

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

A. Conclusion

This study set out to answer two research questions: First, how are the psychological effects of divorce portrayed through the character arcs of Charlie and Nicole in *Marriage Story* (2019); and second, what coping mechanism do Charlie and Nicole employ to navigate the emotional challenges of their divorce. The analysis conducted in Chapter IV, applying the integrated theoretical framework established in Chapter II, yields definitive answers to both question answers that also generate specific modifications to the existing theoretical literature.

1. The Psychological Effects of Divorce

The psychological effects of divorce are portrayed through the characters of Charlie and Nicole as two structurally divergent but causally interconnected trajectories, each driven by the form of identity disruption the individual brought into the marriage. For Charlie, the primary psychological effect of divorce is the forced exposure of an identity that had never been required, within the marriage, to examine its own emotional contribution to the relationship. His professional self-fused with his role as a theater director and protected from scrutiny by his consistent emotional cutoff is simultaneously destabilized by the legal, financial, and relational demands of the separation, producing a compounding distress dynamic in which identity threat and socioeconomic pressure amplify each other rather than operating independently. His passage through the emotional stages of divorce is non-linear in a specific structural sense: denial and rationalization do not coexist with grief but actively prevent its emergence, such that the anger stage functions not as one phase within a grief sequence but as the gatekeeping mechanism through which suppressed grief becomes psychologically accessible for the first time. His provisional acceptance at the film's close is achieved not through internally generated insight but through the external catalyst of Nicole's letter, which provides information his suppressive coping had prevented him from accessing through introspection alone.

For Nicole, the primary psychological effect of divorce is the surfacing of an identity disruption that predated the separation. Her professional self was not destroyed by the marriage but suppressed within it; the loss of relational self that the Psychology of Divorce identifies as a consequence of divorce was, in her case, already complete before the legal proceedings began. The divorce provides the relational and discursive conditions specifically, the professional advocacy of a lawyer who explicitly invites an honest account of the marriage under which she can name this pre-existing loss for the first time. Her anger at key junctures of the narrative does not function as a reactive protest against loss, as the standard grief-stage model characterizes the anger stage, but as an instrument of agency reclamation: a deliberate assertion of self that the

marriage had made structurally impossible. Her depression following the custody hearing does not signal adjustment failure but demonstrates that effective post-divorce adaptation does not eliminate grief and that the capacity to sustain grief and functional competence simultaneously is the more accurate marker of successful adjustment for this population. Taken together, the two arcs demonstrate that the psychological effects of divorce cannot be fully understood through single-character analysis: the stability and duration of the marriage itself is explained only by the fit between the two characters' complementary defensive structures, each of which made the other's coping mode sustainable for longer than it otherwise would have been.

2. Coping Mechanisms

Charlie's coping profile is dominated, throughout the majority of the narrative, by an integrated system of maladaptive emotion-focused strategies suppression, avoidance, rationalization, and projection that function not as independent responses to discrete stressors but as mutually reinforcing components of a single defensive architecture organized around the preservation of a coherent, non-culpable self-concept. Because these strategies are structurally interdependent, they cannot be revised incrementally; their failure is necessarily simultaneous and abrupt, producing the coping collapse of the argument scene before adaptive coping becomes structurally possible. Following collapse, Charlie transitions toward problem-focused engagement directly negotiating custody arrangements, planning relocation, and eventually achieving cognitive reappraisal of the marriage through Nicole's letter. This transition, however, remains dependent on external input at each stage and is not fully self-generated, which distinguishes his recovery trajectory from the internally motivated adaptation the Transactional Model typically predicts as the outcome of effective secondary appraisal.

Nicole's coping profile undergoes the most complete transformation in the film. Her pre-divorce coping is organized around chronic self-silencing: a systematic and accumulating suppression of her own professional and personal needs in service of relational stability that does not register as a coping strategy at all while it is occurring, becoming nameable only retrospectively in conversation with Nora. Once the divorce begins and her stressor recognition is activated, her adaptive coping unfolds in a deliberately sequenced order: social support-seeking through legal representation first, problem-focused professional re-engagement second, and sustained emotional processing of grief for the marriage third. Each step creates the resource conditions for the next. This sequencing is not predicted by the Transactional Model as currently formulated, which specifies which coping strategies are effective without specifying in what order they should be deployed to maximize cumulative resource restoration. Nicole's trajectory also demonstrates that effective coping in divorce presupposes the prior existence of a recoverable resource: her professional re-engagement is available as a coping strategy only because her pre-marriage career identity, though suppressed, was preserved rather than eliminated. Where a prior identity has been fully extinguished rather than merely suppressed, this

pathway to adaptive coping may not exist, and the Transactional Model's secondary appraisal mechanism cannot account for this precondition.

B. Implications

The findings of this study carry implications across two fields: theoretical psychology and film and literary studies. These implications do not merely apply the study's conclusions to adjacent domains; they follow necessarily from the specific claims the analysis generates.

1. Theoretical Implications

The most significant theoretical implication of this study concerns the grief stage model as applied to divorce. The findings demonstrate that for individuals with suppressive, emotionally avoidant coping profiles, the anger stage does not occupy a sequential position within the grief process but functions as its structural precondition: the point at which the suppressive architecture collapses and grief first becomes cognitively and emotionally accessible. This is not a claim about non-linearity that the existing literature already acknowledges (Avis et al., 2021; Hald et al., 2022); it is a claim about the mechanism by which one stage becomes possible at all. The implication is that the grief stage model, as currently applied to divorce, requires a typological distinction between populations for whom anger is a grief stage and populations for whom it is the mechanism through which the grief process begins. Conflating these populations' produces systematically inaccurate predictions about how long denial will persist, how abruptly anger will emerge, and what conditions are necessary for movement toward acceptance predictions with direct consequences for how post-divorce psychological trajectories are modeled in empirical research.

A second theoretical implication concerns the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. The study's dual-character design reveals two structural gaps in the model that single-character analysis could not generate. The first is the absence of a "coping sequencing" concept: Nicole's arc demonstrates that the order in which adaptive strategies are deployed is as consequential for outcomes as the strategies themselves, because each step in her sequence creates the resource conditions for the next. The model accounts for which strategies are deployed but not for their ordering logic. The second is the absence of a "historical resource inventory" in the secondary appraisal construct: the model identifies resources available in the individual's current situation as the objects of secondary appraisal, but does not specify that suppressed prior-identity resources may be among the most consequential coping assets available to individuals in long-term high-fusion marriages. Both modifications are testable propositions that future empirical coping research could operationalize and examine in samples of divorcing individuals.

A third theoretical implication concerns the concept of post-divorce adjustment measurement. The finding that Nicole sustains genuine, unresolved grief concurrently with high professional and parental functioning demonstrates that grief intensity and adaptive functioning are orthogonal rather than inversely related in the post-divorce period. Research instruments that assess grief intensity as an indicator of poor adjustment a common operationalization in the quantitative divorce literature (Hald et al., 2022) may therefore be systematically misclassifying individuals who grieve genuinely while functioning effectively. The implication is that validated adjustment measures in divorce research should include an independent assessment of functional performance alongside grief or distress ratings, rather than treating them as proxies for each other.

2. Implications for Film and Literary Studies

For film and literary scholars, the study demonstrates that a psychologically well-constructed narrative film can function not merely as a cultural representation of psychological phenomena but as a valid site for generating theoretical claims about those phenomena. The dual-character comparative design used here analyzing Charlie and Nicole as two simultaneous runs of the same theoretical model, exposed to the same event from divergent psychological positions is a methodological contribution that could be productively extended to other films that center bilateral psychological processes: films depicting grief, addiction, trauma, or identity crisis experienced simultaneously by two characters in a shared relational system. *Marriage Story*'s psychological realism, in particular, makes it a resource that scholars in the Psychology of Divorce field could engage directly as a teaching and illustration tool, given that it dramatizes with unusual clinical precision the mechanisms coping collapse, externally catalyzed reappraisal, liberatory anger that the theoretical literature describes but rarely depicts with this level of character specificity.

C. Suggestions

The suggestions advanced here are grounded in the specific methodological and analytical limitations this study has identified in Section B.5 of Chapter IV. They are concrete recommendations for the research directions that would most directly address those limitations, rather than general expressions of hope for future scholarship.

1. For Future Film-Based Qualitative Research

The single most important limitation of this study is that it relies on a single researcher's interpretive judgments across all stages of the analysis. Future research replicating this study's

design should incorporate a second independent coder who applies the same a priori coding scheme to the same film without prior exposure to the first researcher's coding decisions. Inter-rater agreement should be calculated and reported, and any scenes on which the two coders disagree should be adjudicated through a principled, documented discussion process rather than defaulted to the primary researcher's reading. This modification would substantially strengthen the validity claim that the patterns identified in this study reflect the film's content rather than a single analyst's interpretive tendencies.

Future research using this study's methodological framework should also extend the dual-character comparative design to films depicting bilateral psychological crises across greater demographic diversity than *Marriage Story* provides. The present study's scope is limited to an affluent white American couple whose socioeconomic resources access to experienced legal representation, pre-existing professional networks, geographic mobility are not available to the majority of divorcing individuals globally. Applying the same integrated theoretical framework to films depicting divorce under conditions of socioeconomic precocity, in non-Western cultural contexts, or involving couples with children of different ages, would test whether the theoretical claims this study generates are specific to the conditions *Marriage Story* depicts or generalizable across a wider range of divorce experience.

2. For Empirical Divorce Research

This study generates three specific empirical research proposals that would directly test the theoretical claims advanced in Chapter IV. First, the claim that suppressive coping profiles produce an asymmetric grief sequence in which anger functions as a precondition for grief rather than as one of its stages predicts that, in a sample of divorcing individuals assessed at multiple time points, participants scoring high on emotional suppression measures should show higher levels of persistent denial, more abrupt and intense anger episodes, and greater dependence on external precipitating events for movement toward acceptance, compared to participants with lower suppression scores. A longitudinal design with quarterly assessments across the first year post-separation, including validated measures of emotional suppression, grief stage, anger intensity, and coping strategy, would be the appropriate empirical framework for testing this prediction.

Second, the claim that the recoverability of a pre-marital identity is a significant moderating variable in post-divorce coping outcomes predicts that, among divorcing individuals from long-term high-fusion marriages, those who retained access to a prior professional identity operationalized as having maintained professional credentials, networks, or opportunities during the marriage should show faster and more sustained problem-focused coping engagement and better one-year psychological adjustment outcomes than those whose prior professional identity was more thoroughly extinguished. This prediction could be tested in a cross-sectional or

longitudinal sample using a measure of “prior identity recoverability” that this study’s findings suggest should be developed and validated as a distinct psychological construct.

Third, the claim that grief intensity and adaptive functioning are orthogonal rather than inversely related in the post-divorce period implies that existing adjustment measures should be revised. Future scale development work in divorce psychology should produce instruments that assess grief or distress intensity and functional performance in the professional, relational, and parental domains as independent dimensions rather than as indicators of a single underlying adjustment construct. Validating such an instrument against current gold-standard measures would establish whether the grief-adjustment confound this study identifies is present in existing empirical literature and, if so, how substantially it has distorted estimates of post-divorce recovery trajectories.