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# Lesbian adoptive mothers' emotional responses and adaptation in the wake of relational dissolution

Katherine R. Allen <sup>a</sup> and Abbie E. Goldberg<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Human Development and Family Science, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia, USA; <sup>b</sup>Department of Psychology, Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA

## ABSTRACT

Relational dissolution is often characterized by heightened feelings, especially around co-parenting and child custody. Lesbian mothers may experience their emotions in uniquely nuanced ways due to intersections among female gender, minority sexual orientation, and family structural change. Framed by a critical feminist perspective, we conducted a qualitative analysis of telephone interview and online survey responses by 17 lesbian adoptive mothers whose relationship ended. Four emotional response patterns emerged – mostly positive, mixed feelings, mostly negative, very negative – corresponding to four adaptation patterns: adapted, improving, stalled, and stuck. We provide implications for individuals, families, and societal change related to LGBTQ divorcing families.

## KEYWORDS

Emotional responses; lesbian adoptive mothers; lesbian relationships

Although divorce is a commonplace experience, it remains stigmatized and is often viewed as a personal and relational failure (Ahrons, 2007; Goldberg & Garcia, 2015; Willén, 2015), especially if individuals fail to conform to the cultural mandate of obtaining “a good divorce” by disentangling from their former spouse and moving on with their lives (Ahrons, 1994). Lesbian mothers who are ending their same-sex partnerships may face unique and heightened feelings of stress, anger, and loss (Allen, 2007; Frost & LeBlanc, 2019), given the capacity of lesbian couples to create emotional closeness in their partnerships and prioritize intimate connection and equality in their relationships (Connolly, 2012; Richards et al., 2015). Complicating the potential for heightened emotional responses is the reality that many sexual minority women experience social and legal disadvantages due to not conforming to the dictate of heterosexual marriage and motherhood (Allen & Goldberg, 2020; Balsam et al., 2017). Given the broader societal invalidation surrounding their relationships, few social supports exist, either among one’s informal support networks or among clinicians and educators, to help sexual minority families deal with the intense emotions associated with relationship dissolution (Connolly, 2012; Farr & Goldberg, 2019; Goldberg & Allen, 2013). In this paper, we explore the emotionally charged experiences of lesbian mothers who have split up from the partners with whom they adopted their children.

## Post-divorce emotional responses and adaptation

The ending of a relationship is typically an emotionally dysregulating time, when negative feelings about oneself and one’s partner are prominent. As Maatta (2011) noted, “Great emotions and expectations are invested in love...The more you expect of a marriage, the easier you will be disappointed” (p. 416). Divorce is dysregulating because of the loss of an attachment relationship that provides a primary source of emotional and physiological stability (Sbarra, 2015). Individuals who

are able to work through their emotions, recover economically from financial losses (especially for women), and eventually repartner in a new relationship tend to show more positive adaptations to divorce (Raley & Sweeney, 2020).

Various dimensions of the marital relationship are relevant when considering the ability to adapt post-divorce. Perrig-Chiello et al. (2015) examined patterns of psychological adaptation to divorce among mid-life individuals who were married 25 years on average in terms of affective and cognitive well-being and subjective health. They found five patterns of response to marital breakup: average copers (49%), resilienters (29%), malcontents (12%), vulnerables (6%), and resigned (4%). Thus, the majority (78%) of individuals – the resilienters and the average copers – eventually adapted well, given a positive combination of intrapersonal and interpersonal resources. The most adaptive – the resilienters – scored lower on a measure of neuroticism and were more financially stable than all other groups. Thus, they possessed greater personal and structural resources. An important finding of this research is the heterogeneity among the 22% who were not adapting well to their divorce, as revealed in the three types of maladaptation. For example, vulnerable individuals reported the most negative emotional experiences, were the least likely to be in a new relationship, and were the most likely to have strained relationships with former spouses. This study revealed support for two seemingly contradictory explanations of adjustment to divorce: namely, the crisis model suggests that the negative consequences of divorce are temporary, and the chronic strain model indicates that negative consequences of divorce do not dissipate over time. In the Perrig-Chiello et al. (2015) study, both models appeared to be true, albeit to differing degrees, in part depending on different personal and structural resources.

Given that individual (e.g., neuroticism) and structural issues (e.g., finances) play a role in adjustment, parenting issues represent an additional factor that may impact individuals' emotional responses and psychological adaptation post-divorce. Intense discord between former partners is often linked to disputes about child custody decisions and parenting practices (Amato, 2010; Lebow & Rekart, 2007). For example, a review of research by Bergman and Rejmer (2017) revealed that parents' conflicts surrounding custody are often centered in conflicts of values, frequently stemming from concerns related to the other parent's capability to care for young children. Significantly, when divorced parents become stuck in an adversarial relationship with high levels of conflict, their inability to forge a constructive post-divorce relationship with one another can put their children's adjustment at risk (Demby, 2016). Willén (2015) found better emotional, relational, and familial outcomes for both parents and children when divorced spouses were able to take responsibility for their own emotions without unduly blaming the spouse, and to respond in a well-modulated way to each situation and interaction that arose. In contrast, divorced partners who were rigid in their emotional patterns, disagreed about childcare issues, and allowed hostile or hurt feelings to fester and overtake their interactions, tended to report worse outcomes for themselves and their children. These parents tended to ruminate on their divorce experience, blame the ex-partner, and nurture feelings of revenge (Willén, 2015).

In sum, divorce is one of the most stressful of life experiences (Knopfli et al., 2016). As such, the expression of negative emotionality (e.g., anger, resentment) and interpersonal conflict (e.g., blaming the ex-spouse, hostile communication) is common for many individuals in the short term during the divorce process – but, for the majority, such intensity toward the former spouse eventually stabilizes and dissipates over the three years following the divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2000; Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Most individuals do learn to manage their negative emotions and move forward with their lives (Schramm & Becher, 2020). Recent panel studies of the divorce process reveal that declines in mental health and life satisfaction are typically short-term, with most divorced individuals recovering in their psychological adjustment over time (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Of concern, then, are those who still experience charged emotional responses toward their ex-partners. Although a minority of the divorced population, some individuals are vulnerable to poor psychological adaptation to divorce (Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015), especially those who are stuck in a reactive pattern of being emotionally triggered by their ex-spouses (Demby, 2016).

### ***Lesbian mothers' experiences with relational dissolution: a feminist perspective***

Among those who may experience more nuanced and heightened emotional expression and discord are sexual minority mothers who are ending a same-sex partnership, including lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identified (LBQ) women. These women may experience more intense emotions, due to the intersections among female gender, minority sexual orientation, and family structural change. The roots of this emotional connection can be found in the origins of their lesbian partnerships. Given that women are more emotionally expressive and relationally focused than men overall (Chaplin, 2015; Del Giudice, 2015), one of the joys of establishing a lesbian relationship for many women is the satisfaction of joining their gendered histories of emotional competence and relationship-enhancing abilities with a female partner (Kurdek, 2004; Rothblum, 2009). Lesbians may experience strong emotions during the initial processes of forming and building their intimate partnership and becoming a parent, which are major life transitions accompanied by role restructuring, identity shifts, and relational changes. Long-term lesbian partners agree on “the value of talking, sharing intimate thoughts, and eliminating boundaries between partners” (Umberson et al., 2015, p. 546). Lesbian couples often utilize competent communication and empathic attunement practices in their relationships in order to achieve high levels of mutuality (Jonathan, 2009). Seen in their own right, and not compared to a heterosexual standard of relationships, the emotional closeness of lesbian partnerships, especially as a hedge against societal discrimination, is a source of strength and resilience (Biaggio et al., 2002; Connolly, 2006; Felicio & Sutherland, 2001).

Lesbians are highly invested in their mothering and almost all children born to or adopted by lesbian mothers are very much planned (Bos et al., 2003). Lesbians also possess high expectations for egalitarianism in their relationship, which extends to the division of labor in child care (see Lavner, 2017). In turn, when lesbian parents experience what they perceive as inequitable power arrangements, this may cause equally intensive frustration, disillusionment, or stress (Farr & Goldberg, 2019; Goldberg, 2013). Lesbian adoptive mothers, who are especially likely to be parenting children with special needs and multiple marginalized identities (e.g., due to race and disability), face unique strains that are exacerbated during the dissolution of their partnerships, given the augmented practical and emotional labor associated with parenting high-needs children, and the corresponding greater incidence of parenting stress (Goldberg, 2019). Adding to the emotionally intense experiences that may characterize lesbian-parent families, lesbian mothers have often pushed themselves to be exemplary representatives of a model minority family (Gianino & Sackton, 2019; Goldberg, 2007). The dissolution of their partnership must be seen in the context of this unique intersection among gender, sexual minority status, and the societal barricades of heterosexism, homophobia, and legal uncertainty (Balsam et al., 2017; Connolly, 2012; Farr & Goldberg, 2019).

Rather than blaming women for their emotional expressiveness in response to relationship dissolution, we interpret their experiences from a critical feminist perspective on motherhood for sexual minority women, which acknowledges and critiques the oppressive social institutions that privilege the heteronormative family and erase the power disparities in private and public spheres (Allen et al., *in press*; Baber & Allen, 1992). A critical feminist framework on family relationships and diverse family structures takes into account the interlocking systems of oppression generated by intersections among gender, race, class, sexuality, and the like (Few-Demo, 2014; Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). At the heart of this perspective is a focus on social justice and empowerment for those whose family lives are disproportionately challenged by systemic sexism, heterosexism, racism, and other systems of domination that limit opportunities and well-being for diverse families (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

In considering the particular oppressions that challenge lesbian mothers, it is notable that despite recent social transformations, including the 2015 advent of legalized same-sex marriage with the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Obergefell v. Hodges*, lesbian mothers of all backgrounds must deal with a stigmatized social identity against the backdrop of limited legal and institutional supports for their families. Same-sex couples experience unique stressors as a result of the stigmatized and devalued nature of their relationship. Stressors may encompass personal dimensions, such as expectations of

social and familial rejection and the need to constantly make decisions about sexual identity concealment or disclosure, and legal dimensions, such as the inability to adopt children together in certain states and jurisdictions (LeBlanc et al., 2015). Rostosky et al. (2016) found that married same-sex couples constantly dealt with internalized stigma, uncertainty about whether they should disclose the nature of their same-sex marriage (and the potential consequences of doing so), the homophobia-induced fear that their legal right to be married would be rescinded, and ambivalence about the pros and cons of getting married. For lesbian mothers of color (Moore, 2011), for lesbian mothers with limited economic resources (Badgett, 2018), and for trans and nonbinary lesbian mothers (Pfeffer & Jones, 2020), intersections with race, social class, and gender identity, respectively, further complicate the stigma and limitations imposed upon women's ability to care for their families. Thus, as feminist family theorists have argued, sexual minority identity and same-sex relationship ties are legally tenuous, which creates unique and incessant stressors and invalidates the relationships of LGBTQ individuals and their families at the institutional level (Allen et al., *in press*).

Against this backdrop of individual, relational, and societal challenges for lesbian mothers, this study builds on the literature regarding divorce processes and lesbian couple dynamics in order to understand the emotional and relational experience of lesbian adoptive mothers who have separated from the partner with whom they adopted their child(ren). The study was guided by two research questions: How do lesbian mothers describe their own emotional experience with separation and divorce from a same-sex partner? How do lesbian mothers describe their relational experience of sharing co-parenting and custody with their former partner?

## Method

### *Sample description*

The sample includes 17 women drawn from Abbie Goldberg's larger longitudinal study of adoptive parenting (e.g., Goldberg & Garcia, 2015), originally recruited during 2005–2009. Permission to conduct the study was approved by the Clark University internal human subjects review board. The women in the current study, all of whom identified with a lesbian sexual orientation, had adopted eight years prior to the latest wave of data collection (2015–2017), and were currently separated or divorced from their lesbian partners. The 17 women were white and lived in various cities and rural areas of the U.S. including residents of the Northeast, South, and West. They ranged in age from 35 to 53, with a mean of 44.5 years. All of the women were well-educated, including three with some college, four with a bachelor's degree, and 10 with an advanced degree (see Table 1).

On average, the women had been partnered, before separating, for 12 years (range of 6 to 17.75 years). Legal same-sex marriage was not available to everyone in the U.S. until 2015; thus, relational dissolution strategies varied among the 17 women. Ten women experienced the legal divorce process: five women had obtained a legal divorce; four women were in the process of obtaining a legal divorce; and one woman was in the process of legally dissolving her registered domestic partnership. Seven women did not experience a legal divorce because they had never legally married or registered their partnerships. Most women had or were currently navigating some form of shared or joint custody with their ex-partners; only two women did not have shared or primary custody of their children (their ex had primary custody). Seven women had new partners, and eight said their ex-partner was in a new relationship. Thirteen women said their children were currently in therapy, and nine women were in therapy themselves, demonstrating a strong commitment to obtaining professional support for their families.

Eleven mothers adopted one child, four mothers adopted two children, and two mothers adopted three children. Children ranged in age from 3 to 19 years ( $M = 8.77$ ), and 12 were boys and 13 were girls. Eight of the 25 children were white and 17 were of color, including multiracial or biracial. Fifteen of the children had some type of mild to multiple special needs, including a learning disability or a mental health diagnosis, such as depression or Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder.

**Table 1.** Sample demographics by adaptive pattern.

Name	Age	Education	Occupation	Relationship years pre-separation	Years since separation	Lesbian relationship pre-dissolution	Adaptive pattern
Mari	39	Masters	Therapist	9.5	0.5	Domestic partnership*	Adapted
Isla	46	Masters	Healthcare	14.5	1.5	Legal marriage	Adapted
Betsy	45	Some college	Grounds care	17.75	3.0	Not married	Adapted
Dina	49	Masters	Consultant	6	7.0	Not married	Adapted
Elena	45	Bachelors	Business	7.5	3.0	Legal marriage	Improving
Cora	38	Masters	Social worker	13.5	3.5	Domestic partnership	Improving
Evie	45	Some college	Manager	7.5	3.5	Legal marriage	Improving
Leila	35	Bachelors	Administration	9	0.3	Not married	Stalled
Julia	45	Masters	Administration	14	0.5	Legal marriage	Stalled
Adele	47	Bachelors	Entertainment	11	2.5	Not married	Stalled
Cary	41	Masters	Therapist	15	3.0	Domestic partnership	Stalled
Fiona	45	Bachelors	Entertainment	17	3.5	Not married	Stalled
Freda	49	Masters	Technology	17	4.5	Not married	Stalled
Jade	50	Doctorate	Higher education	14	0.7	Legal marriage	Stuck
Hazel	36	Masters	Therapist	14	1.2	Domestic partnership	Stuck
Kate	53	Doctorate	Business	8	2.0	Legal marriage	Stuck
Gaby	49	Some college	Child care	8.5	5.0	Not married	Stuck

\* legal, registered domestic partnership with the same rights as marriage, allows divorce

## Procedures

Participants completed online surveys and interviews during the pre-adoptive stage and at various points after they were placed with a child. At the most recent assessment point, during the telephone interview, they were asked if they had separated or divorced since their child's adoption. The 17 women who said they had split up answered seven open-ended questions and seven closed-ended questions on the telephone, and were also sent a separate online survey with 26 open-ended questions and nine close-ended questions about the legal nature of their relationships, the relationship dissolution, child custody arrangements, and the social and emotional aftermath of separation. An example of a closed-ended question was to indicate "Which of the following issues contributed to the separation/divorce?", where responses included growing apart, infidelity, parenting disagreements, financial issues, substance use, violence, disagreements about sex, and communication difficulties. They were asked to respond to open-ended questions about ways their relationship with their ex-partner had become easier or changed over time and to describe the issues they had in handling separation, coparenting, custody, and new partners. Participants were also asked about their experiences with therapy, to describe the hardest part of the separation process, and the individuals and services that had been most and least supportive to them. Finally, they were asked to describe their views of marriage and same-sex relationships.

## Data analysis process

We conducted a qualitative analysis of the 17 interview transcripts and online survey responses using grounded theory principles of open, focused, and selective coding in order to generate an overarching storyline (Charmaz, 2014; Daly, 2007). We initially framed the analysis in terms of our guiding research questions with sensitizing concepts such as the expression of feelings about the process of separation and divorce, and scaffolding children. In the initial phase of data analysis – open coding – we generated an exhaustive list of key words, theoretical concepts, and preliminary themes that appeared from the entire data set of women's descriptions of the feelings, events, and processes

associated with splitting up from their lesbian partners (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). Further, we wrote case histories of each participant's "splitting up story" (assigning each woman a pseudonym), which we cross-referenced against the emerging themes. Women's splitting up stories were characterized by two overarching issues: (a) intense emotionality (and for some, very negative feelings) regarding what went wrong with the relationship and how the ex-partner was to blame, and (b) fervent concern about how the children were doing in the midst of their parents breaking up. Although the women varied in the positive to negative valence and intensity of their emotional responses about who was to blame for the break up, they universally expressed concern for their children, particularly because their children were adopted, and in many cases, were transracially adopted or had special needs. Thus, they emphasized their commitment to providing a stable, loving home for their adopted children in the midst of their relationships ending, and in a relatively hostile societal context that did not fully support their sexual minority and adoptive family status.

The next phase of data analysis, focused coding, involves sorting, synthesizing, and integrating the most significant initial codes (Charmaz, 2014). Specifically, we focused on how the women's emotional responses were experienced in light of their feelings about their former spouses, the ways they parented their children, and how far along they were in legally and/or socially completing the divorce process. For example, it was clear from reading the case histories and comparing the women's emotional responses that not all women were actively blaming their ex-partner for the breakup. The women who expressed mostly positive emotions had seemed to move past blame and accepted personal responsibility for the separation. This led us to consider the expression of both positive and negative emotions in understanding women's perceptions of the breakup. For example, we found that "blame" was a property only of the more negative narratives, allowing us to generate a distinction between the concept of owning one's own part in the breakup (taking responsibility) compared to continuing to blame the ex-partner for the relationship's demise, and in some cases, for the children's problems post-separation.

Selective coding is the final step in creating and honing a theoretical story line (Daly, 2007) about the women's perceptions of their relational dissolution as lesbian adoptive mothers. The current analysis is our interpretation of the women's emotional experience around their breakup, portraying how taking responsibility for one's own part in the breakup is distinct from ongoing emotional hostility to the ex-partner, and further addressing how mothers' concerns for their children entered into their heightened emotional expression. Building upon the data from this study and the existing literature, we further paired the emotional tenor of women's splitting up stories with their adaptation following relational dissolution.

## Findings

We found four emotional response patterns in the expression of (a) mostly positive, (b) mixed, (c) mostly negative, and (d) very negative feelings, which correspond to the women's level of adaptation: adapted, improving, stalled, and stuck, respectively (see Tables 2 and 3). In contrast to data about how emotional reactivity tends to dissipate within three years post-divorce for most heterosexual couples (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2000; Raley & Sweeney, 2020; Willén, 2015), we found that the temporal length of the relationship prior to separation or after separation did not differentiate in terms of lesbian mothers' intense emotional responses toward their former spouses. For example, the range of time since separation for the four women in the "positive" group was 6 months to 7 years, and, at the opposite end of the spectrum, the range of time in the "very negative" group was 9 months to five years. Further, the original legal status of the partnership did not intersect with these emotional response patterns, in that each type of legal relationship status (not legally married, registered domestic partnership, legal marriage) were represented across the four emotional types.

Instead, we found several other dimensions associated with the variability in women's emotional expression (see Table 3). Our data suggest that there may be some unique aspects of lesbian partnership dissolution to consider in light of lesbian couple dynamics and lesbian motherhood. Particularly

**Table 2.** Individual and relational contexts that make a difference in women's adaptation to relational dissolution.

Name	Tenor of women's stories	Divorce status	# of children	Transracially adopted child(ren)	Children with special needs	Type of custody/ caregiving	She has new partner	Ex has new partner
Mari	Mostly positive	Divorced	1	yes	no	50/50 split	yes	no
Isia	Mostly positive	Divorce pending	1	no	no	50/50 split	yes	yes
Betsy	Mostly positive	n/a	1	yes	no	Ex is primary	yes	yes
Dina	Mostly positive	n/a	1	yes	yes	Primary	yes	yes
Elena	Mixed	Divorced	1	no	yes	50/50 split	no	yes
Cora	Mixed	Divorced	1	yes	multiple	50/50 split	no	yes
Evie	Mixed	Divorced	1	no	yes	50/50 split	yes	no
Lella	Mostly negative	n/a	3	yes	multiple	Primary	no	no
Julia	Mostly negative	Divorce pending	2	yes	no	50/50 split	no	no
Adele	Mostly negative	n/a	2	yes	multiple	Primary	yes	yes
Cary	Mostly negative	Divorced	1	yes	multiple	50/50 split	no	no
Fiona	Mostly negative	n/a	1	yes	yes	Ex is primary	no	yes
Freda	Mostly negative	n/a	1	yes	yes	Primary	yes	no
Jade	Very negative	Divorce pending	2	yes	no	50/50 split	no	no
Hazel	Very negative	Divorce pending	1	no	multiple	Full custody	no	no
Kate	Very negative	Divorce pending	2	yes (1)	multiple	Primary	no	no
Gaby	Very negative	n/a	3	no	multiple	Primary	no	yes

**Table 3.** Emotional and relational components of women's splitting up stories by adaptive pattern to relational dissolution.

Adaptive pattern	Tenor of women's stories	Contributors to break-up	Feelings after break-up	Attribution of blame and responsibility	Perception of ex as a parent	Current parenting stress
Adapted	Mostly positive	Growing apart Parenting disagreements Communication difficulties Disagreements about sex	We're happier now. Hurt feelings have eased.	I take responsibility for my part, and feel bad I hurt her.	We are friendly and cooperative.	Low
Improving	Mixed	Growing apart Parenting disagreements Communication difficulties Disagreements about sex Ex's substance use Infidelity	Life is easier, but I still have some resentment. It's complicated.	I work hard at getting along with my ex.	We focus on our child.	Low
Stalled	Mostly negative	Growing apart Parenting disagreements Communication difficulties Disagreements about sex Ex's substance use Infidelity	Life with her was traumatic, so it is better we don't live together.	The break-up was entirely her fault.	She hurt our child by starting a new relationship too quickly.	Moderate to high
Stuck	Very negative	Growing apart Parenting disagreements Communication difficulties Ex's substance use Ex was violent	Things are much worse now.	I could have handled things better, but she was far worse.	Her parenting is harsh and inconsistent.	Very high

relevant to our sample of lesbian mothers was the fact that all women were still involved in co-parenting with their ex-partner. For women in the emotionally negative groups (mostly negative and very negative), their assessment of their ex-partner's parenting capacity may have contributed to their ongoing sense of being emotionally "activated" toward them: far from feeling "settled" or "cooled off", these women revealed ongoing intense and negative feelings toward the ex-spouse. Also noteworthy is that women in the mostly positive and mixed groups were all mothers of only children, whereas the women in the more negatively charged groups tended to have more children (one to three). Another domain that corresponded to women's emotional expression was whether they had a new partner: all of the women in the mostly positive group did, whereas none of the women in the very negative group did (see Table 3). Finally, degree of parenting stress was a distinguishing factor in women's emotional response patterns: those who demonstrated a more adaptive response described less parenting stress than those who were stalled or stuck in their adaptation to the divorce process.

### ***Adapted and mostly positive***

Four women signaled that they had adapted to the divorce and moved on with their lives. All of these women were now repartnered, and they expressed that they were all happier now that they had ended

their previous partnerships. These women had adopted only one child (all were boys), and as shown in Table 2, the families whose children did not have special needs were in this group (though one child had a mild reading disability). What these women had in common was a more neutral – and even positive emotional tenor – rather than a highly charged or distressed feeling about their ex-partner. They were also the least stressed as parents – again, likely reflecting in part the fact that they were parenting only children who had few emotional or developmental challenges. They indicated that life was much easier and happier since the relationship had ended: as Betsy stated, “[We’re] not friends but friendly and cooperative. Amicable. Overall I think it is working well.” These women focused on the gains associated with the ending of their relationship and were relieved that housing and childcare arrangements were settled. Further, they expressed acceptance about the decision to separate or divorce, whether it was their own choice or their ex-partner’s desire to do so. As Dina stated, “[It was a] very good decision to split up. We are all happier now.” Dina also described how prior to their separation, she felt tremendous interpersonal strife and disagreement, especially around childrearing differences. Yet, after their separation, Dina’s earlier displeasure toward her ex-partner was no longer a focus, signaling that she had completed the emotional and relational work to move her from a place of angry upset to more equanimity.

None of these four women expressed lingering bitterness or blame toward their ex. Instead, they took responsibility for their own behaviors. In response to a query about whether there was anything she would do differently in handling the separation, Mari owned her part in not being more forthcoming about wanting to separate from her ex, stating, “I [wish I] would have said something sooner. There was never any outright arguments or contention but it was a shock to [my ex] and I feel badly that it hurt her as much as it did.” Further, Isla acknowledged the personality differences between her and her ex-partner that led to their separation, but noted that those differences did not matter now because they were both devoted to putting the needs of their son first. Regarding co-parenting, Isla said that it was going very well, despite their “polar opposite” personalities: “I am much more laid back and not a routine oriented person, where my ex is very extremely regimented. . . . But for the most part we can see that our child does better with a general structure and clear expectations.” Isla’s experience shows that some of the personal qualities that led to their divorce were no longer salient since they were at peace with their decision to live separately and focus on their son’s well-being.

These four women also expressed more empathy, respect, and appreciation for their own needs as well as those of their ex-partners, as Mari noted:

I am a much happier person and realize that some things that I wasn’t getting in my previous relationship, and had written off as unimportant, were much more necessary to my happiness than I had been willing to admit. . . . [my ex] has been very respectful and had a positive message for [our] child’s sake despite her own personal feelings.

Whereas these women may have felt some anger and conflict toward the ex-spouse when they were living together, their differences were easier to handle after they broke up. Now that their living situations were reconfigured and they had repartnered, the mostly positive women felt more self-assured and contented, and were no longer emotionally charged by their ex-partners. They had adapted to the divorce, expressing a balanced perspective on the breakup: they diplomatically acknowledged that both partners played a role in dissolving their relationship and noted the positive consequences of the breakup for their family.

### ***Improving with mixed feelings***

Three women expressed mixed feelings, where both positive and negative emotions about the ex-partner and the relationship dissolution comingled. All three women had adopted one child with a disability, and one of these children had multiple needs. None of them indicated that they experienced much parenting stress because they were very committed to work together with their ex-partners to support their child. Two of these women said that infidelity was an issue in their breakup.

Cora described the complicated nature of having mixed feelings in the separation and divorce process, emphasizing both gains and losses:

Since living apart, things have gotten easier. It is interesting to learn to relate as friends and co-parents, and not as partners. Some pressure has been relieved by divorcing, but some of the pain and old issues remain. . . . Sometimes I wish I had my daughter more of the time – especially as my ex-partner has had personal difficulties that have affected the way she parents. On the other hand, as I've stepped up to take more responsibility for child care, I've also felt some resentment. It's complicated!

Regarding the expression of positive sentiments, these mothers were similar to those in the “mostly positive” group in that they emphasized their desire to work with their former partner to put their child's interests first. Elena explained that she and her ex chose to live within 5 minutes of each other in order to make their joint custody arrangement easier for their son and they put their differences aside when they are interacting with him together, “We have very similar rules and values, so our son's home life is relatively consistent. We make a significant effort to get along and be happy around each other when in front of him.” Like the four women in the mostly positive group, these women enjoyed the bonus of having more time for themselves as well as more quality time with their child, as Elena explained:

No longer living with someone you no longer love is a positive consequence [of divorce]. I am really enjoying living alone half time and then living with my son half time. I get more quality time with him, and I get the time I need to take care of me.

Yet women with mixed feelings also zeroed in on negative qualities of their ex-partners. Evie expressed dislike for her ex-partner, who had been the one to initiate the divorce, explaining how she dealt with her mixed emotions by limiting contact with her ex:

We have to get along. Which is hard for me because I really don't like my ex much and I have to just be “at peace” with who she is and how she is. It is very helpful that we don't have to interact much and that we are very civilized with one another and can set up our schedules and above all just focus on how much we love our son.

The women with mixed feelings were willing to move forward with their lives and were not stuck in blaming their ex-partner – their post-divorce adaptation was clearly improving. They vocalized and appreciated various benefits of being newly single, such as having more time for themselves. On the other hand, they acknowledged some negative views or feelings about their ex-spouses, which they dealt with by limiting contact with them and focusing, instead, on the needs of their child. Their adaptation to the divorce process was improving in that all three women were now legally divorced (a major milestone), but they still had some lingering sour or bitter feelings about their former spouse that they were still working through.

### ***Stalled and mostly negative***

The six women with mostly negative emotions had from one to three children, all of whom were transracially adopted, and in five families, at least one of the children was a child with mild to multiple special needs. These splitting up stories were characterized by a sense of being stalled because these women adamantly expressed (a) more intensive dislike and blaming of their ex-spouse, (b) feelings that they were much better off now that they were no longer partnered with their ex, and (c) defensive judgment of their own behavior (especially parenting) as better than their ex-spouse's behavior. Only two of these women had repartnered and most were dealing with a moderate to high level of parenting stress, depending on the number and special needs of their children. Further, two women in this group cited their ex-partner's indiscretions (with either infidelity and/or substance use) as one of the reasons for the breakup. In other words, they were stalled in their ability to move forward, amidst lingering emotional negativity toward the ex-partner. Of note is that only one of these women had completed a legal divorce. Four had not married legally, and thus experienced the relational dissolution process without the benefit of a socially prescribed and definitive transition (e.g., a recognized divorce).

These six women expressed a higher level of hostility, criticism, and blame of their former partners than those in the two previous emotion groups. Adele, mother of two sons, blamed her ex-partner for the ending of their relationship, saying, “My ex had checked out over 3 years prior to telling me she wanted a divorce. She had an affair and was basically ready to move out and move on.” When describing the hardest part of splitting up, Adele located the blame completely on her ex-partner:

This split is gut wrenching. ...WOW, talk about the rug being pulled out from beneath you. Getting my self-esteem back on track and coming to realize it really had nothing to do with me but everything to do with her was difficult.

Similarly, Julia expressed intense, negative feelings, and blamed the divorce on her ex by stating that their family “had to” break up because of her partner’s addiction and refusal to get help:

I wish we didn’t have to separate at all. I wish she would have gotten the help she needed for her addiction. ...I wish she would have agreed to in-patient rehab and not blamed me for her issues. I wish she didn’t destroy the trust and try to destroy my life in the process. It was very traumatic the way things happened and I wish if she wasn’t happy, that she would have divorced me beforehand.

Fiona was relieved to be out of her relationship with her ex, noting, “I wish I had left earlier!” She blamed their relationship problems on her ex’s lack of interest in sex and “neurosis” about their daughter, saying “I couldn’t take it anymore and saw myself holding in frustration, then becoming angry, which was not fair at all.” Now, 3.5 years after their separation, Fiona was highly critical of her ex’s new partnership:

I believe her immediate leap into another relationship after I left was a HUGE mistake. [They] could have hid the relationship from our daughter for several months until the kid was used to the fact that I wasn’t coming back. Call me crazy, but I think that was the most fucked thing about the split. Very selfish of the two of them. I really think that affected our daughter negatively.

Although these women were mostly negative, they did share one positive dimension about their separation experience: namely, they collectively spoke positively about the relief and benefits of getting out of the old relationship and on their own, and/or finding a new partner, and they emphasized that they were much better off without their ex-partner. They framed the divorce as a positive, but there was a pronounced “sting” in the way that they spoke about this welcomed ending. After splitting up from her ex-partner, Cary said, “I became more of a whole person and have discovered myself in so many ways once I got out of that relationship.” Freda was about to marry her new partner, and compared the level of commitment she enjoyed with this new partner to the lack of commitment she ascribed to her past relationship:

My current partner and I feel very strongly about commitment, and what that means. Marriage is the next step for us and also important for many logistical reasons. My ex and I were never sold on it as we couldn’t get on the same page about what it meant.

Unlike the women in the mostly positive and mixed feelings groups who were more generous or forgiving in describing their ex-partners, the women in the mostly negative group couched even their positive reflections as a rebuke to their exes. The bulk of their negativity was aimed directly at the former partner’s faults both during the marriage and now, post-separation, whereas they were more generous in how they talked about themselves and their role in the separation. In her splitting up story, Leila, mother of three daughters, first located the blame on her ex-partner:

Things were really bad between us before the separation. I wish we could have told the children earlier that we were separating, once the decision was made, but my ex didn’t want to do it until she had a place to live. ...I wish we hadn’t been so hurt and so hostile. I wish she had been able to get her drinking under control and hope she still will. I very much regret that she was verbally abusive in front of our children.

In contrast, Leila was more forgiving of her own behavior. She described her ex-partner’s use of secrecy as damaging, but excused and justified her own, saying:

I am dating very casually and in ways my kids don't know about, so only in the time they're not with me. My ex had a secret relationship prior to our breakup and she claims that it's over but she and the children see that friend/possible girlfriend regularly. I hope she's being honest just because honesty is important, but I don't need to know. I don't want to introduce a stepparent on my side for a long time, if ever.

The six women with mostly negative stories revealed a stalled adaptation to divorce in that they were still intensely focused on their ex-partners' faults. Even those who were starting to date again or in new partnerships were defensive and reactive toward their exes, and found ways to denigrate their exes' behavior, problems, and choices. Being stalled, they had not let go of the relationship and were still holding their ex accountable for what had soured in the marriage.

### ***Stuck and very negative***

Four women told very negative splitting up stories, and described an intensive and ongoing hostility toward their ex-partners. These women were stuck in difficult and contentious circumstances. Three of the four women in the group were waiting for their divorce (whether from a legal marriage or a legal domestic partnership) to be finalized, thus adding to their tenuous and stressful circumstances. Three of these four women had two or more children, and three of the four had children with multiple special needs. Two women cited violence as one of the reasons for their breakup. All four women were experiencing very high parenting stress.

Their narratives were characterized by great animosity and bitterness toward their ex-partners. Lack of productive communication was at the core of these acrimonious descriptions of separated – and not yet divorced – families. Two women described their interaction with their ex-partners as far worse post-separation than when they had been together, and the other two said that their circumstances were slightly better now, but only because they rarely communicated. Gaby described how their situation was now far worse than before. Although Gaby blamed her ex-partner's harsh and inconsistent parenting for her three children's emotional difficulties, her view was intensified by her deep concern for her children's well-being:

She [ex] has had conflict with the oldest child first, resulting in his living with me. She then had conflict with our middle child and she ended up living with me. My ex-partner has nothing to do with the older children, claiming that they need to understand what they did wrong. She maintains a relationship with our youngest and we often butt heads about it, with my resentment over her treatment of our older two children affecting my ability to deal with her objectively.

Gaby's perspective is contextualized by her children's special needs, and the ways she wished that she, but especially her ex, had put the children first:

I have to admit to a certain satisfaction when they wanted to live with me full time. I wish I had been more able to kindly deal with their feelings. I had a very hard time with that, being very angry myself. I wish [my ex] partner had/would put [our] children first.

Kate also said her situation with her ex-partner was worse now than when they were together. Separated for two years, they were still going through the divorce process, and the custody issue introduced new antagonisms. Kate explained the increased anger:

We are no longer communicating unless it is something relevant to the girls. The situation has gotten noticeably worse as we get closer to the custody hearing. ...Not being the legal parent, [my ex] has devolved into character assaults and trying to drum up legal charges. If there is a dirty divorce playbook, she has it.

Kate was especially cognizant of the fact that the current hostilities and her ex's unfair behavior were very upsetting to her two daughters:

Discipline is only being done by me and a constant source of difficulty and confusion for the kids. School problems revolve around who pays for what and coordinating events/homework. Financial issues are only me paying for everything because my ex never has any money. The children are struggling with transition I believe because the routines are too difficult. Both girls prefer my house which was their home.

Unlike Gaby and Kate, who were openly dealing with hostile ex-spouses, Jade and Hazel minimized their interaction with their former spouses. Jade explained why their relationship was less stressful now that they split: “We don’t see each other that often and no longer have to share the same space”. Still, she viewed her ex-partner as vindictive, saying that “I feel like she wants 50% custody to pour salt in the wound, rather than because she wants the kids”. Jade directed criticism of her ex in terms of differences in their parenting styles, indicating how her two children preferred her ways:

My kids are hesitant to go with her, though she will probably not tell you that. They’ve asked to come home with me when it’s transition time or if we’ve met somewhere with the kids during her time with them. The other day, my daughter tried to hide in my car. Heartbreaking. They call her place, “Mama’s house” and my place, “Home”.

Similarly, Hazel, attributed the “mildly better” situation with her ex-partner to the fact that they had limited contact:

We have been living apart for just over a year though the separation was for work and not to divorce however since then a plan to divorce has been decided. I am just now attempting to file the paperwork. I am often afraid and anxious currently. I do not feel like things are easier between my ex and I at this time. It seems that things are mildly better in the sense we are not talking often and so there is no chance for conflict to occur.

These very negative stories revealed an unmitigated animosity toward the ex-partner, in the context of women’s stress about their ex-partner’s poor behavior or parenting inadequacies. The only relief these women experienced from the negative emotions about their former partners was when communication was limited. At the center of these women’s very negative emotional responses was the tendency to blame the ex-partner for not being a good-enough parent, as indicated by impassioned descriptions of ex-partners as callous or irresponsible parents. Further, it is notable that none of these women had repartnered. They were stuck in a negative space, exacerbated by delays in the finalization of their divorce and custody arrangements.

## Discussion

The ending of an intimate relationship through separation and divorce is stressful, especially for individuals whose marginalized identities are not legally protected or socially sanctioned (Balsam et al., 2017; Frost & LeBlanc, 2019). The negative emotions that accompany stressful transitions may be amplified for women who are ending same-sex relationships, because of the high priority that women place on emotional intimacy, mutuality, and relational connection, and the challenges of disentangling their lives from another woman (Biaggio et al., 2002; Connolly, 2012; Farr & Goldberg, 2019; Umberson et al., 2015). Sexual minority women who adopt their children are vulnerable to heightened parenting stress, especially if they adopt older children and/or children with special needs (Goldberg, 2019), which may compound the stress they experience in the divorce/separation process and its aftermath. Although much of the heterosexual divorce literature indicates that the stress following divorce is short term (Lebow & Rekart, 2007; Raley & Sweeney, 2020), we found that for most of the women we interviewed, emotional reactions to the former partner was still present for years to come. The participants were dealing with multiple layers of stress that accompany the normative life course transitions of marriage and parenthood, but in addition, they were dealing with the nonnormative stressors that accompany adoptive parenting and subsequent separation and divorce, in the unique context of their status as lesbian-parent families. Although the women in this study had the benefits of racial and social class privileges, their narratives suggest that their gender, sexual orientation, and family structural change intersected in complex ways, and in turn their lives and emotional experiences were often fraught with difficulties.

The women in this study shared their experiences with relational dissolution in diverse ways. We conceptualized four emotional responses that captured women’s splitting up stories, which were accompanied by four distinct patterns of adaptation. The first emotional response was mostly positive, where these four women said that their families were much happier now that the parents had separated

and adapted post-divorce. The second was characterized by mixed feelings – both positive and negative. These three women indicated that their feelings about their former spouse were complicated: Although happy to be on their own now, they still had some lingering negative views about their ex. Both of these groups, however, experienced low levels of parenting stress and all of these women had only one child. These women had moved on or were in the process of improving and thus moving on, similar to the resilient and average copers in Perrig-Chiello et al.'s (2015) study. Notably, the women in our study who were adapted or improving comprised 41% of our sample, and the resilient and average copers in Perrig-Chiello et al.'s study – which used a very different sample than ours – comprised 78% of their sample.

Over half of the women in the current sample expressed a great deal of negative emotions regarding their former spouses, more so than is indicated by the heterosexual divorce literature: Indeed, the mostly negative and very negative groups of women comprised 59% of our sample, whereas only 28% of Perrig-Chiello et al.'s sample was characterized by a maladaptive response. The six women in our third group, stalled and mostly negative, were heavily invested in blaming their ex-partner's behavior for what went wrong with the relationship, often claiming that its dissolution was the partner's fault (e.g., the partner had an affair, or an addiction). These women stopped short of being wholly negative: they emphasized the positives associated with the ending of their relationship, noting that learning to live on their own was a relief and an opportunity to be independent, find a new partnership, or grow closer to their children – yet they were stalled by virtue of their negative views toward their former spouse, which in turn impeded their full adaptation. The final group, stuck and very negative, were characterized by highly complex and contentious family interactions. These four women blamed their ex-partners' egregious behavior and were unable to communicate effectively with them. Unlike the former group, they could not see or did not articulate the benefits of ending their relationship, and were therefore preoccupied (i.e., stuck) in their current phase of negativity, unable to fully move on and adapt. Significantly, both the mostly negative group and the very negative group were still “in process,” without a socially sanctioned marker to end their relationship: indeed, most had not (yet) experienced a legal divorce or repartnered, which may be important milestones in enabling women dissolving lesbian partnerships to fully embrace the ending of their unions.

Considering the women who described their exes in mostly positive or even mixed terms, it is notable that their lives had fewer individual and external stressors than the women who revealed greater negativity. All of the women in these first two groups of adapted and improving had only one child, and some of their children did not have special needs. Our critical feminist lens leads us to posit that the more beneficial structural circumstances of their lives, including productive shared custody arrangements, legal divorce, and fewer parenting challenges, fostered their enhanced well-being – as opposed to suggesting, for example, that women who were more positive were somehow more emotionally mature or less neurotic. In contrast, women who were either mostly or very negative (stalled and stuck, respectively) were experiencing more structural challenges and multi-layered stresses in their lives overall: indeed, more of these women had adopted multiple children, and all of them had at least one child with special needs. They focused on and blamed the ex-spouse as the cause of their negative emotions and the ending of the relationship – for example, due to the spouse's affair, addiction, or irresponsible parenting behavior. They continued to harbor strong feelings of blame and anger, and to feel resentful of their ex-partners for their role in the divorce, and the ways in which their behavior seemed to be negatively affecting the children. Again, rather than condemn these women for their emotional negativity, we suggest that it is important to look beyond the individual level and to examine the social structures that limit support for lesbian-parent families. It is still taboo for women to express anger, and reducing women's emotional negativity to the individual level is merely “blaming the victim” of this societal-level phenomenon. Women's anger is grounded in a sexist society that seeks to silence and disempower them (Jack, 2001; Jaramillo-Sierra et al., 2017). We assert, instead, that living in a society that lacks (a) visible societal examples of lesbian-parent families that have navigated divorce with resilience, and (b) widespread access to LGBTQ-affirming legal professionals, therapists, services, and support groups (such as those aimed to help people struggling with

substance use and intimate partner violence), may undermine these women's ability to adapt and thrive as sexual minority adoptive parents amidst a stressful life transition such as divorce.

### Implications, limitations, and future directions

Given the value placed on the relationship enhancing qualities of lesbian partnerships (Connolly, 2012; Kurdek, 2004) and the loss that accompanies a primary attachment relationship (Sbarra, 2015), of potentially great utility are LGBTQ-affirming therapeutic interventions that assist women who still feel such negativity toward their former spouses. Specifically, these women might benefit from having child, family, and individual therapists, and support groups, that are grounded in LGBTQ-affirming and anti-heteronormative principles, whereby relationship dissolution among same-sex couples is treated as the major life event that it is, and attention is paid to the structural and interpersonal components of minority stress that may have contributed to relationship dissolution as well as post-dissolution stress (Frost & LeBlanc, 2019). Likewise, practitioners and educators must recognize the unique stressors faced by adoptive parents, parents of children with special needs, and lesbian mothers – and validate how such stressors may intermingle to create particularly high levels of challenge for couples during their relationships and after their relationships end (Farr & Goldberg, 2019). If lesbian mothers experience validation in the therapeutic context, they can more easily work on self-acceptance and forgiveness toward their former spouses (Rohde-Brown & Rudestam, 2011). Lesbian mothers, in particular, are vigilant in putting the needs of their children first, which is a strength found in the literature on planned lesbian families (Bos et al., 2003). Scholars, educators, and clinicians can build on this strength, thereby taking a more empowering strengths-based perspective rather than one that focuses exclusively on deficits and vulnerabilities (Connolly, 2006; Felicio & Sutherland, 2001).

Despite the variation in how lesbian adoptive mothers respond emotionally to their relationship dissolution experience, a limitation of this study is that the 17 participants were relatively homogeneous in terms of race and education level (e.g., white, well-educated). The relative privilege afforded by Whiteness and middle class status leaves unexamined the additional burdens faced by lesbian women of color, from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups, as well as those with, trans and nonbinary gender identities. The women in this study, however, were unique in that most of them had adopted transracially, and many of their children had special needs. Future research should examine the experiences of sexual minority mothers who are more diverse in sexual and gender identity, racial and ethnic identity, and socioeconomic status. Such research will provide an even more complete portrait of the challenges and resiliencies of diverse sexual minority parent families who experience divorce, and will enable a fuller understanding of how individual identities and structural forces intersect to shape women's experiences of and adaptation to relationship dissolution and its aftermath.

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### ORCID

Katherine R. Allen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9920-0333>

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