

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF DIVORCE: A CHARACTER ANALYSIS OF CHARLIE AND NICOLE IN MARRIAGE STORY (2019)

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji dampak psikologis perceraian sebagaimana digambarkan melalui karakter Charlie dan Nicole dalam film *Marriage Story* (2019). Dengan menggunakan pendekatan analisis kualitatif, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pergulatan emosional, mekanisme koping, dan transformasi identitas yang dialami oleh kedua karakter tersebut selama proses perpisahan pernikahan mereka. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyoroti bagaimana film tersebut menggambarkan kompleksitas perceraian, termasuk dampaknya terhadap kesejahteraan individu dan hubungan antarpribadi. Dengan menganalisis alur cerita dan perkembangan karakter, penelitian ini memberikan wawasan mengenai penggambaran perceraian yang realistis di media serta relevansinya dengan pengalaman kehidupan nyata. Temuan-temuan ini berkontribusi pada diskusi akademis di bidang psikologi, studi film, dan sosiologi, sekaligus meningkatkan kesadaran akan tantangan emosional dan psikologis yang terkait dengan perceraian. Penelitian ini juga menawarkan implikasi praktis bagi para profesional kesehatan mental dan pembuat film, dengan menekankan pentingnya penceritaan yang otentik dalam menggambarkan transisi paling menantang dalam kehidupan.

Kata Kunci: Aspek Psikologis, Perceraian, Marriage Story

Abstract

This study examines the psychological effects of divorce as portrayed through the characters of Charlie and Nicole in *Marriage Story* (2019). Using a qualitative analysis approach, the research explores the emotional struggles, coping mechanisms, and identity transformations experienced by the characters during their marital separation. The study aims to highlight how the film captures the complexities of divorce, including its impact on individual well-being and interpersonal relationships. By analyzing the narrative and character arcs, this research provides insights into the realistic depiction of divorce in media and its relevance to real-life experiences. The findings contribute to academic discussions in psychology, film studies, and sociology while promoting awareness of the emotional and psychological challenges associated with divorce. This study also offers practical implications for mental health professionals and filmmakers, emphasizing the importance of authentic storytelling in representing life's most challenging transitions.

Keywords: Psychological Aspects, Divorce, Marriage Story

1. INTRODUCTION

Divorce constitutes one of the most severe forms of relational trauma an adult can undergo. Beyond the legal termination of a marriage, it disrupts the foundational psychological structures of identity, attachment, and emotional security that the marital bond sustains,

producing a constellation of effects that closely parallel those observed in traumatic loss: anxiety, depression, grief, identity disruption, and pervasive feelings of helplessness (Trichal, n.d.). These effects rarely remain confined to the period of formal separation; they persist and evolve across the months following juridical divorce, producing divergent mental health trajectories shaped by personality and coping capacity and extend into physical health and socioeconomic functioning as well (Pellón-Elexpuru et al., 2024; Wanberg et al., 2022).

The psychological mechanisms through which divorce produces these effects are illuminated by psychoanalytic theory. Freud's structural model of id, ego, and superego, together with the ego's repertoire of defense mechanisms such as projection, rationalization, and intellectualization, provides a precise vocabulary for describing the unconscious processes that govern behavior under sustained psychological pressure (Di Giuseppe & Perry, 2021). Applied to divorce, this framework illuminates not only what individuals experience but why they behave in ways that appear self-defeating or contradictory, while the non-linear stages of grief identified in the bereavement literature offer a complementary account of how these defenses are sequentially engaged and dismantled across the separation process (Avis et al., 2021).

Film has long been recognized as a culturally significant site for representing psychological experience, and psychoanalytic film theory has demonstrated that fictional characters function as case studies through which unconscious conflict, grief, and relational anxiety can be systematically examined (Bellagamba, 2023; Reghintovschi & Reghintovschi, 2025). Empirical applications confirm this method's productivity: psychoanalytic and Lacanian readings have been shown to rigorously illuminate a film's protagonist (Çelik, 2024), and psychoanalysis applied as a descriptive method to characters with neurotic behavioral patterns generates explanations that purely narrative approaches cannot (Elmacı et al., 2024). Within this context, Noah Baumbach's *Marriage Story* (2019) is an exceptionally well-suited object for analysis: its screenplay dramatizes the systematic deployment of defense mechanisms with clinical precision, its bilateral structure gives equal narrative weight to both partners, and it has already attracted scholarly attention from family-systems theory (Katmer et al., 2021) and rhetorical analysis (Christiansen, 2022).

A review of the existing scholarship reveals three interrelated gaps. First, psychoanalytic film studies have produced valuable single-character readings of unconscious conflict (Çelik, 2024; Elmacı et al., 2024; Reghintovschi & Reghintovschi, 2025) but none extends this method to a bilateral, comparative design in which two characters navigating the

same relational crisis are analyzed simultaneously. Second, the empirical literature on divorce psychology has established robust findings on identity loss, self-differentiation, and mental health trajectories (Moral et al., 2021) without examining how these documented phenomena are given narrative and cinematic form. Third, existing scholarship on *Marriage Story* itself has approached the film through family-counseling and rhetorical frameworks (Katmer et al., 2021; Christiansen, 2022) without conducting a systematic psychoanalytic character analysis that integrates divorce psychology, grief theory, and coping theory as a unified interpretive framework. This study addresses these gaps through a dual-character psychoanalytic analysis that applies an integrated theoretical framework to both Charlie and Nicole simultaneously, generating findings that single-character analysis cannot: specifically, findings about the complementary psychological positions the two partners occupied within the marriage and the gendered asymmetry in how equivalent emotional phenomena function for each.

Based on this background, the study addresses two research questions: (1) how are the psychological effects of divorce portrayed through the character arcs of Charlie and Nicole in *Marriage Story* (2019); and (2) what coping mechanisms do Charlie and Nicole employ to navigate the emotional challenges of their divorce. Correspondingly, the study aims to analyze the narrative and character development of both figures to identify the psychological effects of divorce they experience, and to identify the coping strategies each employs across the separation process. Theoretically, the study is expected to contribute a framework for analyzing filmic characters as case studies of psychological phenomena; practically, it is expected to help individuals experiencing or recovering from divorce recognize the psychological challenges and coping strategies the film dramatizes.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design employing psychoanalytic textual analysis of film as its primary method. Qualitative research is appropriate when the objective is to understand how phenomena are experienced and represented rather than to measure their prevalence (Naeem et al., 2023). Psychoanalytic textual analysis treats filmic characters as psychologically coherent subjects whose behavior can be read through established frameworks, including Freud's structural model, to generate interpretations that purely narrative accounts cannot provide (Elmacı et al., 2024; Bellagamba, 2023).

The material object of the study is *Marriage Story* (2019), written and directed by Noah Baumbach, starring Adam Driver as Charlie Barber and Scarlett Johansson as Nicole Barber. The formal object is the psychological effects of divorce and the coping mechanisms

experienced by the two principal characters across the narrative. The data consist of characters, dialogue, and visual illustration drawn from the film as the primary data source, together with previous research and related documents as secondary data sources.

The researcher watched the film in its entirety a minimum of five times prior to data extraction, with subsequent viewings conducted with specific analytical focus, first on Charlie's arc and then on Nicole's, to ensure that no psychologically significant scene was overlooked. To establish credibility, four validity strategies were employed: theoretical triangulation, in which each retained scene had to be independently legible under more than one theoretical lens before being admitted to the analysis; source triangulation, cross-checking interpretations against peer-reviewed literature on divorce psychology and coping; theoretical member checking, verifying that claims extending a framework were stated explicitly as qualifications rather than direct findings; and researcher reflexivity, requiring every code application to be supported by directly citable dialogue or visual evidence.

Data were analyzed through a four-stage deductive thematic coding procedure. First, an a priori coding scheme was constructed directly from the theoretical review, comprising psychological-effect codes (identity disruption, denial, anger, bargaining, grief, acceptance, and gendered loss pattern) and coping codes (primary and secondary appraisal, problem-focused, emotion-focused, adaptive, and maladaptive coping), each given an explicit operational definition. Second, the film was segmented into discrete, time-stamped scene units and screened against the coding scheme, with a code applied only where directly citable evidence unambiguously matched its definition. Third, code application was refined across multiple viewing passes, in which provisional and overlapping tags were consolidated into the theoretically grounded codes established in the first stage. Fourth, the final scene corpus presented in the Results and Discussion was selected according to three criteria: theoretical clarity, non-redundancy, and coverage of each character's full emotional trajectory from the pre-crisis phase through to acceptance or its absence.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the character analysis together with their theoretical discussion, organized by character and research question. Each subsection synthesizes the scene-level evidence obtained through the coding procedure described above and relates it to the psychoanalytic and coping frameworks established in the literature.

3.1 Charlie Barber's Psychological Effects of Divorce

Charlie is introduced as a man who has not yet performed the primary appraisal of his marriage as a genuine threat, and this foundational unawareness shapes the entire trajectory of his response to the divorce that follows. His identity prior to the separation is organized almost entirely around his professional role as a theater director; the marriage had allowed this fusion to remain unexamined by absorbing the emotional energy he withheld from Nicole, an emotional cutoff that the divorce dismantles by rendering his professional and personal crises simultaneous. At the couple's first mediation session, Charlie insists they were "doing this together, amicably, without lawyers" and asks, "so what changed," a response that reflects a primary appraisal of the situation as manageable that Nicole's retained counsel has already invalidated. His subsequent consultation with divorce lawyer Jay Marotta, in which Jay states plainly that "it's already nasty, you just haven't felt it yet," functions as a forced reappraisal event that Charlie resists by appealing to a prior agreement to "be decent" cognitive dissonance characteristic of the denial stage of grief (Avis et al., 2021).

The discussion must qualify the standard account of identity disruption in divorce, which frames it as the loss of a relational self the marriage had organized (Moral et al., 2021). For Charlie, what is disrupted is not primarily a relational self but a professional one that the marriage had protected from scrutiny; the divorce does not simply disrupt an existing self-concept so much as expose the absence of the self-examination a stable identity would have required all along. His passage through denial, rationalization, and an explosive rage episode confirms the non-linear character of post-divorce grief (Avis et al., 2021), but the findings suggest a more specific claim: for Charlie, rage functions as the price of admission to genuine grief rather than as a departure from it. His suppressive and rationalizing coping prevents him from registering loss directly, and it is only when those defenses fail simultaneously in the film's central argument scene that the underlying grief becomes accessible at all. This suggests that, for individuals whose pre-divorce identity is built on suppression, the anger stage may function less as a transitional phase within grief than as a structural precondition for entering it.

The financial pressure Charlie experiences legal fees that threaten his theater company's stability illustrates the socioeconomic-disruption dimension of divorce documented in the broader literature (Wanberg et al., 2022), but its significance is compounded rather than additive: because his professional institution is also his primary identity anchor, the financial threat functions simultaneously as a financial and an identity threat, which helps explain why his distress intensifies rather than stabilizes in the film's

middle section. His arc closes not with full resolution but with partial acceptance, triggered by information disclosed in Nicole's letter that he did not generate himself. This qualifies the acceptance stage as typically theorized: for individuals whose suppressive coping is sufficiently severe, acceptance may require an external catalyst that standard grief models do not anticipate as a structural requirement.

3.2 Nicole Barber's Psychological Effects of Divorce

Nicole's psychological experience is organized around a different foundational condition than Charlie's: not the absence of self-examination but the suppression of an already-formed self in the service of relational stability. Where Charlie's identity disruption exposes an absence, Nicole's exposes a presence that had been actively concealed, including from herself. Her admission that she stayed in the marriage "for him" rather than "for us" demonstrates that the identity loss associated with emotional fusion (Moral et al., 2021) was already complete well before the divorce began; what the divorce produces is not the loss itself but the conditions under which she can finally name it. This suggests that identity disruption in divorce is not always a consequence of the separation but may, in cases of long-standing emotional fusion, be a pre-existing condition the separation simply renders visible for the first time.

The findings show that anger performs a markedly different psychological function for Nicole than it does for Charlie. Her refusal to relocate back to New York—"I'm being reasonable about myself, maybe for the first time" is not the eruption of suppressed material but a deliberate act of boundary-setting, complicating a straightforward application of the anger stage of grief to her arc: rather than an emotional reaction to loss, her anger operates instrumentally as the mechanism through which she begins to reclaim agency. A significant finding qualifying any simple reading of her arc as one of straightforward liberation is her grief after the custody hearing, in which she insists that Charlie "is a good father" despite the adversarial legal process she has just navigated. This demonstrates that her recovery does not require, and is not accompanied by, a devaluation of what the marriage meant to her; the depression stage of grief (Avis et al., 2021) is visible here in a form distinct from incapacitating sadness grief held alongside competence rather than grief that displaces it. Taken together, the findings concerning her disrupted domestic routine and the subsequent partial restoration of financial and professional stability through her directing position confirm that post-divorce disruption affects health-sustaining routines, cognitive functioning, and financial stability simultaneously (Pellón-Elexpuru et al., 2024; Wanberg et al., 2022), while her capacity to access this restorative resource was itself contingent on a professional identity

that, although suppressed, had not been destroyed by the marriage a gendered pattern consistent with the divergent post-divorce trajectories documented in the broader literature (Trichal, n.d.).

3.3 Charlie Barber's Coping Mechanisms

The findings addressing the second research question show that Charlie's coping profile is dominated, for most of the film, by maladaptive emotion-focused strategies, and that his eventual movement toward adaptive coping is neither self-initiated nor complete. What is notable is not merely that he deploys avoidance, rationalization, and projection, but that these strategies function together as an integrated defensive system rather than as isolated responses to discrete stressors: his avoidance of legal representation, his rationalization of the affair, and his projection of blame onto Nicole during the argument scene all serve the same underlying function of preserving a self-concept organized around being a reasonable, non-culpable partner. The standard account of maladaptive emotion-focused coping typically treats such strategies as separable (Obbarius et al., 2021); the findings suggest that, at least for individuals with Charlie's psychological profile, they should instead be understood as components of a single defensive structure that must fail as a whole before adaptive coping becomes possible.

This integrated character of Charlie's maladaptive coping explains why his transition to adaptive strategies is preceded by a coping collapse rather than a gradual shift: because his various strategies reinforce a single self-concept, that self-concept can only be revised once enough of its supporting strategies fail simultaneously, which is precisely what occurs when his projection fails to redirect Nicole's accurate accusation and his suppression fails to contain the resulting distress. Even his subsequent adaptive coping direct co-parenting negotiation and the cognitive reappraisal triggered by Nicole's letter remains contingent on external input rather than self-generated insight; he does not independently arrive at the recognition that Nicole's sacrifices exceeded his own, but receives it through her letter. This qualifies any reading of Charlie's arc as a straightforward narrative of coping growth: his adaptive coping is real but incomplete, and the discussion treats it as a caution against over-generalizing his recovery as a model of how avoidant individuals typically move toward adaptive coping after divorce.

3.4 Nicole Barber's Coping Mechanisms

Nicole's coping trajectory is more deliberately sequenced and more substantially self-generated than Charlie's, though it is not without cost and is not independent of pre-existing

resources that not every individual possesses. Her pre-divorce coping pattern chronic self-silencing, in which she absorbed the relational costs of the marriage without registering them as losses is named only retrospectively, during her consultation with her lawyer, indicating that the maladaptive quality of self-silencing is not always apparent to the person employing it while they are employing it (Kaya & Kaya, 2023). This has implications for how emotion-focused coping should be applied to long-term relational patterns: self-silencing may not register experientially as coping at all but simply as the ordinary maintenance of a relationship, making it more resistant to revision than more acute maladaptive strategies precisely because it does not feel like a strategy.

Once the divorce process begins, Nicole's adaptive coping unfolds in a coherent, largely self-directed sequence: support-seeking through legal counsel, problem-focused professional re-engagement through the directing position she is offered, and constructive emotional processing of her grief for the marriage and for Charlie as a father. Unlike Charlie's adaptive coping, each of her strategies is initiated by her own appraisal of her situation, consistent with the Transactional Model's account of effective secondary appraisal (Obbarius et al., 2021): she correctly and repeatedly identifies which dimensions of her situation are controllable and directs her coping resources toward them rather than toward dimensions she cannot control. This trajectory, however, presupposes the prior existence of a professional identity that, though suppressed, had not been erased by the marriage; her pre-marriage career and the offer she once declined remain available to her precisely because they were set aside rather than abandoned, a precondition future research should treat as an important moderating variable. Finally, her grief after the custody hearing—occurring well after her most decisive adaptive coping actions—demonstrates that coping and grief operate concurrently rather than sequentially: for Nicole, effective coping creates the functional stability within which grief can be felt safely, rather than eliminating the need to feel it at all.

3.5 Structural Synthesis and Theoretical Contribution

Read together, the findings reveal that Charlie's and Nicole's psychological experiences of divorce, though triggered by the same external event, are organized around structurally opposite conditions: an absent self-examination in Charlie's case and a suppressed but intact self in Nicole's, summarized in Table 1. This structural opposition accounts for nearly every divergence the findings document the different functions anger serves for each character, the different sequencing of their adaptive coping, and the different degree to which their recovery depends on external versus internally generated resources. At the same time, the findings

reveal a significant convergence: both characters' trajectories are shaped less by the legal or logistical facts of the divorce than by the specific psychological architecture each brought into the marriage, supporting the shared premise of divorce psychology and coping theory that marital dissolution interacts with pre-existing individual structure to produce effects that are, in important respects, individually specific (Obbarius et al., 2021; Moral et al., 2021).

Table 1. Structural Comparison of Charlie and Nicole

Dimension	Charlie	Nicole
Pre-divorce condition	Identity fused with professional role; no prior self-examination	Identity suppressed but preserved beneath relational role
Function of anger	Symptom of failing suppression; precondition for grief	Instrumental self-assertion; reclamation of agency
Origin of adaptive coping	Externally triggered (coping collapse, Nicole's letter)	Self-directed (own appraisal of controllable resources)
Relation of coping to grief	Coping failure precedes and enables grief	Coping and grief operate concurrently
Degree of resolution	Partial; acceptance dependent on external disclosure	Substantial; grief held alongside functional recovery

This study's contribution is theoretical rather than empirical-generalizable: because it analyzes a fictional cinematic representation rather than lived experience, and because Charlie and Nicole are an affluent, white, creative-professional couple whose access to legal counsel and pre-existing professional networks is not equally available to all divorcing individuals, its claims should be read as tests of the logical structure of existing theoretical models rather than as claims about how divorce typically unfolds. Within that scope, the analysis suggests two specific refinements: that the sequencing of grief stages may be shaped less by an intrinsic emotional logic than by the specific defensive structure an individual brings into divorce, and that adaptive coping in divorce may presuppose a prior identity that is recoverable suppressed but preserved rather than one that has been extinguished altogether.

4. CLOSING

This study set out to answer how the psychological effects of divorce are portrayed through the character arcs of Charlie and Nicole, and what coping mechanisms each employs to navigate the emotional challenges of their separation. The analysis shows that these effects are portrayed as two structurally divergent but causally interconnected trajectories, each driven by the form of identity disruption the character brought into the marriage. Charlie's primary psychological effect is the forced exposure of an identity that had never been required, within the marriage, to examine its own emotional contribution to its strain; his

passage through denial, rationalization, and rage confirms the non-linear character of post-divorce grief while suggesting that anger can function as a gatekeeping mechanism for grief rather than one phase within it, and his provisional acceptance is achieved through an external catalyst rather than internally generated insight. Nicole's primary psychological effect is the surfacing of an identity disruption that predated the separation; her anger functions as an instrument of agency reclamation rather than reactive protest, and her depression following the custody hearing demonstrates that successful post-divorce adaptation does not eliminate grief but is marked by the capacity to sustain grief and functional competence simultaneously.

Regarding coping, Charlie's profile is dominated by an integrated system of maladaptive emotion-focused strategies that cannot be revised incrementally and that therefore fail abruptly rather than gradually, after which his transition toward problem-focused engagement remains dependent on external input at each stage. Nicole's coping undergoes the most complete transformation in the narrative, moving from an unrecognized pattern of chronic self-silencing to a deliberately sequenced, self-directed adaptive process—support-seeking, professional re-engagement, and emotional processing—that presupposes the prior existence of a recoverable professional identity. Taken together, the two arcs demonstrate that the psychological effects of divorce cannot be fully understood through single-character analysis, since the complementary fit between the characters' defensive structures explains the stability of the marriage itself for as long as it lasted.

For future research, this study recommends applying the same integrated framework to films depicting divorce under different socioeconomic or cultural conditions to test whether the theoretical refinements proposed here generalize beyond an affluent, Western case, and recommends empirical validation through longitudinal, multi-informant designs of the specific claims this analysis generates: that suppressive coping profiles may produce an asymmetric grief sequence in which anger precedes rather than accompanies grief, and that the recoverability of a pre-marital identity may function as a significant moderating variable in post-divorce coping outcomes.

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