

Apart, but still together: Separated parents living in limbo during COVID-19

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, parents face unprecedented challenges linked to social isolation, uncertainty about the future, and financial, employment, and school-related stress. Individuals who planned to separate and divorce before the pandemic now find their lives on hold. In this exploratory study of 14 women who completed an online survey of open- and closed-ended questions regarding the divorce process and parenting challenges during COVID-19, we were guided by family stress and resilience theory and a directed qualitative content analysis approach to generate a collective story of their experiences, which included four themes: (a) pile-up of tensions, challenges, and stressors, (b) living in limbo during the pandemic, (c) finding creative strategies and solutions to navigating parenting and relational dissolution, while still living together, and (d) reaching the breaking point. We conclude with implications for professionals seeking to support individuals, couples, and families during a time of unprecedented transition and uncertainty.

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the nature of family and work life in the United States. Worry and stress about one's children's mental health and potential learning loss during lockdown, as well as deteriorating intimate relationship quality, are some of the critical problems contemporary adults—as parents and partners—face (APA, 2020; Goldberg et al., 2021a; Russell et al., 2020). Economic woes have impacted families across race and social class, with extra burdens on people of color, essential workers, and parents who cannot afford to stay home and who

may not have relatives to help with childcare and education (Chaney, 2020; Stanley & Markman, 2020). The burden of the pandemic is also fundamentally gendered, with employed mothers increasingly at risk for stress, burn-out, and mental health challenges, especially as they face role overload associated with their roles as parents, workers, and, often, academic coaches for their children (Goldberg et al., 2021b; Craig & Churchill, 2021). Many couples, including parents, are experiencing increased conflict in their relationships due in part to less time alone or with non-household members, coupled with high levels of stress (Luetke et al., 2020).

Couples who were considering separation or divorce at the time that the pandemic took hold may have experienced COVID-19 and the ensuing stresses that it introduced to be the “clincher” in their marital difficulties, solidifying their intent to leave their current relationships. Individuals who were taking steps toward the process of separation and divorce likely experienced tremendous disruption in their individual and family lives as the pandemic and its associated stressors (e.g., social isolation; financial, employment, and/or school stress; uncertainty about the future) accumulated (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Prime et al., 2020). Even in non-pandemic times, separation and divorce, at least in the short run, can be unsettling and unpredictable as individuals make numerous changes in their emotional, familial, residential, legal, and economic lives (Crabtree & Harris, 2020; Doherty et al., 2016; Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Although social norms have relaxed the pressure for estranged couples to continue to live together for the sake of appearances, having children in the home does complicate the move to two households and is one of many factors in the process (rather than the event) of separation and divorce (Cross-Barnet et al., 2011; Rault & Regnier-Loilier, 2020). Thus, the practice of “living together apart” (LTA), where former intimate partners continue to cohabit beyond the ending of their relationship, has emerged in recent years, particularly when financial, structural, and parenting barriers to separation are present (McDonnell et al., 2019).

The current study explores the experiences of 14 mothers who, at the time that they were surveyed during the COVID-19 pandemic, were in the process of separating with the intention of divorcing their partners. However, due to various circumstances, they were (a) stalled in their efforts to move forward with a divorce, and (b) still living with their partners or had only secured separate residences within 2 weeks of data collection. We position this work as a case study of unanticipated findings about “lives on hold” in the midst of the often traumatic effects of a global crisis. The larger study from which this sample was derived sought to shed light on the experiences of separated and divorced parents during COVID-19, and how they were handling parenting, financial, and legal challenges associated with divorce and custody issues. The exploratory study we report here consists of a group of mothers who found themselves caught between the intention to separate and/or divorce and the externally imposed consequences of not being able to complete a life transition for which they had already psychologically prepared.

STRESSORS ASSOCIATED WITH BEING SEPARATED BUT STILL COHABITING

The process and experience of getting a divorce is often stressful, as documented by the scholarly literature over the past five decades (e.g., Amato, 2010; Goldberg & Romero, 2019; Mastekaasa, 1997; Weiss, 1975). In the initial period, perhaps prior to the actual physical separation of spouses, individuals are “uncoupling” (Vaughn, 1986), which is an emotionally charged experience marked by gradual adjustment to the idea and actuality of disentangling their lives from the partner with whom they had been in a committed relationship. This process of psychological

separation involves anticipating what life will be like after they are no longer engaged in the same routine of sharing the physical presence of a home and a bed with their partner, as well as, among parents, the routines of childcare, mealtime, and coordinating schedules. This initial phase of the separation and divorce process, the period of termination (Federico, 1980), typically occurs while partners are still together, and is often highly stressful. During this phase, at the same time that partners are intent on going through with the divorce, they may be hopeful for the day when the relationship is finally over, the pre-separation stress can be alleviated, and they can redefine and move on with their lives (Lebow, 2020; Vaughn, 1986). Part of what helps individuals through this stressful transition is the anticipation and hope for the positive changes in their lives after they are no longer legally bound to their spouse, with whom they no longer want to live or be partnered, and the expectation that coparenting following divorce will go smoothly (Ahrns, 1994; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). Thus, the stress of their current uncertainty is tempered by their positive expectancy about life in the future.

Thinking about divorce as a *final* event that signals the end of a transition period from married to single helps to normalize the stress of divorce and enables therapeutic, health, educational, and other support professionals to reassure clients and participants that although they are experiencing stress in the short term, with good communication skills, forgiveness, and the ability to navigate positive family relationships postdivorce, life will eventually improve (Ahrns, 1994; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015; Rohde-Brown & Rudestam, 2011). Indeed, the websites of divorce lawyers, mediators, and financial planners (e.g., Collins Family Law Group, 2019; Doskow, 2021) often delineate a clear set of “stages” of emotional reactions to divorce (e.g., shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, before moving on to “acceptance”) revealing how pervasive this cut-and-dry “stage model” has become. The reality is, however, that lives do not typically follow in lockstep fashion to the cultural narrative of a good, normal, or predictable divorce (Amato et al., 2011; Doherty et al., 2016). Separations often involve volatile and unanticipated interactions around children, financial resources, households, new partners, changes in family and friend networks, and shifting plans for the future (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015; Raley & Sweeney, 2020; Willén, 2015). Intense feelings and disagreements about any or all of these issues during the dissolution of a relationship can disrupt even the most normative of storylines about how divorce can proceed (Allen & Goldberg, 2020). Instead, rather than following a linear pathway from separation to divorce, individuals are often ambiguous about the break-up of their relationships and lack clarity about whether they will eventually reconcile or actually divorce (Crabtree & Harris, 2020). This ambiguity is especially acute among members of invisible or poorly understood groups who do not easily conform to the dominant divorce narrative, such as same-sex couples who are splitting up (Allen, 2007) or people who are forming postdivorce stepfamilies (Afifi & Keith, 2004).

In a rare study disrupting the linear narrative of marriage to separation to divorce as easily identifiable and discrete events, Crabtree and Harris (2020) describe the implications of boundary ambiguity and the uncertainty that comes from not making a firm decision about the relationship’s future. They argue that marital separation should be considered in its own right, because some separated couples will eventually reconcile. Although most couples separate with the intention to divorce, some lack such clarity. Treating marital separation as a phenomenon in its own right, Crabtree and Harris interviewed 20 maritally separated individuals and found that they were generally in a very ambiguous space with one another and about the future of their relationship. For example, they recognized that their current separation was not sustainable or itself an “end point,” but at the same time they were not certain about what they wanted, or what would happen, in the future. The participants also experienced the uncertainty of their current

marital status (whether they were married or separated) as well as their future plans (whether they were going to reconcile or divorce) as taking a grave emotional toll. The stress and pain of living in limbo was intolerable, even paralyzing, for some participants (Crabtree & Harris).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our study is guided by family stress and resilience perspective, an integrative theoretical approach to understanding both the challenges that can harm and the resources that families bring to crises and stressful life circumstances, which often render them vulnerable and at risk for loss and/or better able to confront and grow from crises (Allen & Henderson, 2017; Prime et al., 2020). As a composite framework, family stress and resilience is rooted in systems theory, with its emphasis on the interdependence, process, and boundaries within family subsystems (Broderick, 1993). Also relevant is family stress theory (Boss, 2006; Patterson, 2002), with the emphasis on the range of stressor events (from normative to traumatic) that challenge a family's ability to cope, regroup, and grow. Family stress and resilience theory is further informed by a risk and resilience perspective (Henry et al., 2015; Masten, 2018; Walsh, 2016), which emphasizes the pathways and processes of family reorganization and the capacity for individuals and family systems to retain vitality and viability.

Families are complex interactional systems, and there is growing appreciation that what happens in families is rarely linear or normative (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). A family stress and resilience perspective views families as constantly dealing with the ebb and flow of life's ups and downs, even in the best of times. Yet, families often experience so-called normative crises and stress with a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty (Boss, 2016). Becoming a parent, moving to a new location, getting a job, and retiring from one's career, are all seemingly normative experiences that have unanticipated stressful conditions and reactions for which most people are ill-prepared. Family life, then, is generally stressful, and there are countless ways in which changes in family structure (who lives in families) and in family process (how family members relate to and interact with one another) can exacerbate family stress, as well as summon resources for productive growth, change, and well-being (Allen & Henderson, 2017).

The dual nature of stressors on families—that they create havoc as well as provide opportunities for resilience and growth—is especially relevant in the time of a global pandemic (Lebow, 2020). COVID-19 has wrought unprecedented challenges to family life, particularly in the expectation that working parents add teacher to the mix of adult responsibilities, often stretching parental well-being to a breaking point. Mothers, in particular, may be experiencing debilitating stressors in their personal, relational, and community lives (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2021b; Prime et al., 2020). Economic challenges, due to job loss, housing shortages, and remote schooling responsibilities, especially for families who experience systemic racism and classism, contribute to the growing stress families face (Thomeer et al., 2020). Despite the social disorganization and challenges to mental health, families still thrive—finding new ways to meet basic needs, regroup, and chart new pathways for a more hopeful future.

The research question guiding this study was: How do mothers who are in the process of separating describe and navigate the challenges they face during COVID-19, when they are not yet able to separate from and ultimately live apart from their ex-spouses? The study has implications for professionals seeking to support couples and families during an unprecedented time of transition and uncertainty—and, in particular, those who are constrained, due to structural,

interpersonal, and/or intrapersonal issues, to continue living with their former partner while parenting during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHOD

Recruitment, procedure, and survey

Parents who had at least one child under age 18 were recruited via email, social media, and snowball sampling by the second author to complete a 15- to 20-minute anonymous survey with open and closed-ended questions hosted by the online platform Qualtrics (Goldberg et al., 2021a). People were invited to participate if they were “separated from your child(ren’s) other parent (even if you are still living in the same home), in the process of getting a divorce from your child(ren’s) other parent, or are already divorced from your child(ren’s) other parent.” The study was approved by the Clark University human subjects review board. Participants completed the survey during Summer/Fall of 2020.

Participants responded to open-ended questions such as the following: If you have broken up but are still living together, please explain. How has this affected your relationship? Prior to COVID-19, how would you describe your relationship with your ex? How, if at all, has the quality of your relationship with your ex changed since the pandemic began? What are the biggest challenges you have had post-COVID related to co-parenting after separation? What supports would help you better navigate separation, divorce, or co-parenting during COVID? What has been missing? What have you needed? Looking ahead, what immediate concerns do you have regarding your divorce, co-parenting custody, and/or financial support, amidst COVID-19? Closed-ended questions included demographic and relational history questions; type of legal and therapeutic services utilized during the separation and divorce process; sources of tension and conflict with the ex-partner; and changes in mental health status during the pandemic.

Sample description

A subsample of 14 women, derived from the larger dataset of 296 separated, divorced, or divorcing parents with complete data, participated in the current study. At the time of data collection, these 14 women were mostly living with, but intending to permanently separate from and divorce, their spouses. The 14 participants were White women, and all of their partners, with one exception were White (see Table 1). Eleven women were partnered with male spouses, two were partnered with female spouses, and one was partnered with a nonbinary spouse. Most women had between one and two children, with a range of one to four. All of the women had at least some college, and most had a Bachelors or a Masters degree. Nine of the women worked full time (seven from home; two outside the home); two women worked part-time from home, and three were not working during the pandemic. Most of the women were from the Northeast or mid-Atlantic regions of the United States.

Twelve women were legally married to their partners, with their marriages lasting between 2 and 24 years. Only one had actually filed for divorce at the time of data collection. The participants were living in three types of arrangements: (a) eight women were still living in the same home as their partners; (b) three women were nesting with their partners, where the children lived in the family home, and the parents rented/shared an apartment and went back and forth to

TABLE 1 Sample demographics

	Partner gender	Her race	Partner race	No. of children	Education	Legally married	Filed for divorce
Ana	Male	W	W	1	College degree	Yes	No
Bette	Male	W	W	3	Some college	Yes	No
Carly	Male	W	W	2	College degree	Yes	No
Dana	Male	W	W	1	College degree	No	-
Emmy	Male	W	W	2	Masters degree	Yes	No
Frankie	Male	W	W	2	College degree	No	-
Gladys	Male	W	Of color	2	Masters degree	Yes	No
Holly	Male	W	W	4	Some college	Yes	Yes
Iris	Male	W	W	1	Masters degree	Yes	No
Joni	Male	W	W	3	Some college	Yes	No
Kris	Male	W	W	1	PhD/MD/JD	Yes	No
Luna	Female	W	W	1	Masters degree	Yes	No
Mia	Female	W	W	2	Masters degree	Yes	No
Norah	Nonbinary	W	W	1	Masters degree	Yes	No

stay with the children, sometimes overlapping in the same home; and (c) three women had just started to live apart from their partners. Twelve women indicated that they, or members of their immediate families, had used a lawyer ($n = 8$), mediator ($n = 4$), an individual therapist ($n = 12$), or a couple's therapist ($n = 4$) at least once during the separation process.

Data analysis process

The two authors—a family scientist and a psychologist—mutually conducted a directed qualitative content analysis to code and analyze the open-ended data and to interpret the quantitative survey responses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The data analysis process incorporated family stress and resilience theory, sensitizing concepts from the literature (e.g., stresses associated with marital separation and parenting during COVID-19), examination of closed-ended responses, and in-depth analysis of the participants' open-ended responses to the survey questions. Specifically, we used open and focused coding strategies in order to generate an overarching storyline that incorporates the individual and collective account of the women's liminal experience of separation in the midst of a global pandemic (Goldberg & Allen, 2015).

The process we used ensured that we reached saturation in the themes we generated, which is the point at which we determined we understood the women's experiences as fully as possible (Daly, 2007). To begin, we assigned each woman a pseudonym and carefully examined her individual data (i.e., responses to both open- and closed-ended questions) to get a sense of her overall narrative of feelings, events, and transitions associated with the stalled process of leaving the relationship and interacting with her ex around parenting decisions and practices. We then generated an exhaustive list of open codes, and through continual reading of the data and consulting with one another about possible emergent themes, we sought to further reduce the data by highlighting the most meaningful focused codes around which the major themes were

clustering (Charmaz, 2014). We continually returned to the data, examining themes across participants, as well as how themes varied according to participant demographics and social locations. We wrote reflexive theoretical memos about our educated hunches as to what was going on in the data, informed by our knowledge and experiences with women's family lives under stress (Allen & Goldberg, 2021; Allen & Walker, 2000; Daly, 2007). Upon achieving 100% consensus in the most salient and shared components of the women's stories, we arrived at four major themes that characterize the overarching storyline of these data: (a) a pile-up of tensions, challenges, and stressors, (b) living in limbo during the pandemic, (c) finding creative strategies and solutions to navigating parenting and relational dissolution, while still living together, during COVID-19, and (d) reaching the breaking point.

RESULTS

A pile-up of tensions, challenges, and stressors

When asked to indicate the number and type of tensions and challenges they experienced during COVID-19, out of a total of 22 possibilities, the women reported between one and 11 sources of tension or challenges, with an average of 5.43 tensions. The most common stressor was financial issues ($n = 8$), followed closely by decisions about mental health or health care for children ($n = 7$). Other frequent concerns were establishing and maintaining a routine, moving ahead with the divorce, handling remote schooling, and handling childcare. Issues such as handling holidays and family or friends taking sides, which are common points of tension among already separated and divorced couples (Adamsons & Pasley, 2006), were identified by only one participant, perhaps reflecting their decreased salience during a pandemic and/or the fact that these participants were early in the separation process (and still living together). Furthermore, only one participant indicated that both substance use and violence were current stressors in her relationship with her soon to be ex-partner.

The daily activities of taking care of children in a pandemic, especially around remote schooling and the disruption to their routines and communication issues, were very stressful. Ana, who was employed part-time outside the home, with one child, stated, "I work in another county and am home only at night to sleep. I have not been able to properly care for my child." Norah, employed full-time and working from home, with one child, also emphasized the difficulty of the balancing act: "Working remotely from home and caring for our daughter simultaneously has been terrible. It's very difficult to balance all of the conference calls and meetings with ensuring she's safe and healthy."

These activities were rendered even more problematic by feeling emotionally distanced and desirous of a divorce from one's spouse, yet being unable to formalize the separation and divorce due to external constraints caused by the pandemic. Only two of the 14 women reported that they were still close friends with their soon-to-be former spouse, and another two said they were amicable and civil. The remaining 10 described contentious, strained, or hostile relationships with their exes which made parenting more difficult. As Kris, mother of one child who was working from home, stated, "I do it all while also working full time."

The pile-up of stressors was also taking a toll on women's mental health. Indeed, 10 women said they had experienced more anxiety and more depression since COVID-19 began. Of note is that only two women said that they themselves had COVID-19, and none said that another member of their immediate family had it. Thus, their increased depression and anxiety largely

reflected the associated stressors surrounding the pandemic, combined with the stress of living with their exes and parenting, rather than the illness itself. As we explain next, the sense of being stuck, treading water, and lacking a clear way forward weighed heavily on participants, given the uncertainty of COVID-19, the uncertainty of separation and divorce, and the looming uncertainty of formalized arrangements for their children. This complex of factors revealed how their inability to complete the separation and divorce process during a global pandemic was destabilizing their sense of well-being.

Living in Limbo: caught between a rock and a hard place, with no end in sight

In describing their challenges with parenting, separation/divorce, and COVID-19, all of the women noted circumstances in which they felt they had few choices. A confluence of systemic and personal issues, often in large part brought on by the pandemic (e.g., financial insecurity, inability to purchase another home during a pandemic, court closures and delays leading to inability to actively pursue legal divorce) had contributed to their status quo. They were stuck between a rock and a hard place, with little room to do more than just get through the day. This sense of being stuck—and alone—in a wider world that offered no comfort and few options—had emotional reverberations. As Carly, mother of two children, who worked full-time from home, explained, “[I am] feeling completely stuck. It’s hard to grieve [the end of the marriage] when we are living in close proximity but also hard to move forward when the world is on hold.” COVID-19 hit right as these individuals were preparing, or “about to” leave or start, the divorce process. Yet the global nature of the disaster and the ongoing threat of infection or illness, as well as the associated disruption to their work lives, their parenting lives, and the court system, rendered their own personal needs for a new life—apart from their former spouse—less palatable or realistic. Frankie, mother of two children, shared that both she and her partner were not working at this time due to COVID-19. In turn, she felt that “COVID is pushing us back into a relationship when I was ready to move on in single life.” Ana explained the liminal nature of her situation with marital separation candidly:

I was going to leave him in April. Then all of a sudden COVID-19 happened and it didn’t seem safe or fair to go in the middle of a fucking global pandemic. I don’t know when I’ll be able to leave now. It’s more complicated because there’s a child in the picture.

Luna, mother of one child, who worked full-time outside the home, noted the challenges of living with uncertainty, even though her relationship with her ex was relatively stable: “We have not figured out how to deal with the living situation, as yet, due to COVID. Our situation is amicable, so far, but there has definitely been some tension around the living space now, and for the future.” The future looked even more unpredictable; as Luna continued, “We know that the process will be trickier with the continued risks of COVID. We are uncertain about finances, as well as what housing will look like.” Gladys, mother of two children who worked full-time at home, said her husband moved out in the past 2 weeks, so their childcare and custody arrangements were very much in flux, which led to feeling a lack of control about safety practices, as well: “We are not in control of all the variables since separation.”

The confluence of economic, legal, and parenting difficulties with a non-responsive partner must be weighed against the backdrop of protecting their children from getting COVID-19. As Dana, mother of one child, explained: “I was laid off and we are living in the same house due to economic reasons. Also, my ex is fairly irresponsible and I thought I would have better control/oversight over behaviors to protect my child from contracting COVID-19.” This lack of control over the conditions caused by the pandemic fueled the women's sense of limited control in creating the living situation they desired, and feeling that they had few choices to improve their current situation. For example, if they pursued moving out and completing the divorce process, this action could be a catalyst for other challenging and even more potentially difficult dynamics and circumstances, such as having even less money than they did with two adults present in the home. The ongoing uncertainty associated with their own employment stability and assets further contributed to their sense of feeling trapped. As Ana explained, “I’m desperate to get out of this marriage, but am terrified about losing my job and being able to get shared custody of my child.”

Amidst the constraints and uncertainties that led to a sense of feeling stuck in their current circumstances, the women felt there was “no light at the end of the tunnel.” Instead, they felt resigned to their situations, with no immediate relief or even hope for relief, as might be generated by proposing a timeline for moving out, or completing the separation and divorce process. They were truly in limbo, with a sense of “nowhere to go and nothing to do.” The sense that there was no end in sight was amplified by financial and legal difficulties (e.g., court closures, lack of response from attorneys), as Emmy, mother of two, explained, “We have been unable to meet with a mediator and also do not feel ready to do so until I can become fully employed again post Covid.” Emmy was only working part-time, and faced a stalled divorce due to COVID-19. She elaborated:

It will take us longer to divorce than it should because I need to get back on the ground with my gig-based employment. We can’t do much until my income stream is back where it should be and that likely won’t happen until spring/summer because my gig work is based on large gatherings.

The sense of “there's no end in sight” was also revealed in parenting disagreements with partners, including different views of what counted as acceptable behaviors in relation to COVID-19. Participants had no idea what the future held, or when they would finally be “on their own,” and thus adapted their own parenting approach to accommodate the challenge of living with one's ex while technically co-parenting. For example, Bette, mother of three (one biological and two step) children who worked full-time outside the home, explained, “We have just been each parenting our own children our own way.” Some struggled mightily to establish or negotiate a set of shared rules or guidelines about safety practices, when partners were no longer in sync regarding acceptable behaviors. Dana explained, “He will wear a mask and distance but he continues to go to a weekly social gathering and I’m not there and don’t know how adequately they all are masking and distancing and there’s alcohol involved.” Dana sought to live with this ongoing uncertainty and not create further tension between her and her ex by simply not asking questions. Joni, mother of three children, who was not employed, expressed “feeling in limbo that we can’t more fully separate our households and finances,” noting that this had led to “continued disagreements over kid and household routines [that] have gotten more complicated with the loss of regular full time school.” Only one of the 14 women expressed that things were working well with her ex while living in the same home. Said Emmy, “We are both working from home and trying to parent our children and supervise their

online schooling. It has been a challenging time but we have been making it work. Though we are separated [emotionally] we are still a great team.”

The women felt alone in handling their current predicament, without support from schools or other institutions. They did not see their communities, government, or society in general as coming up with the kinds of solutions that would help them in their current situation. As Mia, mother of two, who worked full-time from home, explained,

I want to be more independent from my ex, but that's SO HARD to do when there's literally no support system anymore. I used to be able to have my parents or friends step in to help with childcare, or send the kids to school during the day so I could work. Not anymore. It's impossible to both parent well and do my job well when the two overlap.

These women, then, felt caught in the middle of an immobilized system that was not moving forward, resulting in their “treading water.” Until the courts were open and the systems they relied on (work, school) were fully functional, they could not completely disentangle from the marriages they were ready to leave. Some tried very hard to separate—at least tentatively, but some felt forced back together, given the pandemic. They were stuck—and mostly unhappily—with their ex-partners, even though their hearts and minds had already moved on. They were aware that they could not make the physical move toward separation until the broader systems were functional and operational again—and when that would happen was entirely unclear.

Demonstrating resilience: creative strategies for living in Limbo

As family stress and resilience theory predicts, participants were very creative in how they confronted the stresses imposed by the pandemic and in finding ways to work with partners they no longer wished to share their emotional, sexual, and residential space with. Three of the women were nesting, where they created a shared home for their children, with the parents moving back and forth in a rented room or apartment, that they also shared. This residential arrangement allowed them to make their children the focus, and preserve their stability, while also minimizing time spent with their ex. As Mia explained:

We have been nesting in the same house since separating a year ago. We rent a room in a nearby home that we swap in and out of. We each have 2-3 nights off per week and spend the remaining time at the family house with the kids. We typically overlap 2-3 nights per week at the nest.

Another three women navigated one spouse moving out, if only temporarily or within 2 weeks of when they were surveyed. This situation was associated with more strain between the women and their ex-partners. As Gladys explained, her biggest challenge was “trying to separate in the midst of the pandemic and maintaining quarantine.” Efforts to make residential changes were among many ways in which the women demonstrated their creativity in navigating so many competing, and unprecedented, demands on their lives, as parents, partners, and employees trying to stay healthy and meet their family and work life demands in a pandemic.

Women also demonstrated their creative resilience in the face of stress and adversity in their utilization of a variety of professional resources to help them navigate their desire for a divorce.

Having access to such services went hand-in-hand with the overall economic privilege of the sample, in that they were able to afford professional assistance and advice. Kris was one of several women who mentioned the ease and convenience of accessing therapy via telehealth. Mia explained that she was able to cope with the complexities of nesting, parenting, and separation by also relying on a therapist:

I'm back in therapy. I'm trying to focus on untangling the dynamics my ex and I had when married, particularly around leaning on each other for financial/childcare support and instead attempting to be more independent. This is a HARD time to do this, since logistically, this is the time we should be leaning on each other more.

Many of the women identified self-care in their coping regimen. Dana explained that she relied on a variety of strategies to help her manage the challenges around COVID-19, parenting, and hostile feelings regarding her ex-partner, including “exercise, yoga, talking to a friend or sister, virtual therapy.” Frankie used “meditation, yoga, therapy, 12 step recovery.” Luna said that what worked for her was “time alone and with friends (socially distanced) to have time to be apart, self-care. Also, daily exercise for both of us, and therapy.”

These creative strategies were necessary, because sometimes the pressure of dealing with their ex was too much. For example, Iris said that her “partner does not want to move out and stay with family; [we] have continued to discuss this option.” To cope, Kris said that what she does is “leave the house on nights he spends with our son.”

Reaching the breaking point: Where is the societal response?

Despite these examples of finding creative individual solutions for dealing with the stressors associated with the pandemic, many of the women were beginning to exhaust their resources. As Ana said, “My mental and physical health have significantly deteriorated since March because I want to leave him and have not been able to.”

Coping with a host of issues, from getting laid off during COVID and having what she described as an irresponsible partner who continued to drink and hang out with friends, led Dana to express a lengthy list of supports she wishes she had: “Financial support, a job, more social connections, help with childcare.” Frankie expressed a longing for “expanded unemployment benefits or UBI so we aren't forced to move back in together.” Gladys wished for “more divorce and separation support from the Veterans Administration, and more mental health resources for him.” Some women voiced a desire for more guidance and supports from the school system; as Norah explained, “It would have been helpful to have more communication from school.” Norah summarized the confluence of conflicts, in describing the personal, relational, and societal challenges she and her family face: “Remote school; juggling schedules of which parent is staying with their girlfriend and when; worrying about reduction in work; worrying about our daughter's mental health and wellness.” Participants also desired more clear, consistent, and transparent communication and support from the systems and professionals they relied on in order to execute their divorce. Mia, for example, desired “better communication from mediator about what step we're at, what next steps should be taken, and reminders to get paperwork in.”

These women's narratives, then, highlight the reality that offering—and receiving—only individual solutions to a global pandemic is not sustainable. It is clear that the relatively invisible nature of their situation—trying to parent, and, at the same time, anxious to separate from

their former partners—is one that society must soon address. Possible answers to this dilemma, of society failing to provide the safety net these families need, can be found in the women's own assessments of what supports would better help them navigate separation, divorce, and co-parenting during COVID-19.

DISCUSSION

In this study of 14 women, we sought to answer the research question, how do mothers navigate the challenges of a pandemic when they are not yet able to separate from and live apart from their ex-partners? Through the analysis of open- and closed-ended responses to survey questions and sensitized by family stress and resilience theory, we generated four themes that tell their collective story. First, the women experienced a pile-up of tensions, challenges, and stressors that reflected both anticipated events and transitions associated with seeking a divorce as well as unanticipated challenges that were thrown at them as a result of living through an unprecedented global health crisis. Second, they narrated this pile-up of stressors as an endless process of living in limbo, with tremendous uncertainty about the future. Third, they revealed their resilience—the flip side of a stress paradigm—by finding creative strategies and solutions to navigating parenting and relational dissolution, while still living together, during COVID-19. Finally, they reached a breaking point in the sense that they were expected to come up with and execute all possible solutions on their own—and identified that more coordinated, supportive societal level responses were necessary to help families navigate the pandemic and its aftermath.

These mothers were “stuck” living in limbo, in the midst of dealing with the force of circumstances beyond their control that was overloading them with stress in their daily lives and uncertainty about moving forward (APA, 2020; Goldberg et al., 2021b; Lebow, 2020; Luetke et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020). Prior to the onset of COVID-19, they were deliberately making plans to separate from and divorce their partners (12 of the 14 were legally married). Yet, as the pandemic took hold, systems they once relied on—the courts, the schools, their places of employment—were shut down, or otherwise altered, and they, as parents, workers, partners, and citizens, needed to scramble each day, in order to ensure their children's and their own well-being. They felt responsible for childcare, remote schooling, family management, financial needs, safety precautions, and negotiations with outside systems, and it was both exhausting and challenging. The uncertainty of parenting and uncoupling in a pandemic was taking its toll on these women, at the time that they were surveyed (i.e., Summer and Fall of 2020, approximately 4–8 months after the onset of the pandemic in the United States). Like the individuals living with ambiguous marital separation in Crabtree and Harris's (2020) study, our participants also felt relatively alone and lonely in coping with the challenges and uncertainties they faced. The lack of support they could count on was a contributing factor in feeling so alone and isolated, especially now that they no longer felt like a “team” with their soon-to-be former partner.

This pile-up of stressors left many women exhausted and emotionally spent. Just coping day to day took most of their energy. Eventually, when these women are able to divorce and are navigating custody decisions, they should anticipate the possibility of intensive negotiation around legal and physical custody that often derails some divorcing families (Adamsons & Pasley, 2005; Amato et al., 2011; Lebow, 2020). Currently, 11 of the 14 women were still living in a shared custody situation with their ex-partner, since they shared the same residence. The pandemic forestalled the moving out process, but that will bring with it new tensions of which these women should be aware of and prepared for. As predicted by family stress and resilience theory, many

unexpected dilemmas arise in a major transition such as a divorce (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Lebow, 2020; Thomeer et al., 2020). In turn, a lack of custody issues during the pandemic could merely signal “the calm before the storm” once the divorce proceedings are resumed and the immediate crisis of managing COVID-19 is averted, or at least no longer families’ primary stressor or concern. Thus, custody decisions, which can be highly intense and stressful, had not yet occurred, because the pandemic had stalled the divorce process.

The lack of social support from schools, courts, and other social institutions also fed their sense of uncertainty and isolation that left them feeling in limbo. Yet, as predicted by family stress and resilience theory, the women demonstrated their ability to find solutions that promoted individual and family well-being (Allen & Henderson, 2017; Henry et al., 2015; Masten, 2018; Walsh, 2016). They got creative about housing, as they tried to navigate among the constraints imposed by uncoupling, parenting, and dealing with COVID-19 mitigation restrictions and regulations. They continued to see therapists, and utilized the benefits and convenience of telehealth (Lebow, 2020; Maier et al., 2021). They pointed out many ways that society should intervene, but unfortunately, system-wide efforts have not yet come to fruition. Again, they were still on their own in trying to care for their children, themselves, and their families under conditions of uncertainty. Many of the women were still working and had the financial resources to seek out social supports, as was evident in the families who were able to use nesting as a way to maintain a stable family home for their children, but still provide some separateness for the adults who wanted to divorce. Overall, the lack of a broader social safety net for even the very privileged families is made evident during a pandemic.

Clinical implications

The emotional reverberations of living in a pandemic are intense, especially for mothers who shoulder the primary parenting responsibility (APA, 2020; Russell et al., 2020). The women in this study felt as if they were the bottom line for childcare, remote schooling, earning a living, negotiating with estranged partners, and navigating the pandemic. They relied on therapists to assist them and appreciated the option of doing therapy from home remotely. Indeed, telehealth is an innovation that many may continue to utilize after the pandemic is over (Maier et al., 2021).

A systems approach to family stress and resilience reveals that stress has a dual nature, and most families will weather the challenges COVID-19 has wrought (Lebow, 2020; Thomeer et al., 2020). That is, families having to “shelter in place” often emerge from this challenging time by expressing more appreciation for one another, with a renewed sense of intimacy and connection (Stanley & Markman, 2020). Similarly, research on LTA families in which former intimate partners choose to continue to live in the same home and parent their children together in adaptive ways (and even find new intimate partners) reveal how imaginative and “mobile” families can be (McDonnell et al., 2019). Thus, there will be many ways in which families can alter old patterns and find new, more productive ways of relating to one another. Having one’s plans to divorce a partner with whom one no longer feels joined get derailed during the pandemic holds the possibility of a stronger sense of determination to complete this transition, and in a manner that is well-thought out for all family members involved.

Living in limbo, though uncomfortable, may also allow individuals to planfully and compassionately go through with the separation and divorce with thought and care, thereby setting up their families for healing and stronger postdissolution relationships (Ahrns, 1994; Crabtree & Harris, 2020). Therapists can help families discover their strengths in living with this uncertainty

and turn it into a positive force for change. Stanley and Markman (2020) describe the four foundations of safety that are needed for relationships to thrive: physical, emotional, commitment, and community. We suggest that these foundations may also include the reality that some couples are ready to leave their marriages and need skilled therapists and mediators to help them navigate a good divorce, where the needs and interests of the divorcing spouses, their new partners, and their children are honored. Therapists can help clients develop resilience and survival strategies as they endure their current situation, which may have an uncertain timetable. Therapists should also recognize the economic and structural constraints on individual freedom and avoid judgment of parents' complex set of choices and tradeoffs (Goldberg et al., 2021a).

Limitations and future research directions

In this exploratory study, we charted a relatively invisible dimension of the separation and divorce process, that of individuals who intend to divorce, but due to a global crisis, must put their plans on hold and continue to live in limbo. Our participants were White, female, and well-educated, thereby excluding the experiences of people of color and low-income individuals. We acknowledge that the nuances of our results are limited by the online survey data because we were not able to follow up with qualitative probes to further deepen participants' responses. Research on a diversity of families from more multilayered perspectives is needed (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). For example, Black/African American individuals and families, who are often left out of studies due to not responding to social media posts (which are increasingly used) in calls for research participants (Chaney, 2020), are an important source to consult for their experiences of uncoupling and coparenting. We also recommend more research on same-sex couples. Female same-sex couples, in particular, tend to have an extra dose of relational intensity, which can complicate or amplify the uncoupling process (Allen & Goldberg, 2021).

On balance, our study is a first step in revealing invisible family processes associated with a family arrangement that is counter normative to the traditional nuclear family model. These women's collective storyline reveals the resilience and innovation by which families can confront, adjust, and remake their emotional, relational, and geographic ties, even in the face of extreme public stress, as rendered by a global pandemic.

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