

“I Want to Make Sure I’m Doing
What It Takes”:
Parental Role Changes Following
Separation

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Background



- The establishment of new parental roles shortly following separation is important:
 - Transitions such as separation are times of disequilibrium requiring adjustments in parental roles (Cowan, 1991)
 - Maintaining care for children amid changes in circumstances, roles, and relationships (Ashbourne et al., 2013; Emery, 2012)
 - Adjusting to new roles is a concern for parents around this time (Ferraro et al., 2016; Nelson, 2006; Troilo & Coleman, 2012)
 - Early changes in parental roles can affect the trajectory for later changes
 - Many divorce education classes are offered during this period

Purpose

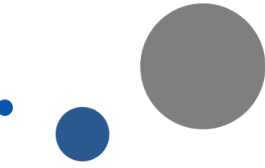
- Previous research has mostly focused on roles of divorced or unmarried parents well after separation
- Less is known about the process of parental roles changes shortly following separation
- The current study used grounded theory methodology to describe:
 1. Parents' perceptions of role changes following separation
 2. Conditions that are related to changes in parents' roles
 3. Influence of role changes on parents' perceptions of individual wellbeing and family functioning

Method



- Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 1990)
- Concurrent recruitment, data collection, and analysis
- 60 – 90 minute interviews
- Open, axial, and selective coding
 - Four research team members
- Qualitative validity
 - Memos and audit trail
 - Multiple research team members with varied backgrounds
 - Emergent design – development of new interview questions

Recruitment & Sample

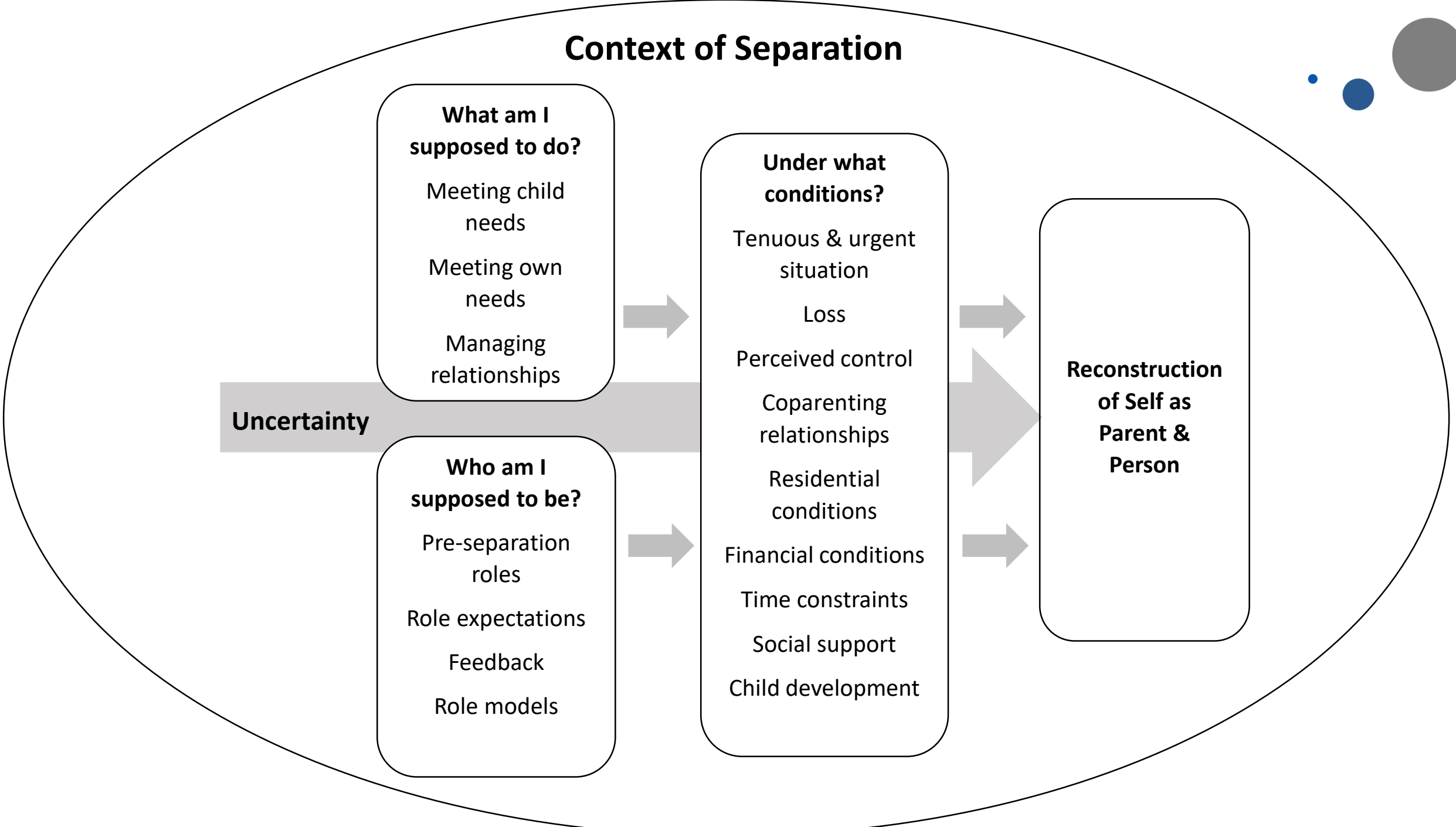


- Recruitment
 - Separated mothers and fathers; at least one child ≤ 18 years old
 - Mandated parenting education classes for parents seeking custody in northeastern Pennsylvania
- Sample characteristics ($N = 12$)
 - 7 fathers, 5 mothers
 - Recently separated or still living with ex-partner ($mdn = 6$ months)
 - 33% \geq college degree
 - Median annual household income range (\$40,000 - \$49,000)
 - Age ($M = 40, SD = 8.9$)
 - Number of children ($M = 2.1, SD = 0.9$)
 - Age of youngest child ($M = 7.6, SD = 5.3$)

Results: Three Parent Groups

- **Always primary parents (4 mothers; 1 father):** took on most parenting tasks while with former partners and in separation; reported minor role changes
 - *“...being the same parent I always was.” (Lenore)*
- **New to primary parenting (2 fathers):** little engagement while with their partners; assumed primary responsibility for children in separation
 - *“I might have slipped a little bit... I want to make sure I’m doing what it takes, not only in ways that I have been before, but in new ways.” (Dan)*
- **Threatened loss of parenting role (4 fathers, 1 mother):** barriers to maintaining preferred roles; concerns about becoming outsiders or “second class parents”
 - *“I would just like to not be excluded. You know, I would still like to be the mother, you know.” (Ariel)*

Context of Separation



Always primary parents

Context of Separation

"I ride this fine line between protecting my kids and making sure they have their dad involved." (Erica)

What am I supposed to do?

Responding to child needs
Managing relationships
Strategizing for the future

Under what conditions?

Control and responsibility
Pros and cons of ex-partner engagement
Ambivalence toward ex-partner
Child development & relationship management
Financial challenges

Reconstruction of Self as Parent & Person

Parenting alone
Taking control, but uncertain about decisions
Overwhelmed, but hopeful

"...you wonder, like... 'Are you making the right choices?'... Um, but overall, I mean, it's just rewarding." (Erica)

"...it might be a hard transition, but I feel like there's a lot more hope... maybe that's because I'm in more control of it" (Kelly)

Uncertainty

Who am I supposed to be?

Loss of family ideal & re-envisioning
Looking to family role models
Limiting feedback from others

"I always have to step back and ask myself what's causing it [negative child behaviors]...Is it because we're missing Daddy? Is it because we're upset that we're no longer living in the same house?" (Erica)

Sources of uncertainty:

- "same parent I always was"
- Child adjustment
- Foster ex-partner involvement?

"I want [the children] to have that sense of family... make sure that it's not dying with our marriage." (Erica)

Context of Separation

New to primary parenting

What am I supposed to do?

Present-focused
Understanding and responding child needs
Managing the family
Managing own reactions

"I need to make sure their insurance cards are good and I got their schoolwork signed, permission slips are signed, they have stuff for lunch... You know, all the roles that you depend on someone else to help with get pushed to you." (Morty)

Uncertainty

Primary source of uncertainty:

- Taking primary responsibility

"It was instant fear of 'What do I do now?' ...a reality check because you now realize you are the parent, not a parent." (Morty)

Who am I supposed to be?

Limited time to reflect on self (responding to practical child needs)
Openness and soliciting feedback

Under what conditions?

Initial emotional pain due to loss of relationship
Responsibility with wavering control
Time constraints
Social support

Reconstruction of Self as Parent & Person

New roles (nurturer, caregiver, family manager)
New satisfaction in parenting
"Doing my best"

"... you 'go through the motions' [as pre-separation father]. Now... it's more exciting." (Dan)

"I want to be the father... I want to make sure that I'm doing what it takes, not only in ways I have been before, but in new ways, too." (Morty)

Context of Separation

Threatened loss of parenting role

I get to drive [16 year-old daughter] down. I don't care if I have to sit in the [concert venue] parking lot for 4 hours... Just from the situation... not living with them and not having a place where they can visit..."(Jack).

What am I supposed to do?

Managing relationships
Strategizing for connection
Managing own reactions

Uncertainty

Primary source of uncertainty:

- Future role and family relationships (fear of becoming an outsider)

Who am I supposed to be?

Role & boundary ambiguity
Challenges to playing pre-separation roles
Fear of becoming obsolete or replaced by new partners and family members

Under what conditions?

Profound loss and loneliness
Lack of control (weak relationship foundation, nonresident status, perceived court bias)
Coparenting (triangulation, limited influence)
Geographic distance
Limited space in the new home
Child development = additional challenge

"You don't wake them up in the morning. You are not ironing their clothes for them and everything, you are just like, 'crap I miss that'"(Jack).

Reconstruction of Self as Parent & Person

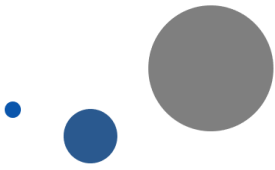
Continued uncertainty and loss
Developing new roles and relationships
Coping with limitations ("making the most of it")

"I feel like my back is against the wall. I am stuck in a corner that I can't get out of, you know?" (Eric)

"I want him to know that he's loved by his dad so I... I do a lot more things with him now." (Roland)

"I can't be a mom, now." (Ariel)
"The authoritative role is the one I struggle with a lot. What to say? What to do? When am I allowed to?" (Jack)

Discussion



- The general process of role adjustment was similar for all parents during separation
 - However, challenges, strengths, and conditions differ by group
- “One-size-fits-all” approaches to divorce education and intervention may be limited
- Parents felt an urgent need to make the right choices amid uncertainty during this tenuous and formative period
- Previous research suggests that perceptions of control are associated with positive outcomes for divorced parents (Afifi, McManus, Hutchinson, & Baker, 2007)
 - However, control comes with responsibility that may initially overwhelm some parents
- Future research should examine how role changes early in separation affect later parent, child, and family functioning

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Thank you!

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