict operates across the entire family system, for both parents and children, and has been widely documented (Cao et al., 2022; Ferraro & Lucier-Greer, 2022). Its negative impact on emotional security persists regardless of family structure (O'Hara et al., 2024). In addition, a recent meta-analysis has reported that after divorce, higher levels of interparental conflict are linked to poorer parenting behaviors and lower parent-child relationship quality which, in turn, are associated with internalizing and externalizing symptoms in children (Van Dijk et al., 2020). These findings are consistent with the Emotional Security Theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994) which identifies interparental, parent-child, and whole-family insecurity as the primary mechanisms influencing child adjustment and with the spillover hypothesis (Kouros et al., 2014), which explains the mechanisms through which conflict spills over the family system. Within this framework, Polak and Saini (2018) emphasize that high-conflict families are multifaceted systems where individual and familial factors mutually reinforce one another. Given this complexity, high-conflict families, for instance those requiring supervised visitation centers, provide a particularly relevant context for examining how parents navigate the post-divorce reorganization, including the psychological and relational demands of separation and how these processes shape the family wellbeing (Stolnicu et al., 2022) .

To address this, Yárnoz-Yaben and Comino González (2010) outline a multidimensional model of divorce adaptation comprising four components that previous research has identified as key for this process: (1) psychological difficulties in coping with divorce, such as denial, intrusive thoughts, or persistent negative emotions; (2) the level of conflict between ex-partners, which may range from minimal to ongoing hostility and anger; (3) the willingness of coparenting, reflecting the degree of cooperation and shared involvement in child-rearing; and (4) parents' perceptions of the negative impact of divorce on their children, particularly in relation to stressors like residential instability, financial strain, and family conflict.

As this model proposes, adaptation is not limited to individual outcomes, but transcends the individual symptoms to encompass relational components between the former partners, such as existing conflict and the quality of coparenting. Consistent with Emotional Security Theory, the parental approach to divorce shapes child adjustment which, in turn, influences how coparenting is handled, emphasizing the systemic nature of this transition (Martínez-Pampliega et al., 2021; Van Dijk et al., 2020). The quality of coparenting not only shapes the dynamics between parents but also has significant implications for children's well-being (Karberg & Cabrera, 2020; Martínez-Pampliega et al., 2021). Meta-analytic evidence has indicated that positive coparenting relationships are associated with lower levels of internalizing and externalizing symptoms, as well as improved social functioning in children (Pan et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2023). Moreover, longitudinal research focused on middle childhood further supports this link, demonstrating that both coparenting and individual parenting behaviors contribute to children's adjustment outcomes (Parkes et al., 2019).

How parents adjust to the new family structure and how they interact to meet their children's needs significantly influence the quality of parent-child relationships (Herrero et al., 2020; Millings et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to study in detail the components involved in a parent's adaptation to divorce and to delineate their associated impacts. To do so, it seems relevant to move from a linear causality approach to a circular one, following the family systems theory (Johnson & Ray, 2016), where the adjustment of one family member or one subsystem is linked to the dynamics of the entire system. In our study, this systemic interconnectedness is operationalized through Latent Profile Analysis (LPA). By moving beyond individual variables, the person-centered approach allows us to map how acceptance of divorce, interparental conflict, coparenting, and perception of impact on child combine into specific configurations, reflecting the reciprocal and circular nature of family reorganization in high-conflict settings.

The current study

While previous research has identified multiple factors influencing divorce adaptation, relatively little is known about how these variables interact to form distinct systemic patterns of adjustment, particularly among high-conflict divorced parents. The interplay among variables, such as parent gender, time elapsed since divorce, child age, and number of children, suggests considerable heterogeneity in how individuals and families reorganize. This variability underscores the need for person-centered approaches, such as Latent Profile Analysis (LPA), to capture the diversity of post-divorce adjustment pathways that variable-centered models often obscure.

Furthermore, much of the existing research, has focused on children's adaptation to divorce, leaving a gap in our understanding of how parents themselves navigate this transition. From a family systems perspective, parental adaptation plays a crucial role in shaping children's post-divorce well-being.

The first aim of the present study is to identify distinct profiles of post-divorce adaptation in families experiencing high interparental conflict. We move beyond individual symptoms by integrating four systemic dimensions: psychological acceptance of the divorce, interparental conflict, coparenting quality, and the perceived impact on children.

A second objective is to examine how these latent adaptation profiles are associated with the mental health of the family unit. Specifically, we examine how these configurations are linked to greater psychological symptoms in parents and to poorer child adjustment. We hypothesize that parents who show poorer adaptation to divorce, characterized by greater psychological difficulties in accepting it, higher interparental conflict, lower levels of coparenting, and stronger perceptions of harm to their children, will also report higher levels of psychological symptoms themselves, and that this distress will be associated with poorer outcomes in their children.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 257 divorced parents who were users of family visitation centers due to high-conflict custody issues. These centers serve as specialized post-separation resources, offering neutral settings for child exchanges and supervised visitations.

Participants had a mean age of 40.3 years (SD=6.91), with a predominance of women (61%). On average, they had divorced after 10.54 years of marriage (SD=6.35). At the time of the study, most had been divorced for over

three years (52%), followed by 1–2 years (19%), 2–3 years (13%), 6 months to 1 year (11%), 2–6 months (5%), and less than 2 months (<1%).

The majority of participants had exclusive physical custody (80%). Most were parents of one (57%) or two children (34%), with a smaller proportion reporting three (7%), four (2%), five (<1%), or seven (1%) children.

Measures

Ad-hoc Sociodemographic Questionnaire. Participants completed a questionnaire specifically designed for this study, which collected information on gender, age, time since divorce, number of children, and the children's average age.

Adaptation to Divorce. Adaptation to divorce was assessed using the Cuestionario de Adaptación al Divorcio-Separación (CAD-S; Yárnoz-Yaben & Comino González, 2010). The questionnaire consists of 20 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). It comprises four subscales: (1) Psychological difficulties in the adaptation to divorce, which assess experiences such as anger toward the ex-partner, difficulty accepting the separation, beliefs that the separation will never be overcome, and obsessive interest in the former partner's current life; (2) Conflict with the ex-partner, which measures the frequency of arguments, quarrels, and disagreements; (3) Negative consequences of the separation for children, which evaluates the parent's perception of the divorce's impact on their children (e.g., academic performance, parent-child relationships); and (4) Willingness to coparent, which captures the degree of collaboration and joint responsibility the ex-partners show in raising their children.

According to the original validation study, the CAD-S demonstrates adequate psychometric properties, with a total scale Cronbach's alpha of 0.77, and subscale alphas of 0.78, 0.81, 0.72, and 0.65, respectively (Yárnoz-Yaben & Comino González, 2010). In the present study, internal consistency reliability was assessed using both Cronbach's alpha (α) and McDonald's omega (ω). The following coefficients were obtained: Psychological difficulties in adaptation, α=0.72, ω=0.76; Ex-partner conflict, α=0.77, ω=0.78; Coparenting, α=0.77, ω=0.78; and Divorce impact on children, α=0.52, ω=0.54. It should be noted that the internal consistency for the last subscale did not reach acceptable levels. However, it was retained due to its theoretical relevance, but findings related to this subscale should be interpreted with caution.

Parental Symptoms. Parental symptomatology was assessed using the Spanish version of the Symptom Checklist-Revised (SCL-90-R; Derogatis, 1994), adapted by González de Rivera et al. (2002). The SCL-90-R includes 90 items describing various psychopathological and psychosomatic symptoms. Respondents rate the level of discomfort associated with each symptom on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*no discomfort*) to 4 (*extreme discomfort*). The instrument is structured around 10 symptom dimensions. For this study, four subscales were used: Somatization, Interpersonal Sensitivity, Depression, and Anxiety. Prior research has demonstrated adequate internal consistency for these subscales: Anxiety (α=0.84), Depression (α=0.89), Somatization (α=0.87), and Interpersonal Sensitivity (α=0.83) (Carrasco et al., 2003). In the present study, internal consistency was also high, with the following reliability coefficients: Anxiety, α=0.91, ω=0.92; Depression, α=0.92, ω=0.92; Somatization, α=0.92, ω=0.92; Interpersonal Sensitivity, α=0.86, ω=0.86; and Global Severity Index, α=0.97, ω=0.97.

Child Symptoms. Children's symptoms were assessed using the Spanish version of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991), adapted by Sardinero García et al. (1997). Parents served as informants, reporting their children's symptoms using a 3-point Likert scale. The CBCL assesses the presence of internalizing and externalizing symptoms in children and adolescents and is widely used in both clinical and community samples. In the present study, reliability coefficients were as follows: Internalizing Symptoms, α=0.85, ω=0.86; Externalizing Symptoms, α=0.91, ω=0.91; and Overall Symptoms, α=0.93, ω=0.93.

Procedure

Data were collected between 2016 and 2017 from 12 family visitation centers in Spain. Inclusion criteria required participants to be responsible for at least one child. Exclusion criteria included a diagnosis of a severe psychopathological disorder or the presence of domestic violence, determined either by the judgment of the assigned professional or the existence of an active restraining order.

All participants were informed about the aims of the study and provided informed consent prior to participation. Voluntary participation and data confidentiality were ensured throughout. The study received ethical approval from the University of Deusto Ethics Committee and adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Data analysis

Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) was conducted using Mplus 7.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2013), following the three-step procedure described by Asparouhov and Muthén

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the study variables

	M	SD
Sociodemographics		
Children's age	8.37	4.14
Number of children	1.57	0.82
Time married	10.54	6.35
Divorce adaptation indicators		
Psychological difficulties	1.79	0.73
Conflict with ex-partner	2.68	1.21
Coparenting	2.10	1.00
Divorce impact on children	2.49	0.81
Parents' psychological symptoms		
Overall psychological symptoms	38.17	32.71
Anxiety	7.80	7.83
Depression	14.04	11.33
Somatization	8.93	9.37
Interpersonal Sensitivity	6.11	6.35
Children's psychological symptoms		
Internalizing symptoms	1.58	1.34
Externalizing symptoms	2.38	1.84
Overall symptoms	1.98	1.43

(2014). In the first step, models with one to five profiles were estimated to determine the optimal number of latent classes. Model selection was based on several fit indices: Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC), Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), sample-size adjusted BIC (aBIC), entropy, the Lo-Mendell-Rubin adjusted likelihood ratio test (LMRa), and the bootstrap likelihood ratio test (BLRT). Lower AIC, BIC, and aBIC values indicate better model fit, with BIC considered the most reliable (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Nylund et al., 2007). The LMRa and BLRT compare model fit between K-1 and K profile solutions, where a significant result favors the model with more profiles (Nylund et al., 2007). Entropy values, ranging from 0 to 1, reflect classification precision, with higher values indicating better separation between profiles (Celeux & Soromenho, 1996).

In the second step, participants were assigned to profiles based on their most likely membership. The third step involved examining antecedents and outcomes associated with each profile, as recommended by Lanza et al. (2013). Antecedent variables included gender, time since divorce, number of children, and children's age. Outcome variables included parental psychological symptomatology (overall symptoms, anxiety, depression, somatization, and interpersonal sensitivity) and children's internalizing, externalizing, and overall symptoms, analyzed across the identified profiles.

Results

Descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented in Table 1.

Latent Profile Analyses (LPA) were conducted in successive steps. In the first step, model fit indices and entropy values were used to determine the best-fitting model among solutions with one to five profiles. As shown in Table 2, the three-profile model demonstrated substantially better fit than the one- and two-profile models based on the AIC, BIC, and aBIC. Moreover, the entropy value for the three-profile solution exceeded 0.80, indicating high classification precision. The Lo-Mendell-Rubin adjusted likelihood ratio test (LMRa) was also significant, further supporting the selection of the three-profile model over more parsimonious alternatives.

Profiles 4 and 5 yielded lower BIC values than Profile 3 but showed higher AIC and aBIC values. However, these models did not produce reliable solutions, as the loglikelihood values could not be replicated in successive iterations. As a result, the fit indices (AIC, BIC, aBIC) and likelihood-based tests (LMRa, BLRT) were not considered reliable for the 4- and 5-profile solutions. Additionally, entropy values for both models were below the recommended threshold of 0.80. Based on superior model fit, robustness, parsimony, and acceptable entropy, the 3-profile model was retained as the final solution.

In the second step of the LPA, we examined the characteristics and composition of the three identified profiles (see Table 3; Fig. 1).

The three profiles did not differ in terms of children's socioeconomic changes following divorce. However,

Table 2 Model fit and model comparisons of latent profile analysis

Model	AIC	BIC	aBIC	Entropy	LMRa	BLRT
1-Profile model	2744.51	2772.90	2747.54	NA	NA	NA
2-Profile model	2649.07	2695.21	2654.00	0.937	101.77***	105.44
3-Profile model	2605.67	2669.55	2612.49	0.893	51.55**	53.40
4-Profile model	2598.09	2679.72	2606.81	0.709	16.96	17.57*
5-Profile model	2585.12	2684.49	2595.72	0.751	17.12	17.73***

AIC Akaike's Information Criterion, *BIC* Bayesian Information Criterion, *aBIC* sample-size-adjusted Bayesian Information Criterion, *LMRa* Lo–Mendell–Rubin adjusted likelihood ratio test of K − 1 Versus K Profiles, *BLRT* bootstrap likelihood ratio test of K − 1 Versus K Profiles, *NA* Not applicable. Loglikelihood computation was not reliable for 4-Profile and 5-Profile Models

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 3 Final model estimates

Psychological difficulties	Profile 1	Profile 2	Profile 3
	1.52	3.10	1.87
Conflict with ex-partner	2.74	2.83	2.20
Coparenting	1.76	1.81	4.12
Divorce impact on children	2.45	2.72	2.44
Profile n	185	36	36
% of the sample	72%	14%	14%

Note. Profile 1 = Individual adaptation to divorce – Relational maladaptation to divorce; Profile 2 = Overall maladaptation to divorce; Profile 3 = Overall adaptation to divorce

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

significant differences emerged across the other adaptation dimensions:

Profile 1: Individual adaptation – Relational maladaptation to divorce (72%). This was the largest group, characterized by low psychological difficulties in adapting to divorce but also by high interparental conflict and low coparenting quality.

Profile 2: Overall maladaptation to divorce (14%). This group showed the highest levels of psychological difficulties, along with high conflict and low coparenting, mirroring Profile 1 in relational dimensions.

Profile 3: Overall adaptation to divorce (14%). This profile demonstrated the most favorable adaptation, with low psychological difficulties (though not as low as Profile 1), the lowest conflict levels, and the highest coparenting quality.

In the third step of the LPA, we examined antecedents and outcomes associated with profile membership. Multinomial logistic regression analyses revealed several significant predictors:

Gender: Compared to males, females were more likely to belong to Profile 2 than Profile 1 ($\beta = 1.35$, $SE = 0.66$, $p = .040$) or Profile 3 ($\beta = 1.72$, $SE = 0.76$, $p = .023$).

Time since divorce: A longer time since separation increased the likelihood of belonging to Profile 1 compared to Profile 2 ($\beta = 0.94$, $SE = 0.24$, $p < .001$) and Profile 3 ($\beta = 0.82$, $SE = 0.23$, $p < .001$).

Number of children: A greater number of children predicted membership in Profile 2 rather than Profile 1 ($\beta = 0.53$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = .039$).

No significant effects were found for the age of the children or the length of the marriage prior to divorce.

In this last step of LPA, we also analyzed the relationship of the profiles with the outcomes of overall psychological symptomatology, anxiety, depression, somatization, and interpersonal sensitivity of the parents, as well as with the externalizing and internalizing and overall symptomatology of the children.

Parental symptomatology: Profile 2 showed significantly higher levels of overall symptomatology, anxiety, depression, somatization, and interpersonal sensitivity compared to Profiles 1 and 3, which did not differ significantly from one another (see Table 4).

Children's symptomatology: Children of parents in Profile 3 had lower levels of internalizing, externalizing, and overall symptomatology compared to those in Profiles 1 and 2. No significant differences were observed between Profiles 1 and 2 (see Table 4).

Discussion

The first aim of this study was to identify distinct profiles of post-divorce adaptation in families experiencing high interparental conflict, moving beyond individual symptoms, from a systemic and family systems perspective. The analysis revealed three distinct patterns of divorce adaptation. These findings provide empirical evidence of the variability in post-divorce adjustment trajectories. Beyond describing patterns of post-divorce adjustment, this study makes a novel contribution by identifying distinct profiles of adaptation within a judicially supervised, high-conflict population.

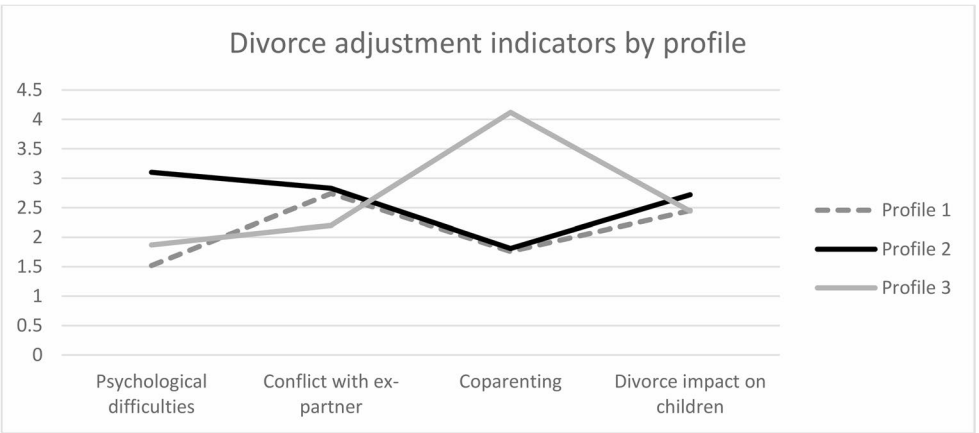

Fig. 1 Final model estimates by profile

Table 4 Differential influence on psychological symptoms by profile

	Profile 1		Profile 2		Profile 3		Profile Comparisons		
Outcome variable	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE	1 vs. 2	1 vs. 3	2 vs. 3
Parents' psychological symptoms									
Overall	32.27	2.25	71.65	6.58	33.41	4.04	30.94***	0.06	24.22***
Anxiety	6.55	0.55	14.96	1.71	6.72	0.88	20.95***	0.03	18.08***
Depression	11.82	0.79	24.72	2.16	14.27	1.60	30.63***	1.86	14.94***
Somatization	7.82	0.65	17.29	1.99	5.83	1.09	19.73***	2.45	25.42***
Interpersonal sensitivity	4.85	0.42	12.80	1.32	5.60	0.96	31.93***	0.51	19.12***
Children's psychological symptoms									
Internalizing	1.62	0.10	1.92	0.26	1.01	0.17	1.14	9.58**	9.05**
Externalizing	2.43	0.14	2.98	0.39	1.5	0.21	1.66	13.03***	11.22**
Overall	2.03	0.11	2.45	0.29	1.26	0.17	1.79	14.26***	12.88***

Profile 1 Individual adaptation to divorce, Profile 2 Overall maladaptation to divorce, Profile 3 Overall adaptation to divorce. Profile comparisons are chi-square tests with one degree of freedom, reflecting the difference between two profiles on the dependent variable

* $p < .001$

Among the three profiles identified, the largest, comprising nearly two-thirds of the sample, was labeled Individual adaptation–Relational maladaptation. Parents in this group reported little to no psychological distress related to the divorce: they no longer thought about or hoped to reunite with their ex-partner and did not experience ongoing anger. However, despite this individual adjustment, they exhibited high levels of conflict and low levels of cooperation in coparenting. From a family systems perspective, this configuration illustrates that the individual subsystems (the parents as individuals) have managed to restore equilibrium and acceptance following the divorce, but the relational patterns (coparenting and conflict) remain dysfunctional. In contrast, a smaller group, classified as Overall maladaptation, displayed a similar pattern of relational conflict, but also reported poor individual adjustment. This configuration shows that dysfunctional dynamics permeate all levels of the family system. These findings underscore the complexity of the divorce and highlight substantial variability in post-divorce adaptation. They also demonstrate that individual recovery can occur independently of relational adjustment, even within high-conflict families. This aligns with previous research documenting challenges in both individual and relational adjustment following marital dissolution (Hald et al., 2020; Smith-Etxeberria & Eceiza, 2021; Yárnoz-Yaben & Comino González, 2010).

The findings indicate that a substantial majority of parents in the study, those classified under Individual adaptation to divorce and overall maladaptation to divorce, reported ongoing conflict with their ex-partner and a low willingness to engage in cooperative coparenting, highlighting these as central features of their post-divorce family dynamics. While existing literature suggests that most divorced families, including those experiencing high levels of conflict, tend to resolve disputes through alternative dispute resolution mechanisms rather than litigation (Poitras et al., 2020), a subset of approximately 10% -15% continues to experience sustained interparental conflict post-divorce (Grych, 2005). Consistent with this, parents in high-conflict contexts are frequently entangled in ongoing judicial proceedings, a characteristic also observed in the present sample, given that all participants were users of supervised visitation centers, an indicator of persistent interparental conflict and legal intervention.

In contrast, only a small minority (approximately 14%) demonstrated overall adaptation to divorce, characterized by both psychological adjustment at the individual level and a constructive, low-conflict coparenting relationship marked by effective communication and collaboration regarding their children. In this profile, the individual component converged with the relational one. Although this pattern is consistent with previous findings suggesting that resilience is the most common outcome following divorce (Sbarra, 2015), its low prevalence in our sample shows the specific complexities of families using supervised visitation centers, where maladaptation patterns are more common.

Our findings contribute to the literature emphasizing the heterogeneity of post-divorce adaptation, specifically by identifying a profile marked by adequate individual adjustment coexisting with significant relational maladjustment. This finding adds nuance to the literature by showing that psychological recovery from divorce at the individual level can coexist with persistent interparental conflict. esearch suggests that these effects may differ by parent gender, with one parent's conflict behaviors potentially influencing the other's parenting practices (Gao et al., 2018). Although the sample was drawn from a service specifically designed for high-conflict families, our findings underscore the heterogeneity in post-divorce conflict levels, even within this high-risk population.

Parental adaptation to divorce has also been linked to the quality of coparenting. Consistent with this, the profile

showing more positive coparenting dynamics was also associated with better child outcomes. This aligns with previous research demonstrating that supportive coparenting is associated with reduced behavioral and emotional difficulties in children, as well as enhanced social functioning (Martínez-Pampliega et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2025; Parkes et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2023). This study further examined the association between children's positive outcomes and coparenting quality within high-conflict families, extending a line of inquiry previously explored in other family contexts, such as low-income populations. Recent work by Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2023), employing a similar analytical framework, found that children's well-being was positively associated with contexts in which both parents perceived the coparenting relationship as high-quality and mutually supportive., They also observed that favorable child outcomes were present even when coparenting quality was moderate, particularly in cases where mothers held more positive views of the coparenting relationship than fathers. These findings suggest that even in less-than-optimal relational contexts, certain perceptions of coparenting support may still foster beneficial outcomes for children.

Qualitative studies involving professionals underscore that coparenting dynamics following divorce are shaped by factors operating at multiple levels. At the individual level, parents' personal histories and psychological resources play a key role. At the contextual level, external pressures such as financial hardship and legal processes can intensify conflict. At the relational level, difficulties such as lack of trust, poor communication, and an inability to distinguish between unresolved emotional grievances and the ex-partner's parenting capacities often hinder functional coparenting (Stolnicu et al., 2022). These multi-level influences may explain why interparental conflict persists even after psychological recovery from divorce.

Several relevant moderators from the literature were examined in this study. Being a woman was more strongly associated with the overall maladaptation to divorce profile. Recent research has identified gender differences in post-divorce adjustment, with mothers reporting greater dissatisfaction with their financial situation and fathers expressing more discontent with their family life (Köppen et al., 2020). However, these differences do not extend to domains such as housing transitions, physical or mental health, psychological well-being, repartnering opportunities, or specific symptoms of psychological maladjustment (Amato, 2014; Leopold, 2018). Importantly, a substantial body of literature has documented the disproportionate financial burden of divorce on women (e.g., Mortelmans, 2020), which has been proposed as a key pathway leading to adverse health outcomes (Sbarra & Whisman, 2022). Women may be particularly vulnerable in high-conflict post-divorce contexts, underscoring the need for further research into gender-specific trajectories and mechanisms of adaptation under such conditions.

The time elapsed since divorce emerged as a relevant factor in the adaptation process. In our sample, over half of the participants had been separated for three years or more. This aligns with prior research suggesting that the negative psychological effects of divorce diminish over time, with many individuals returning to baseline levels of well-being and health (Ding et al., 2021). Our findings support the view of divorce as a temporary crisis rather than a chronic stressor. The likelihood of belonging to the individual adaptation–relational maladaptation profile increased with time, suggesting that while individual psychological adjustment tends to improve, relational dynamics, particularly conflict with the ex-partner and difficulties in parenting, may persist. This distinction has important implications for preventive and clinical interventions, underscoring the need to identify and support parents who remain in high-conflict coparenting relationships despite psychological recovery.

We also examined the presence and characteristics of children as influencing factors. While previous studies offer mixed results regarding the impact of children on parental adjustment (Karela & Petrogiannis, 2020; Wilder, 2016), our findings indicate that the number of children, rather than their age, plays a more significant role. Parents with more children were more likely to belong to the overall maladaptation profile, suggesting greater vulnerability. Contrary to Leopold and Kalmijn's (2016) findings, we did not observe significant differences between profiles based on children's ages.

In line with prior research (e.g., Akpan & Ezeume, 2020; Hald et al., 2020; Pellón et al., 2024), some participants reported symptoms of psychological maladaptation. Our person-centered approach allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the distribution and correlates of these symptoms. Individuals in the overall maladaptation profile presented the highest levels of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, somatization, and interpersonal sensitivity, and also reported greater difficulty accepting the divorce and more intense conflict with their ex-partner. In contrast, participants in the individual adaptation–relational maladaptation and overall adaptation profiles exhibited lower symptom levels, highlighting the dual role of intrapersonal (psychological) and relational (conflictual) dimensions in shaping mental health outcomes post-divorce.

With regard to child outcomes, our findings show that the most adaptive profile, characterized by both psychological adjustment and constructive coparenting, was associated with the lowest levels of internalizing and externalizing symptoms in children. This reinforces extensive evidence

documenting the detrimental impact of interparental conflict on child development (Hess, 2022), as well as the negative effects of ineffective coparenting (Martínez-Pampliega et al., 2021; Karberg & Cabrera, 2020; Parkes et al., 2019).

In sum, divorce is a complex and heterogeneous process. Overall, this study contributes new evidence by integrating a person-centered analytic framework within a high-conflict sample, revealing distinct pathways of adjustment among divorced parents and their children. Conflict with the ex-partner and willingness to coparent emerged as central elements shaping both parental and child adaptation. While individual psychological adjustment appears to protect parent well-being, willingness to engage in collaborative coparenting plays a key role in children's outcomes. These insights point to the importance of supporting coparenting skills and strengthening parent-child relationships in post-divorce interventions.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, its cross-sectional design precludes causal inference between profile types and mental health symptoms. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs to better capture the dynamics of divorce adaptation over time. In addition, the reliability index for one of the subscales in the adaptation to divorce measure, specifically, the Divorce Impact on Children subscale, was not within acceptable limits. This subscale may have contained a relatively high level of measurement error and limited true-score variance. The items may not have been entirely clear to participants, or additional items might be required to capture the construct more comprehensively. More likely, given the nature of the sample, composed of separated parents involved in situations of high interparental conflict, participants might have tended to provide homogeneous responses on this dimension, which could have affected the reliability of the subscale and, consequently, the validity of the related findings. This pattern can be observed in Fig. 1, where the three profiles obtained very similar scores on this dimension, indicating its limited discriminative power in differentiating between profiles. As a result, findings related to this dimension should be interpreted with caution, given the potential limitations in measurement consistency. Future research should prioritize refining the measure to improve its psychometric properties and practical applicability.

Second, the specificity of the sample may have constrained the variability in adaptation patterns. Participants were recruited from family visitation centers, a setting typically associated with high interparental conflict and challenges in shared parenting. Despite this, our findings reveal the presence of distinct adaptation profiles. Future studies should replicate this profiling approach in more diverse populations of divorced parents, including those not involved in high-conflict settings. Moreover, other potentially relevant variables related to post-divorce adjustment, such as attachment style and forgiveness toward the former partner, were not included in the present study. Future research should examine how these factors interact with conflict and coparenting quality, as they have been shown to explain individual differences in adaptation trajectories (Guzmán-González et al., 2025). Third, most participants had been divorced for two to three years and were in sole custody arrangements. To enhance the generalizability of findings, future research should include families at earlier stages of divorce and more individuals with shared custody arrangements.

Finally, this study relied on the perceptions of only one parent, limiting our understanding of the dyadic nature of post-divorce relationships. Future research should incorporate dyadic designs, such as actor–partner interdependence models, to examine how each parent's adjustment influences and is influenced by the other. For example, McRae et al. (2021) studied the conflict-coparenting spillover as a dyadic process and its link with attachment insecurities, reporting gender differences in this association. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the complexity of adaptation to divorce.

Implications

Using a person-centered approach, this study underscores the critical role of interparental conflict in shaping the well-being of divorced parents. Our findings support the view that interventions targeting this population should incorporate components focused on healthy conflict management. In this regard, psychoeducational programs have demonstrated utility, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness in mitigating the negative effects of divorce and interparental conflict (Grych, 2005; Merino et al., 2017).

Our findings also highlight the detrimental impact of low parental willingness to coparent on child outcomes. This underscores the need to promote and strengthen coparenting skills among divorced parents. Programs such as parenting coordination (Tejedor Huerta et al., 2025) align well with these goals and warrant further development and evaluation. The observed vulnerability of women in high-conflict post-divorce contexts is also noteworthy. This, together with the role of coparenting willingness, points to important avenues for future research aimed at identifying gender-specific risk factors and intervention needs.

Despite the study's limitations, its results contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics involved in the divorce process. Together, these results highlight the need for integrated, evidence-based approaches that

address both psychological recovery and relational functioning in post-divorce families. The findings offer practical implications for professionals who support divorced families, psychologists, mediators, psychiatrists, parenting coordinators, social workers, and educators, by informing more tailored and effective intervention strategies.

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Data availability The datasets generated by the survey research during and/or analyzed during the current study are available in the Mendeley Data repository, https://data.mendeley.com/datasets/376mv7mt9n/1.

Declarations

Ethical approval This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of University of [masked for peer review] (21.11.2016/No. ETK-7/16–17).

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Consent to participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Competing Interests The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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