

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

To support the data and help expand the research analysis, writer need help from various previous research sources related to the object, method of this research approach or the topic of the study.

A. Previous Studies

The following review of previous studies is organized into three thematic groups reflecting the three core fields this research brings together: (1) psychological analysis in film and literary studies, (2) divorce and emotional trauma, and (3) studies directly engaging with Marriage Story (2019). This organization allows the current study to situate itself at the intersection of these fields and to identify the specific gap this research addresses.

1: Psychological Analysis in Film

a. **Çelik and Elmacı (2024)** conducted a psychoanalytic study entitled "The Unconscious as Cinematographic Form: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Inception," published in Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities (Vol. 16, No. 1), a journal indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection. The study applied Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic frameworks to analyze how the unconscious mind of the protagonist is structured and represented through the film's cinematographic form. The researchers identified repression, guilt, and the return of the repressed as the central psychological mechanisms governing the character's behavior. This study establishes the methodological legitimacy of applying psychoanalytic theory to complex character analysis in contemporary film. The present research extends this approach by focusing on the relational and processual dynamics of divorce as a sustained psychological crisis experienced simultaneously by two characters.

b. **Reghintovschi and Reghintovschi (2025)** published "Faces of Depression: Why Do We Need Batman, Joker, and Bane?" in Frontiers in Psychology (Vol. 16), indexed in PubMed and

the Web of Science. Using a qualitative methodology informed by object relations theory and systematic film analysis, the study demonstrated that the characters of the Dark Knight Trilogy function as externalized psychic objects through which audiences process their own unresolved psychological conflicts — specifically grief, loss, and internal ego conflict. This study is methodologically relevant to the present research because it demonstrates that psychoanalytic character analysis in film is a valid scholarly approach when applied rigorously. Thematically, its focus on grief and ego conflict closely parallels the psychological terrain of *Marriage Story*, where both Charlie and Nicole navigate depressive experiences arising from the disintegration of their shared relational world.

2: Divorce and Emotional Trauma

a. Trichal (2021) published a meta-analytic review entitled "Effects of Divorce on Mental Health" in the *International Journal of Indian Psychology* (Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 1377–1392). The study reviewed 11 peer-reviewed publications on marital dissolution published between 2011 and 2021, sourced from PubMed and Google Scholar. The review documented that divorce consistently produces elevated rates of anxiety, depression, grief, identity disruption, and social withdrawal in both men and women. Significant gender differences were also reported: women are more likely to experience emotional distress related to loss of relational identity, while men are more likely to face disruption to social support networks. This review is foundational to the present study because it provides empirical grounding for the claim that divorce constitutes a form of psychological trauma with measurable, systematic effects on mental health. The current study extends Trichal's findings by examining how these documented effects are represented and dramatized through fictional characters in a narrative film. More recent research corroborates and sharpens this gendered pattern: a mixed-methods study of divorcees in Pakistan found that gender significantly shapes the intensity and character of post-divorce adjustment difficulties even after controlling for socioeconomic status (Rubab et al., 2023), while organizational research demonstrates that the same emotional expression, anger, carries a different social and psychological cost for women than for men, with women leaders facing systematic backlash for expressing anger that men generally do not face (Block et al., 2022). Together, these studies support treating gender not merely as a demographic variable but as a factor that conditions how a given psychological effect is experienced and expressed, which is directly relevant to the contrasting ways anger functions for Charlie and Nicole in this study's analysis.

b. Moral et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative, cross-sectional study entitled "The Relationship between Differentiation of Self and Psychological Adjustment to Separation," published in *Healthcare* (Vol. 9, No. 6, p. 738), an open-access journal indexed in PubMed and Scopus. The study examined 84 divorced adults using the Differentiation of Self Inventory–Short Form (DSI-SF) and the Psychological Adjustment to Separation Test (PAST). The central finding was that individuals with high levels of emotional fusion an inability to separate personal identity from significant relational bonds are most vulnerable to lonely negativity and co-parenting conflict following divorce. Emotional cutoff, defined as the tendency to psychologically distance oneself from painful situations, was also found to be a significant predictor of post-divorce maladjustment. The study concluded that the capacity for self-differentiation the ability to maintain a stable personal identity while remaining emotionally connected to others is a critical determinant of how well individuals navigate the psychological aftermath of divorce. A subsequent scoping review of 295 primary studies on differentiation of self confirms that this construct reliably predicts psychological and relational health across the wider empirical literature, lending further confidence to its application here (Calatrava et al., 2022). This study is directly applicable to the character analysis of *Marriage Story*. Nicole's prolonged emotional fusion with the role of Charlie's wife her suppression of an independent identity maps precisely onto the high-fusion pattern that Moral et al. identify as a predictor of severe post-divorce psychological distress. Conversely, Charlie's avoidant, emotionally cutoff style corresponds to the emotional cutoff dimension, which the study confirms as independently associated with adjustment difficulties. The present research uses this framework to interpret the contrasting coping trajectories of the two characters.

c. Hald et al. (2022) conducted a large-scale longitudinal study entitled "Mental Health Trajectories after Juridical Divorce: Does Personality Matter?" published in the *Journal of Personality* (Wiley), indexed in PubMed, Scopus, and the Web of Science. The study utilized a randomized controlled trial design with 676 participants, measuring mental health outcomes including anxiety, depression, somatization, and stress at the point of juridical divorce and at 3, 6, and 12 months following divorce. The study confirmed that divorce is among the most stressful life events in modern societies, consistently producing elevated levels of mental distress, depressive symptoms, anxiety, anger, and reduced physical health across the post-divorce period. Importantly, the study identified significant variability in psychological adjustment trajectories: some individuals follow a crisis-and-recovery pattern, experiencing sharp initial decline followed by gradual adaptation, while others exhibit persistent or escalating distress. Personality dimensions were found to moderate these trajectories significantly. A more recent person-centered study using latent profile analysis similarly identifies multiple distinct adjustment profiles rather than a single normative response to divorce, with parental gender, time since divorce, and the age of children distinguishing profiles characterized by overall adaptation, individual adaptation paired with relational maladaptation, and overall maladaptation marked by

heightened psychological distress and intensified conflict with the former partner (Corral et al., 2026), reinforcing the case for treating Charlie's and Nicole's trajectories as distinct rather than as variations on a single normative response. This study is highly relevant to the present research because it establishes that the psychological impact of divorce is not a static state but a dynamic process that unfolds along individual trajectories over time precisely the processual dimension that this study examines in the character arcs of Charlie and Nicole. The concept of divergent recovery trajectories is especially pertinent: Nicole's arc follows a crisis-to-adaptation pattern in which the divorce ultimately enables identity reclamation, while Charlie's trajectory demonstrates a more protracted struggle toward acceptance. Hald et al.'s longitudinal framework provides the empirical rationale for treating these two arcs as psychologically distinct and analytically separable.

3: Studies on Marriage Story (2019)

a. Katmer et al (2021) analyzed *Marriage Story* through Salvador Minuchin's structural family counseling and Murray Bowen's psychoanalytic family counseling. The researchers identified 24 scenes from the film that illustrate core techniques and concepts of these two counseling frameworks, concluding that the film accurately represents the structural and psychodynamic dimensions of divorce as understood in family therapy practice. This study is the most directly relevant precedent for the present research, as it applies psychoanalytic frameworks specifically to *Marriage Story*. However, its focus is on family systems and counseling theory rather than individual character psychology. The current study differs by applying psychoanalytic character analysis to Charlie and Nicole individually, incorporating coping mechanisms theory and the grief model to provide a more comprehensive account of their personal psychological trajectories.

b. Christiansen (2022) published "[The Ethics of the Dispute: A Filmographic Analysis of Postmarital Litigation] in *Ética y Cine Journal* (Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 19–30), published by the University of Buenos Aires and freely accessible on Redalyc.org. The article conducts a close filmographic analysis of *Marriage Story*, examining how the divorce litigation process transforms the communicative patterns between Charlie and Nicole. The study's central argument is that the legal adversarial structure embodied by the lawyers Nora and Jay progressively colonizes the private relational space of the couple, replacing their intimate language with an "epistemicidal" discourse of accusation and counter-accusation. Christiansen demonstrates, through detailed scene analysis, that the argument between Charlie and Nicole mirrors the rhetorical structure of a legal trial: each character attempts to invalidate the other's account of their shared history, construct a self-justifying narrative, and assign causal responsibility for the failure of the marriage. This dynamic is shown to escalate inevitably from civil negotiation to relational destruction, culminating in the climactic confrontation scene that is widely recognized as the film's psychological core. The study further argues that the film

illustrates how the "discussion as war" metaphor in which disagreement is structured as combat transforms a divorcing couple into adversaries whose psychological survival appears to depend on the defeat of the other. This study is directly and substantially relevant to the present research. First, it provides a detailed reading of the specific scenes and character behaviors that this study also analyzes, establishing a scholarly basis for close filmographic reading of *Marriage Story*. Second, its identification of the psychological mechanisms through which legal conflict amplifies relational destruction displacement of grief into argumentation, narrative construction of self-victimization, and the epistemic devaluation of the former partner corresponds precisely to the Freudian defence mechanisms of projection, rationalization, and intellectualization that this study examines. The present research extends Christiansen's analysis by situating these communicative and rhetorical patterns within a psychoanalytic character framework, tracing their roots in the unconscious psychological structures and attachment histories of Charlie and Nicole individually.

B. Underlying Theories

This research draws upon several theoretical frameworks from the fields of psychoanalysis, psychology, and literary/film studies to analyze the psychological effects of divorce as portrayed through the characters of Charlie and Nicole in *Marriage Story* (2019). The following theories serve as the analytical lens through which character behavior, emotional responses, and coping strategies are examined.

1. Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory

a. The Three Structures of Personality: Id, Ego, and Superego

The structural model that Freud introduced in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) proposes that the human psyche is organized around three distinct functional structures, each governed by a different principle and a different relationship to consciousness. The id is the most primitive structure, present from birth and operating entirely on the pleasure principle: the urgent, automatic striving for immediate gratification of instinctual drives, including the libidinal drives of love and attachment and the aggressive drives of hostility and destruction. The id is wholly unconscious; it neither reasons nor recognizes time and contradiction, and it is unaffected by the demands of external reality. Its sole aim is the discharge of tension and the production of pleasure. The ego develops from the id through contact with the external world and operates on the reality principle: the capacity to delay gratification, tolerate frustration, and navigate external demands in ways that are socially feasible. The ego is partly conscious and partly preconscious; it is the executive structure of the personality, responsible for perception, memory, reasoning, and the regulation of behavior. Critically, the ego serves as the mediator between the id's impulsive demands and the external world, seeking satisfaction in ways that avoid punishment or reality-based failure (Hussain et al., 2024). The superego is the last structure to develop, arising

through the internalization of parental authority and, through it, the moral standards of the social world. It operates through two internal mechanisms: the *conscience* the internalized prohibition that generates guilt when violated and the *ego-ideal* the internalized aspiration toward moral perfection against which the ego perpetually measures itself. An overly dominant superego produces excessive guilt, self-condemnation, and anxiety, even when no actual transgression has occurred; a weak or absent superego fails to restrain the id's impulsive demands, resulting in poorly regulated behavior (Hussain et al., 2024; Di Giuseppe & Perry, 2021). The three structures are not independent faculties but are engaged in continuous, dynamic interaction: the ego constantly negotiates between the id's drives and the superego's prohibitions, under the constraints of external reality, and it is the tension generated by this three-way negotiation that produces the full range of emotional experience including the negative emotions that characterize the post-divorce period.

b. Structural Conflict

The most consequential implication of the structural model for the analysis of negative emotion and the most frequently misunderstood feature of Freudian theory is that no emotion is the direct product of a single structure. Approaches that map individual emotions onto individual structures treating guilt as simply the “emotion of the superego,” sadness as the “emotion of the id,” or fear as the “emotion of the ego” misread the structural model as a static typology rather than a dynamic process. In the Freudian account, negative emotions are the *surface manifestations of dynamic conflict between the id, ego, and superego*, not representations of any single structure operating independently. This distinction has direct consequences for how specific negative emotions should be read in character behavior.

Anxiety is not the exclusive emotion of any one structure; in Freud's mature theory, it is a signal produced by the ego in response to a perceived danger. That danger may be external (a threat from the environment), structural-internal from the id (an impulse threatening to overwhelm the ego's regulatory capacity), or moral-internal from the superego (the threat of punishment for a real or fantasied transgression). Fear, as the conscious form of anxiety, is therefore always the product of the ego's encounter with a threat that presses on it from multiple directions simultaneously never a simple “ego response” in isolation from id or superego pressure.

Guilt is often described as the emotion associated with the superego, but this formulation is misleading. What generates guilt is the superego's punitive action upon the ego: the ego has actually or in fantasy violated the standards the superego has internalized, and the superego responds by directing self-accusation and condemnation toward the ego. Guilt is therefore the felt consequence of a superego-ego conflict, not a unilateral superego product. Its intensity is shaped by the severity of the superego's internalized standards and by the degree of id drive energy that was incorporated into the superego during its formation (Di Giuseppe & Perry,

2021). Excessive superego dominance produces not moral clarity but anxiety and paralysis; a healthy ego must be able to bear responsibility without being crushed by the superego's punitive demands.

Sadness and depression are the ego's response to object loss: the experience of having lost a person or relationship to whom the ego had directed libidinal investment originating in the id. In mourning, the ego gradually withdraws that id-level investment from the lost object and eventually reinvests it elsewhere. In melancholia the pathological intensification of grief the ego cannot complete this withdrawal because it has unconsciously identified with the lost object, so the superego turns its aggression against the ego itself, producing the self-accusation and hopelessness characteristic of clinical depression. Sadness is therefore not the "emotion of the id" in any simple sense: it is the ego's experience of a disrupted id-level libidinal bond, mediated by the superego's potential to transform grief into self-attack (Loway & Nurochman, 2023).

Anger may arise from id-level aggressive drive energy breaking through insufficient ego regulation the form it takes when it is explosive and disproportionate but it may equally arise from the ego's instrumental response to a frustration appraised as external, or from the superego's direction of moral condemnation outward rather than inward (the defense Freud identified as projection). The same surface emotion, anger, may therefore serve completely different structural functions depending on the dynamic context that produced it. The analytical consequence is decisive: to identify an emotion in character behavior is only the beginning of analysis. The psychoanalytic question that must follow is: *which structural conflict is this emotion expressing?* That question cannot be answered by consulting a fixed schema that assigns one emotion to one structure; it requires examination of the specific dynamic context the characters internalized relational history, the nature of the current stressor, and the defense mechanisms currently active in which the emotion appears.

c. Defense Mechanisms

When id-superego conflict generates anxiety that exceeds the ego's capacity for conscious, adaptive management, the ego deploys defense mechanisms: unconscious psychological operations that reduce anxiety by distorting, redirecting, or suppressing the threatening material. Defense mechanisms are not themselves emotions; they are the ego's methods for managing the anxiety that structural conflict produces, and they determine the form in which suppressed emotional content eventually surfaces (Di Giuseppe & Perry, 2021).

The major defense mechanisms relevant to the analysis of divorce psychology are: repression, which keeps threatening id impulses and their associated memories entirely outside conscious awareness; projection, which attributes one's own unacceptable impulses or feelings to another person, converting an internal structural threat into an external one; rationalization, which constructs a post-hoc logical justification for behavior actually driven by unconscious motivations, making it appear deliberate and reasonable; intellectualization, which divorces

affect from cognition, enabling the individual to discuss emotionally loaded material in abstract terms without experiencing its full emotional weight; and displacement, which redirects drive energy from its original threatening object toward a substitute that is less dangerous to the ego. The analytical significance of defense mechanisms is that they explain why individuals whose behavior appears surface-coherent may be simultaneously enacting unconscious structural conflicts that contradict that surface. In the context of divorce, where both id-level attachment drives and aggressive drives are simultaneously mobilized by the loss of the love object, defense mechanisms constitute the primary medium through which the underlying structural conflict is managed, expressed in disguised form, and ultimately when the defenses fail exposed (Hussain et al., 2024).

d. The Freudian Logic of Negative Emotions in the Context of Divorce

Applied to the psychology of divorce, the structural model and the dynamic conflict account of emotion together explain the constellation of fear, guilt, sadness, and anger that empirical research has consistently documented in divorcing individuals (Trichal, 2021; Hald et al., 2022) not as independent symptoms but as interlocking expressions of a single, sustained id-ego-superego conflict. Divorce generates a structural crisis across all three levels simultaneously. At the level of the **id**, the dissolution of the marital bond disrupts the libidinal cathexis the emotional investment directed toward the partner and toward the shared relational self the marriage constituted; this disruption produces the grief and sadness of object loss, whose psychological work consists in the gradual withdrawal and reinvestment of libidinal energy. At the level of the **superego**, divorce activates guilt not necessarily because the individual was morally at fault, but because the superego interprets the failure of the marriage as a violation of the internalized ideals of devotion, fidelity, and relational adequacy. At the level of the **ego**, the simultaneous pressure of id-level loss and superego-level guilt generates the anxiety fear of further loss, of financial collapse, of social judgement, and of superego punishment to which the ego responds by mobilizing whatever defense mechanisms are available in its particular relational history. It is this three-level structural crisis that the analysis in Chapter IV traces through the specific scenes, dialogues, and behaviors of Charlie and Nicole across the arc of their divorce. The goal of the Freudian analysis in this study is therefore not to label any single emotion as the expression of any single structure, but to identify, for each emotionally significant moment in the film, the specific configuration of id-ego-superego conflict from which that emotional surface has been produced and through which defense mechanism the ego has attempted to manage it.

2. The Psychology of Divorce

a. Divorce as a Multi-Dimensional Psychological Crisis

Divorce is not a single event but a sustained psychological crisis that disrupts multiple dimensions of an individual's life at once. Research consistently demonstrates that marital dissolution produces a wide range of negative mental health consequences, including elevated anxiety, clinical depression, grief, social withdrawal, and a significant disruption to personal identity (Trichal, 2021). These effects rarely remain confined to the period of separation itself; they persist well beyond the legal dissolution of the marriage and often intensify during the months immediately following juridical divorce (Hald et al., 2022). The multi-dimensional quality of the crisis — simultaneously affecting the emotional, social, economic, and relational aspects of an individual's life — means that no single theoretical lens can fully account for its psychological impact. Understanding divorce as a psychological phenomenon therefore requires frameworks that are sensitive to its processual, relational, and individual dimensions simultaneously (Wanberg et al., 2023).

b. Identity Disruption and the Loss of Relational Self

Among the most psychologically profound consequences of divorce is the disruption it inflicts upon the individual's sense of self. For many individuals, personal identity has been significantly organized around the marital role, and the dissolution of the marriage therefore constitutes a loss not only of the partner but of a version of the self that only existed in relation to that partner (Moral et al., 2021). This process is particularly acute for individuals who exhibit high levels of emotional fusion — an inability to maintain a stable personal identity independent of significant relational bonds — as such individuals have, over the course of the marriage, subordinated their individual goals, preferences, and self-concept to the demands of the relationship (Moral et al., 2021). The result is a form of psychological loss that goes beyond ordinary grief: the individual must reconstruct not only a social life without the former partner, but an entirely new sense of who they are (Wanberg et al., 2023). This challenge of identity reconstruction is one of the defining psychological tasks of the post-divorce period and constitutes a central dimension of the psychological experience depicted in *Marriage Story*.

c. The Emotional Stages of Divorce: A Non-Linear Grief Process

The psychological trajectory through divorce is commonly described through the lens of grief theory, which identifies a sequence of emotional responses including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Scholarship on the application of grief frameworks to non-bereavement loss has confirmed that these stages are observable in individuals experiencing divorce, although their progression is rarely linear and varies significantly across individuals (Avis et al., 2021). Denial may manifest as an initial refusal to accept the irreversibility of the marital breakdown; anger emerges as resentment toward the former partner or the circumstances of the separation; bargaining takes the form of attempts to preserve aspects of the shared life or renegotiate the terms of the relationship; depression follows as the full weight of the loss is confronted; and acceptance involves the gradual rebuilding of life and identity outside the marriage (Avis et al., 2021). The anger stage in particular is not a uniform or unitary state: a

recent meta-analysis of anger and emotion-regulation strategies found that anger is consistently associated with avoidance, rumination, and suppression, and consistently negatively associated with acceptance and cognitive reappraisal, indicating that how an individual habitually regulates emotion shapes whether anger functions as a transitional release or as a sign of entrenched defensive avoidance (Pop et al., 2025). Critical to the application of this framework is the recognition that these stages are not experienced as a fixed sequence but as overlapping and recurring emotional states, and that individuals may cycle between them in response to new developments in the divorce process, including legal proceedings, custody negotiations, and renewed contact with the former partner (Hald et al., 2022).

d. Post-Divorce Physical Health Deterioration and Socioeconomic Disruption

The consequences of divorce extend well beyond psychological distress to produce measurable deterioration in physical health and socioeconomic stability. A comprehensive three-level meta-analysis synthesizing evidence across multiple studies and countries found that divorced individuals face significantly elevated risks across a broad range of physical health pathologies, with this risk heightened further for women, those with lower incomes, the unemployed, and individuals without higher education (Pellón-Elexpuru et al., 2024). The meta-analysis identified multiple pathways through which divorce damages physical health: the disruption of health-sustaining routines established within the marriage, the increased adoption of harmful coping behaviors such as alcohol consumption and physical inactivity, and the loss of the practical and emotional support that the marital relationship previously provided (Pellón-Elexpuru et al., 2024). Socioeconomic disruption constitutes a closely linked and particularly consequential dimension of post-divorce harm. Research tracking divorced individuals across the work domain found that marital dissolution produces measurable changes in cognitive functioning, professional engagement, and workplace performance, with these effects most pronounced in the period immediately surrounding the separation (Wanberg et al., 2023). Financial instability following divorce creates a condition of reduced personal agency and perceived entrapment that amplifies existing emotional distress and significantly impedes the individual's capacity for healthy psychological adjustment (Wanberg et al., 2023). Longitudinal research confirms that these accumulated physical, financial, and occupational disruptions contribute directly to the divergent mental health trajectories observed after divorce: individuals whose post-divorce resources are most severely depleted are significantly more likely to exhibit persistent or escalating psychological distress rather than a crisis-to-recovery pattern (Hald et al., 2022).

e. Gender Differences and Divergent Post-Divorce Trajectories

The psychological experience of divorce is shaped in measurable ways by gender. Women are more likely to report distress specifically related to the loss of relational identity, as their professional ambitions and individual goals have more commonly been suppressed or subordinated within the marriage (Trichal, 2021). Men, by contrast, more frequently report distress arising from the disruption to social support networks and the loss of daily contact with

children and domestic structure (Trichal, 2021). These gendered patterns also manifest in divergent post-divorce adjustment trajectories. Longitudinal research following divorced individuals across twelve months post-separation found that individuals who had experienced significant identity suppression within the marriage tend to follow a crisis-to-adaptation trajectory in which the divorce ultimately enables identity reclamation and improved wellbeing, while those with more avoidant psychological profiles tend toward protracted recovery (Hald et al., 2022). Research further demonstrates that the workplace is a domain in which these divergent trajectories become particularly visible: divorcing individuals show measurable changes in cognitive functioning, work engagement, and professional performance across the divorce period, with the nature and trajectory of these changes differing systematically by gender (Wanberg et al., 2023).

3. Coping Mechanisms Theory

a. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

Coping mechanisms are the cognitive and behavioral strategies through which individuals manage the psychological demands of stressful situations. The theoretical foundation most widely employed in contemporary coping research is the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, which holds that stress arises not from objective conditions alone but from the transaction between an individual and their environment specifically, from the appraisal that the demands of a situation exceed the individual's available coping resources (Obbarius et al., 2021). A theoretical integration of work-family studies with the transactional model clarifies that this framework involves two sequential appraisal processes: primary appraisal, in which the individual evaluates whether a situation constitutes a threat, harm, or challenge; and secondary appraisal, in which they assess the resources and strategies available to manage it (Ryu, 2024). Coping is the cognitive and behavioral effort mobilized in response to this appraisal process, directed at managing demands judged to exceed personal resources. The model has been empirically confirmed across diverse populations and life stressors, demonstrating that appraisal processes predict coping strategy selection, which in turn predicts mental health outcomes including depression, anxiety, and burnout (Spătaru, 2024). This model is particularly well suited to the analysis of divorce, in which the individual's cognitive appraisal of their situation as manageable or overwhelming, as challenge or catastrophe significantly shapes the quality and effectiveness of their coping responses across the entire dissolution process.

b. Problem-Focused Coping: Direct Engagement with the Stressor

Within the transactional model, problem-focused coping refers to efforts directed at actively managing, reducing, or eliminating the source of stress through deliberate goal-directed action. This orientation encompasses behaviors including information-gathering, planning, decision-making, and the development of new skills to address the demands of the situation (Obbarius et

al., 2021). Problem-focused coping is most effective when the stressor is appraised as controllable that is, when the individual judges that direct action can meaningfully alter the situation or its consequences (Ryu, 2024). According to the transactional model, individuals who appraise work-family role conflicts and family dissolution events primarily as challenges rather than threats are significantly more likely to engage in proactive problem-focused coping, and this appraisal orientation itself is a modifiable cognitive disposition rather than a fixed personality trait (Ryu, 2024). Applied to the context of divorce, problem-focused strategies may include proactive negotiation of custody and financial arrangements, career planning, relocation decisions, and the deliberate construction of new social structures. Recent research further demonstrates that a challenge-based stress mindset the belief that stressors can produce growth significantly predicts proactive coping engagement and subsequent psychological wellbeing (Mansell & Turner, 2023). This protective effect is not limited to younger or clinical populations: a study of problem-focused coping as a mediator between emotional clarity and mental health found that the strategy continued to reduce depressive symptoms and increase life satisfaction even among older adults navigating major life transitions, underscoring its relevance across the lifespan (Cho & Choi, 2024).

c. Emotion-Focused Coping: Regulating Internal Distress

Emotion-focused coping is directed not at the external source of stress but at the internal emotional distress it generates. The individual employing emotion-focused strategies manages their affective response through mechanisms such as seeking emotional support, expressive processing of emotions, cognitive reappraisal of the situation's meaning, distraction, or engagement in comfort-providing activities (Obbarius et al., 2021). The transactional model identifies emotion-focused coping as the dominant strategy when a stressor is appraised as uncontrollable conditions that characterize the most distressing dimensions of divorce, including the irrecoverable loss of the partnership and the grief associated with dissolved shared life plans (Ryu, 2024). Contemporary research emphasizes that emotion-focused coping is not inherently maladaptive; when it takes the form of constructive emotional processing and social support-seeking, it enables the individual to manage acute distress while longer-term adaptation processes are engaged (Spătaru, 2024). A serial-mediation study of coping during sustained crisis similarly found that individuals tend to deploy emotion-focused strategies first, as an immediate resort, before transitioning to problem-focused strategies once the stressor has been cognitively reappraised, suggesting that the two coping modes are sequential phases of a single response rather than a binary choice (Srivastava et al., 2023). However, when emotion-focused coping takes the form of suppression, chronic rumination, or systematic avoidance of the emotional realities of the loss, it significantly impedes healthy psychological adjustment and prolongs the period of acute distress (Obbarius et al., 2021). One emotion-focused strategy of particular relevance to this study is self-silencing the inhibition of one's own needs, opinions, or emotional expression in order to preserve a relationship which has been shown to reduce immediate relational conflict while increasing the silencing individual's own distress and general

psychological symptoms over time (Demir-Kaya & Kaya, 2023), and which young women in particular have been documented to deploy as a learned strategy for relationship maintenance even at direct cost to their own wellbeing (Torp Løkkeberg et al., 2024).

d. Adaptive Versus Maladaptive Coping in Divorce

The distinction between adaptive and maladaptive coping is particularly consequential in the context of divorce, where the demands are sustained, multi-dimensional, and involve ongoing contact with the source of stress through shared parenting and legal proceedings. Adaptive coping is characterized by emotional openness, active engagement with practical demands, flexible cognitive reappraisal of changed circumstances, and the maintenance of social support networks (Hald et al., 2022). Maladaptive coping, by contrast, includes emotional suppression, avoidance of necessary decisions, displacement of unprocessed grief into conflict with the former partner, social withdrawal, and substance use (Moral et al., 2021). Research consistently demonstrates that maladaptive coping significantly prolongs psychological distress, impairs co-parenting communication, and delays the reconstruction of post-divorce identity and social functioning (Hald et al., 2022). A large cross-cultural meta-analysis spanning 44 nations confirms that this adaptive-maladaptive distinction is robust across highly varied cultural contexts: problem-focused and avoidant coping styles showed consistent associations with psychological symptoms regardless of national setting, although the strength of emotion-focused and social-support-seeking strategies was further moderated by culture-level dimensions such as uncertainty avoidance (Cheng et al., 2023). A critical finding in the contemporary coping literature is that the capacity for self-differentiation the ability to maintain a stable personal identity while remaining emotionally connected to others is a key determinant of coping quality in divorce: individuals with higher self-differentiation are more capable of remaining functionally effective under the stress of dissolution, while those with lower self-differentiation tend toward emotional fusion or emotional cutoff, both associated with significantly poorer adjustment outcomes (Moral et al., 2021). The successful endpoint of adaptive coping is rarely the simple absence of distress; a narrative analysis of divorced women's lived accounts found that successful post-divorce identity reconstruction is instead achieved through active meaning-making and the reinterpretation of the divorce itself as a transformative rather than purely destructive event (Ashalatha et al., 2025), a pattern closely consistent with the trajectory this study identifies in Nicole's arc.

e. Synthesis: Divorce Psychology and Coping Theory as Complementary Frameworks

The Psychology of Divorce and Coping Mechanisms Theory are not independent frameworks but complementary lenses that together produce a comprehensive account of the psychological experience of marital dissolution. Divorce psychology identifies what happens to the individual identity disruption, grief stages, physical health deterioration, gendered trajectories, and mental

health consequences while coping theory explains how the individual responds to and manages what happens (Obbarius et al., 2021). The transactional model is particularly important to this synthesis because it locates the quality of the individual's coping response in the dynamic transaction between their cognitive appraisal of the situation and the strategies they mobilize a process continuously renegotiated as the divorce unfolds across its legal, emotional, and relational phases (Ryu, 2024). Recent longitudinal research confirms that mental health trajectories after divorce are significantly shaped by the coping strategies employed, with adaptive coping predicting crisis-to-recovery trajectories and maladaptive coping predicting persistent or escalating distress (Hald et al., 2022). Furthermore, the physical health and workplace research demonstrates that coping strategies have consequences extending beyond psychological wellbeing into physical health, professional performance, and socioeconomic stability, affecting how individuals reconstruct their lives in the post-divorce period (Pellón-Elexpuru et al., 2024; Wanberg et al., 2023). Applied to *Marriage Story*, this integrated framework enables the analysis of Charlie and Nicole not merely as individuals experiencing documented psychological effects of divorce, but as individuals whose coping strategies problem-focused, emotion-focused, adaptive, and maladaptive actively shape the divergent psychological trajectories that the film dramatizes from separation to acceptance.

C. Theoretical Application

The researcher uses psychoanalytic theory to analyze the film. Researcher focused on psychological effects of divorce as portrayed through the characters of Charlie and Nicole. The type of data in this study is written documents taken from events and scenes in the film *Marriage Story*. Research data sources, the primary data source is the *Marriage Story* film (2019) and secondary data is documents, journals, articles, and websites on the internet related to research.