

## A Preliminary Mixed-Method Study of Separated Parents

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### DID YOU KNOW?

Divorce is widely recognised as a **process** that can lead to **accumulated stressors** and **reduced personal resources** for parents. While many adjust well, **1 in 5 parents** report **psychological difficulties** and a significant **decline in long-term well-being** [1; 2].

Psychological research has extensively investigated children's well-being, parent-child relationship quality, and coparenting dynamics, while paying comparatively less attention to **the mental health of parents and the risks of chronic stress**.

### METHOD

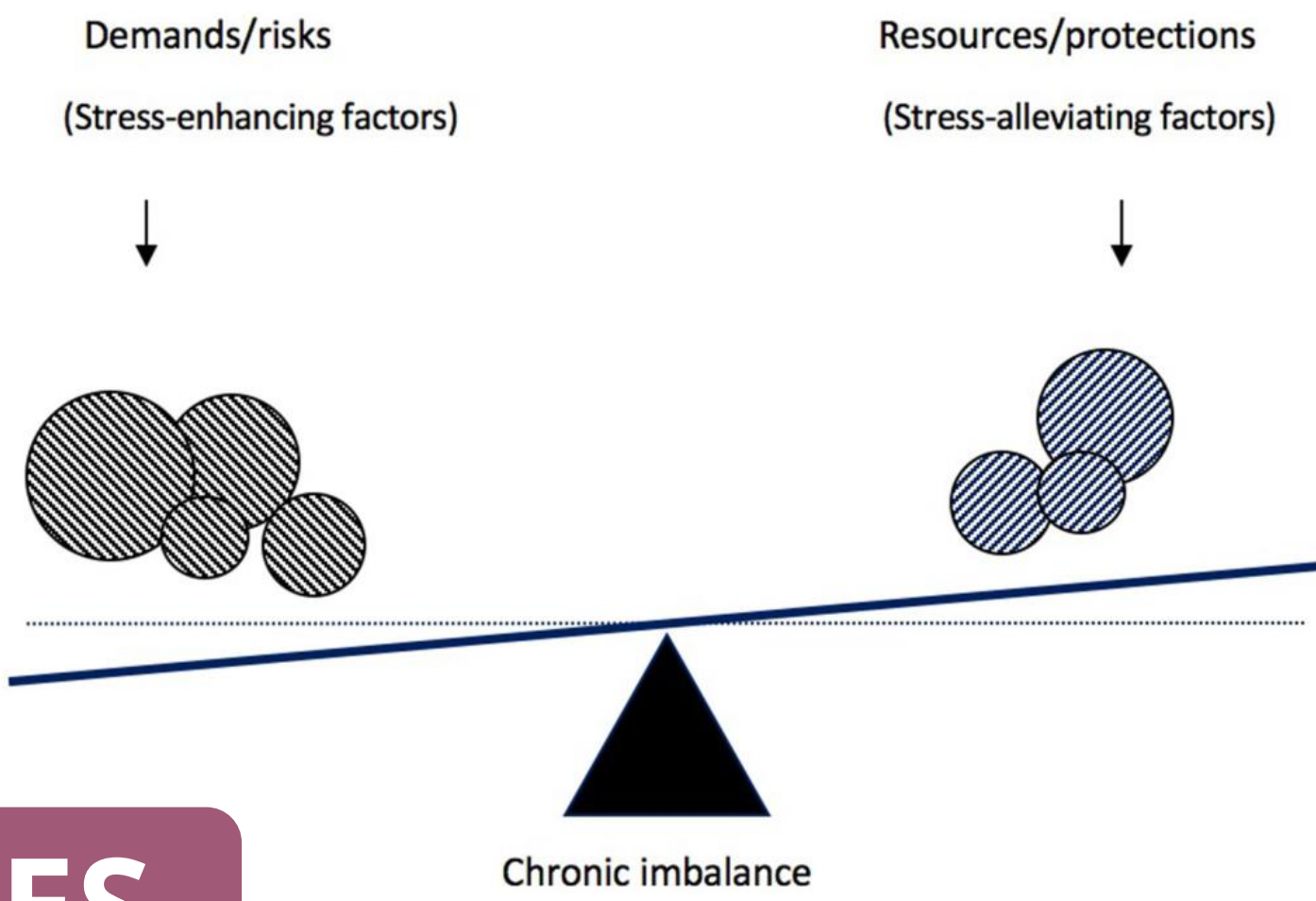
We used a **mixed-method design** and assessed **five self-selected separated parents** through a **semi-structured in-depth interview** and **validated questionnaires** (*The Parental Burnout Assessment* [PBA; 4], *The Balance Between Risks and Resources* [BR<sup>2</sup>; 3], *The Coparenting Relationship Scale* [CRS; 5, 6]).

Data were analysed using **thematic reflexive analysis** [7], supported by **interpretation of themes in light of quantitative scores** [8].

### RESULTS

### OUR PURPOSE

Using the **Balance Between Risks and Resources framework** [3], we aimed to identify specific **stressors and resources** as perceived by separated parents.



### TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

- Separated parents may face **long-term challenges**, even beyond high-conflict cases.
- Post-separation interventions should target **parental well-being** alongside children and coparenting systems. Identifying parents' **specific risks and resources** may be a relevant avenue.
- Interventions should address how parents **perceive and adapt** to changes across **multiple relational levels**: the individual perspective, coparenting, the parent-child relationship and the reorganisation of broader relational systems.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants

Name	Age	Children	Years since separation	Custody	PBA (0 to 138)	BR <sup>2</sup> (- 195 to 195)
Rose	61	Boy 22 y.o.	13 years	Sole (100 %)	20	99
Sarah	38	Boys 9 and 6 y.o.	Less than one year	joint (50 %)	20	65
Alice	55	Girl 22 y.o.	11 years	Sole (100 %)	2	84
Paul	45	Girl and boy 10 and 7 y.o.	4 years 15 years	Secondary (35 %)	19	33
Jamal	38	Girls 9 and 4 y.o.	1 year 5 years	Secondary (20 %)	15	71

*What are the main perceived stressors and resources encountered by separated parents?*

#### Laying down arms for children's sake

While some parents eventually put away their weapons to focus on their children, **others maintain a conflict that ultimately undermines them**.

*Once the procedures and the hatred have been poured out... There comes a time when the parents have to talk again, even years later... But how do you talk again when there are only crumbs left and everything has been destroyed? — Paul*

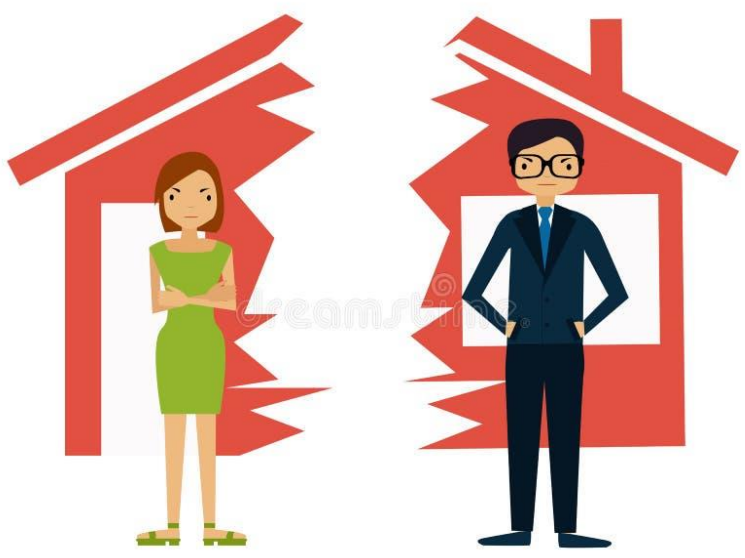
*All I hope is that we can come to an agreement that will allow us to make decisions for the child (...) so that we can (...) bury this hatchet, this animosity... which clouds your vision and doesn't allow you to concentrate solely on the child's happiness. — Jamal*

#### Setting aside one's needs to protect the child

Faced with the threat of the consequences of separation on the child, some parents **over-invest in parenting, putting their needs aside and masking their emotions**.

*I was myself alone, with my daughter (...) I even refused requests to go out with friends (...) because I felt I couldn't penalize my daughter for the fact that her parents were separated. — Alice*

**"For better and worse"**  
**Coparenting with the ex-partner**



#### A daily adaptation work for parents

Even functional coparenting requires **adjustment efforts** that can be a **daily burden**.

*I have a lot of trouble with that, but I accept it, and I let go of it, telling myself that Dad's rules are Dad's rules, and my rules are my rules, and I do the best I can on my side (...) we try to keep the dialogue open, but it's not necessarily easy. — Sarah*

*We must make concessions. Education is a two-person job. — Jamal*

#### Resourcing shifts

After divorce, relational systems may shift and **become valuable resources** for parents.

*The people around me did a lot... because they said: 'It's going to be OK'. They encouraged me. I had my brothers behind me... — Rose*

*She's [the ex-partner] had a partner for two or three months (...) I see him as an ally, a priori. Someone who might be able to ease the situation. — Paul*

#### Distressing shifts

Changes in the relational systems can lead to **isolation** or **fuel conflict**, notably when former friends or in-laws take sides and prolong tensions.

*Yes, I did feel very, very alone (...) I really did have a few people that I haven't really heard from close friends (...) people really needed to choose a side. — Sarah*

*Then the in-laws started sticking their noses in and it went to court with a lawyer — Paul*

#### Feeling of contrast with the "pre-separation parental self"

Separation can lead to **feelings of positive or negative contrast** with previous parental self.

*Now, during the week when I have them, I can spend time with them, reading stories, playing board games... doing things that I used to love to do, but that I didn't enjoy any more. — Sarah*

**Changes in the parental role**

**Reorganisations in the relational systems**



References and supplementary material

Table 2. Supplementary results

Name	Age	Children	Years since separation	Custody	PBA	BR <sup>2</sup>	BR <sup>2*</sup>	CRS									Particularity
								PAgr	PC	EC	CSup	CSab	PApp	DT	SB		
Rose	61	Boy 22 y.o.	13 years	Sole (100 %)	20	99	N/A	4	4	2.57	3.40	0	4.40	3.50	3.38	Took several years to "digest" her husband's betrayal, then established good coparenting.	
Sarah	38	Boys 9 and 6 y.o.	Less than one year	joint (50 %)	20	65	+ 33	4.50	2.75	2	2.80	.83	3.71	4	3.77	Left her ex-husband to start a new relationship; maintains a good relationship with her ex.	
Alice	55	Girl 22 y.o.	11 years	Sole (100 %)	2	84	N/A	6	6	N/A	1.20	0	2	3	1.80	Reports low involvement from the father; describes a "battle" over expenses.	
Paul	45	Girl and boy 10 and 7 y.o.	4 years 15 years	Secondary (35 %)	19	33	+ 12	2.75	0	2.43	.17	4.67	1.71	2	2.54	Ongoing conflicts with his ex-wife. Mentions an eldest daughter from a previous relationship with whom he no longer has contact.	
Jamal	38	Girls 9 and 4 y.o.	1 year 5 years	Secondary (20 %)	15	71	N/A	<u>P1</u> : 3.75 <u>P2</u> : 4.75	3.75 3	2.29 3.86	2.67 .83	3.67 5.67	4.57 4.86	5 5	4.15 3.62	Two previous unions: good relationship with the first mother, ongoing conflict with the second.	

Notes. PBA: Parental Burnout Assessment (range: 0 to 138); BR2: Balance Between Risks and Resources (range: -195 to +195); BR2\* = Balance for the new partner (range: -40 to +40), CRS = Coparent Relationship Scale (each subscale ranges from 0 to 6): PAgr: Parental Agreement, PC: Parental Closeness, EC: Exposure to Conflict, CSup: Coparental Support, CSab: Coparental Sabotage, PApp: Parenting Approval, DT: Division of Tasks, SB: Short Measure. Results in bold indicate scores significantly below or above the normative mean (i.e., Z-scores > +1.65 or < -1.65; p < .05,). Results in green suggest potential strengths or protective and results in red suggest areas of concern. Z-scores were calculated using published means and standard deviations for each measure [see 6].

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