

The Lived Experience of Ambiguous Marital Separation

A Dissertation  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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June 2018



## Acknowledgements

It is not lost on me that I am here because of the efforts and contributions of so many people. I recognize the privilege associated with entering a doctoral program, and while I do not want to minimize my own hard work, I cannot claim to have gotten here entirely on my own volition. I must acknowledge how fortunate I am to have had the support of so many people along the way.

First, I want to thank my family. I am grateful for the ways you cheered me on, sent notes of encouragement, checked on how things were progressing, and offered unending patience and understanding through the entirety of this process. Thank you, as well, for affording me opportunities through of your financial support of my education. Having access to a quality education opened innumerable doors, which subsequently opened even more. It is hard to quantify what has come from all the ways you have invested in me and this process. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

I also want to acknowledge several instrumental mentors who helped me envision a future I would not have dared dream for myself. Dr. Leta and Phil Frazier, Dr. Mary Jensen, Dr. Steve Sandage, Dr. Cate Lally, Dr. Carla Dahl, Tina Watson Wiens – thank you for imagining for and with me, for helping me find a home in my own skin, and for encouraging me to dream big. My gratitude runs deeper than I can find words to express.

I also want to acknowledge my gratitude for the guidance and support of my adviser in this program, Dr. Steve Harris. I have felt most grateful that you not only care about what I produce academically, but that you see and care about me as a person. Thank you for fostering an environment that never feels politically threatening, holds

space for me to be unapologetically me, and that always makes room for conversations about food, music, running, and dogs. I have quite enjoyed our work together.

I am also deeply grateful for the various roles and contributions of my committee members. Dr. Liz Wieling, you have provided encouragement, empowerment, and refuge through my time in this program. Thank you for being a dreamer with and for me, pushing me to think critically, and helping me continue embodying my values. Dr. Bill Doherty, thank you for welcoming me aboard the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project and for affording me an opportunity to learn from you and the others on the team. Your clinical wisdom and astute attention to research design have pushed me to be a stronger, more confident therapist and researcher. Thank you for believing in me. Dr. Alan Hawkins (aka, Oz), thank you for allowing me to be a part of the National Divorce Decision-Making Project and for your enthusiastic support of my research interests. I have learned so much as a result of working on this project, and I hope that my own research efforts make a meaningful contribution to this line of work.

I also want to acknowledge the people whose stories made this research project possible. Thank you for trusting me, a total stranger, with profoundly intimate details about your lives. The time we shared felt sacred, and I am humbled by your contributions. I hold your stories with deep respect and admiration, and I hope I have done right by you in how I present your experiences to others.

Lastly, I want to express my deepest, most heartfelt appreciation for my spouse, Ty. Thank you for believing in me and for your unwavering commitment to supporting me in pursuing a line of work that breathes life and joy (and okay, stress) into my soul,

even when doing so has meant sacrifices for you. I feel fortunate to have struck gold with you and love what we share together in our partnership. I very much look forward to seeing what this next season brings us.

## **Dedication**

To my favorite person and most dedicated advocate, Ty. Thank you for everything.

And to J. I admire you so.

## **Abstract**

Researchers have long treated marital separation as a transition that inevitably and linearly leads to divorce, even though not all separations end this way. The small number of studies examining separation as a marital status distinct from divorce is limited in scope; most of this research is concerned with prevalence, separation outcomes, and marital instability following a separation. Popular sources suggest that some couples separate without clarity about how the separation will end, often for the purpose of assessing whether to divorce or stay married. However, no research on this this kind of ambiguous separation has yet been done. With a sample of 20 currently separated persons from various locations around the United States, I employed a hermeneutic phenomenological design to inquire about the experience of being separated from one's spouse when the separation was initiated without knowing how it would end. Special attention was given to women's experiences of this phenomenon. Six essential themes emerged from the interviews: 1) Our relationship feels ambiguous, 2) separation is a private experience, 3) separation is a lonely experience, 4) there are benefits to separating, 5) separation is not sustainable, and 6) the way out is unclear. A discussion of the implications for the study findings is provided.

Key words: marital separation, trial separation, divorce, marriage

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

### **Chapter Overview**

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce ambiguous marital separation as the topic of the study and to provide relevant empirical and background information that informs this research. This chapter begins by positioning the research on marital separation in the larger context of divorce literature and summarizing what is known and not known about marital separation. Next, I describe knowledge gaps addressed by this study. Finally, this chapter concludes with an overview of the study aims and the research question that guided my inquiry.

### **Introduction**

Researchers have long been interested in marriage and divorce, but divorce has been mostly treated as a single transition (Amato, 2010). While the event of a divorce is undoubtedly consequential, examining divorce as a single transition oversimplifies an indisputably complex process. In recent years, the single transition perspective has been challenged in a few important ways. Some researchers have begun examining divorce using a “multiple transition perspective,” through which they examine whether the number and types of transitions following a divorce account for variance in affected persons’ outcomes (Amato, 2010, p. 657). Others have begun examining what precedes a divorce, namely divorce ideation and processes involved in deciding whether to divorce or stay married when a marriage is strained (Hawkins et al., 2017). These process- and transition-oriented perspectives do much to add depth and complexity to the larger narratives and understandings about divorce.

In more closely examining divorce-related processes and transitions, one area that is important to consider is marital separation. During a marital separation, a couple remains legally married, but the relationship is put on hold, either legally or informally, most likely due to marital relationship distress. Marital separation has been called a “socially ambiguous status – not quite married, not quite divorced” (Amato, 2010, p. 661). This is different from situations in which a couple is geographically separated because of reasons other than marital discord (e.g., military, employment), but whose relationship remains intact. This study focuses on separations involving a suspension of the marital relationship for a period of time.

Research on marital separation is scarce. Historically, persons who are separated because of marital strain have been statistically treated as synonymous with those who are divorcing. For example, divorced and currently separated persons are grouped together in a sample for the purpose of understanding an outcome variable (e.g., Sbarra, Smith, & Mehl, 2014). This points to an assumption that separation inevitably and linearly leads to divorce. However, as Weiss (1975) stated, “every divorce implies a separation, but the converse most definitely is not true” (p. 4). Estimates suggest that 6% (Vennum et al., 2014) to 18% (Kitson, 1985) of still-married couples in the United States have temporarily separated at some point in their marriage. Treating separated persons as divorced individuals leaves little empirical or conceptual room for inquiring about the variety of ways separation can end (e.g., reconciliation, long-term separation), whether there are different types of separation, or the unique characteristics or experiences related to being separated from one’s spouse. Assuming all separated persons will divorce also

implies that decision-making about the future of a marriage happens prior to the point of separation, when decision-making may continue well beyond that point. Recent findings suggest even those who file for divorce are not exempt from ambivalence about their decision. In a sample of 329 divorcing couples, Doherty, Willoughby, and Peterson (2011) found that both partners in 1 in 9 couples believed the marriage could be saved, and both partners in 1 in 10 couples expressed interest in reconciliation services. These findings point to a path between marriage and divorce that is more complex than the current body of divorce literature implies.

The number of studies examining separation as a transition distinct from divorce is small, but it provides a useful foundation from which to build. Beyond prevalence, this research is primarily concerned with predictors of outcomes and marital instability in reconciled marriages. Key findings suggest that separation outcomes seem to be predicated on access to resources, indicating the possible roles of power and privilege in decision-making processes about the future of a marriage. Several studies have shown that those with fewer financial and social resources have been more likely to stay, or at least attempt to stay, in a marriage following a separation (Bloom et al., 1977; Morgan, 1988; Tumin et al., 2015; Wineberg & McCarthy, 1994). This may be especially salient among women, who tend to think less favorably about reconciliation (Bloom & Hodges, 1981), but who are more likely than men to experience financial hardship following a divorce (Gadalla, 2008; Kincaid & Caldwell, 1995). It may be that during a separation, women perceive more barriers to divorce, which motivates them to attempt a reconciliation because of the resources marriage provides. Interestingly, however, a

decision to stay in a marriage does not mean a couple has reconciled, that is, they have resolved their marital problems. Persons who have separated but stayed in their marriages have been more likely to report greater instability and less happiness than those who never separated (Binstock & Thornton, 2003; Kitson, 1985; Vennum et al., 2014; Wineberg & McCarthy, 1994).

While the literature that conceptualizes separation as distinct from divorce is useful, important questions remain unanswered. For example, it may be beneficial to inquire about different types of separation to better understand why some couples stay married while others divorce. One of the limitations of the current separation research is that all separated persons are treated as the same, but couples may separate for different reasons. Many couples likely separate because one or both spouses indicates they want a divorce, and divorce is the intended outcome. As stated above, divorce inevitably implies a separation (Weiss, 1975). However, more ambiguous separations may also occur. Instead of separating with the intent to divorce, some couples might separate because one or both spouses wants to gain clarity about whether to stay married or divorce. Unlike separations that begin with the intent to divorce, at the onset of these ambiguous separations, the outcome is presumably unclear. Popular relationship sources even promote ambiguous separations, sometimes calling them trial or controlled separations (e.g., Hastings, n.d.; Lipe, 2010; Raffel, 1999), to aid in decision-making about the future of a marriage. Interestingly, researchers have only commented on or theorized about these more ambiguous separations (e.g., Tumin, Han, & Qian, 2015); to date, I could find

no empirical work on them. Couples may be using separation in this informal, more ambiguous way, but the research on this phenomenon is unquestionably behind.

### **Problem Statement and Research Question**

The empirical literature that conceptualizes marital separation as distinct from divorce is relatively scarce, and while this body of research is useful, it is limited in scope. At present, all separations are treated the same, but not all separations are likely initiated with the same intent. There is a popular notion that informal separations may help couples gain clarity about whether to divorce or stay married (e.g., Hastings, n.d.; Lipe, 2010; Raffel, 1999), but I could find no empirical evidence to suggest this. The lack of attention to different types of separation, specifically those that begin with a more ambiguous intent, is especially problematic because there is no empirical guidance for these couples or those who work with them, such as therapists or attorneys.

My long-term goals of advancing separation research are twofold. The first goal is to help couples arrive at decisions about their marriages with confidence, as recent literature suggests that decisions to divorce are sometimes made with ambivalence (Willoughby, Doherty, & Peterson, 2011). If couples are using separation as a strategy in their decision-making processes, this needs to be investigated further. It may be that separation creates momentum toward divorce when couples are not ready, or what happens between a couple during a separation might complicate their decision-making. The second goal is to promote equity in marital decision-making processes, as previous findings suggest inequitable financial consequences of divorce on men and women (Amato, 2000; Gadalla, 2008), and those with fewer financial and social resources are

more likely to attempt reconciliation following a separation (Bloom et al., 1977; Morgan, 1988; Tumin et al., 2015; Wineberg & McCarthy, 1994).

Specifically, the aims of this study are to 1) investigate the experience of separations that begin without clarity about how the separation will end because one or both spouses is deciding whether to divorce or stay married, and 2) to examine the gendered nature of separation experiences. The research question that guided this study was *What is the experience of being separated from a spouse when the separation is initiated without clarity about how it will end because one or both spouses is deciding whether to divorce or stay married?* I expect that this study will make a contribution to current literature and will provide direction for future empirical and theoretical developments on marital separation.

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

### **Chapter Overview**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an in-depth review of the research and theoretical frameworks that have informed this study on ambiguous marital separations. This chapter begins with an overview of research on marital separation more broadly, including discussions of separation prevalence, predictors of outcomes, the instability of reconciled marriages, and the limitations of this body of research. I then discuss of the use of theory in separation research and conceptual frameworks that may be especially useful in inquiring about ambiguous separations. This chapter concludes with an explication of the ways the current study helps advance what is known about marital separation and an overview of the study design.

### **Research**

Relatively little is known about separation resulting from marital problems, as marital separation and divorce have historically been conflated in divorce research. Statistically, the date on which a couple separated has been conceptualized as the point at which the marriage ended, and separated persons have been treated as inevitably divorcing. However, a handful of studies has demonstrated that while divorce is the most likely outcome for separated couples, divorce is not the only outcome. Estimates of prevalence suggest that 6% (Vennum et al., 2014) to 18% (Kitson, 1985) of still-married couples in the United States have temporarily separated at some point in the marriage, and 9-35% of separated couples reconcile at least once (Binstock & Thornton, 2003; Duran-Aydintug, 1988; Morgan, 1988; Wineberg, 1994). Researchers have also found

that 40% (Kincaid & Caldwell, 1995) to 45% (Bloom & Hodges, 1981) of separated persons have at least talked with their spouse about the possibility of reconciling.

These findings suggest a couple things. First, and perhaps most obviously, not all separations end in divorce. Some couples choose to stay married, and others at least attempt to reconcile before finalizing a divorce. This suggests the path between marriage and divorce is not as linear as the larger body of divorce research implies. In an effort to better understand how couples makes decisions about the future of their marriages, especially given that decisions to divorce are not always made with confidence (Willoughby, Doherty, & Peterson, 2011), more work needs to be done to better understand the role of separation in deciding whether to divorce or stay married. Second, the phenomenon of couples separating at some point during their marriage may be more common than what is currently assumed. Because couples can informally separate (and subsequently reconcile) without changing their legal marital status, capturing these transitions without purposefully asking about them may be difficult. However, that these transitions are difficult to capture does not mean they are not happening, as evidenced by popular literature that describes and promotes separation as a strategy for gaining clarity about the future of a marriage (Hastings, n.d.; Lipe, 2010; Raffel, 1999).

A small number of researchers have set out to research marital separation as a transition distinct from divorce. This research primarily focuses on predictors of separation outcomes and relationship instability in reconciled marriages. I present the findings from this research next.

## Separation Outcomes

Examining why some separated couples divorce and others do not has been a chief concern among separation researchers. One consistent finding is that the length of a separation is inversely related to the likelihood of reconciling (Binstock & Thornton, 2003; Bloom et al., 1977; Bumpass et al., 1991; Wineberg, 1996). Perhaps this is a function of lengthy divorce processes or state laws mandating that a couple is separated for an amount of time before finalizing a divorce. However, barriers to divorce may offer an alternative explanation. Wineberg and McCarthy (1994) found that among women who had separated from and reconciled with their spouses, those with less education reported shorter separations than those with college degrees. The authors theorized that women with less education may be more dependent on marriage for financial security, motivating them to more quickly attempt a reconciliation.

Demographics seem to partially explain why some separated couples do not divorce, and the likelihood of staying in a marriage seems to be predicated on access to resources and the perception of barriers to divorce. Some of the common predictors of staying in a marriage after separating are low levels of education (Bloom et al., 1977; Morgan, 1988; Tumin et al., 2015; Wineberg & McCarthy, 1994), lower family income prior to separation (Morgan, 1988), younger age (Bloom et al., 1977; Wineberg & McCarthy, 1994), and identifying as an ethnic minority (Bloom et al., 1977; Tumin et al., 2015). Similarly, in a sample of ever-separated women, the likelihood of attempting to reconcile was associated with less education, younger age, and having children (Wineberg, 1996). These findings suggest that those with fewer financial and social

resources, perhaps especially women, may perceive more barriers to divorce and find reason to stay in a marriage because of the resources the marriage provides. Interestingly, separated women tend to think less favorably about reconciliation than men (Bloom & Hodges, 1981), but they are at greater risk of experiencing financial hardship once divorced (Amato, 2000; Gadalla, 2008; Kincaid & Caldwell, 1995). Furthermore, although most persons recover from the negative effects of divorce, the speed at which they do is greatly affected by their access to financial and social resources (Amato, 2014). It may be that perception of fewer resources leads to a greater likelihood of staying in a marriage, especially for women who tend to be disproportionately affected by divorce.

### **Separation and Subsequent Marital Instability**

While some separated couples stay together following a separation, deciding to stay in a marriage does not necessarily mean that a couple has reconciled, or has resolved their marital problems and restored their relationship to health. In fact, the data suggest that marriages following a separation are often marked with some degree of instability. Kitson (1985) found that both men and women who reported at least one separation in their current marriage reported higher levels of psychological distress and were less happy with their marriage than those who had never separated. In another study, the experience of separating and reconciling was associated with less certainty about the future of the marriage and lower relationship satisfaction (Vennum et al., 2014). Having a history of separating may even put couples at risk for separating again. Wineberg and McCarthy (1994) found that among women whose separations ended in divorce, over half had experienced two or more reconciliation attempts, suggesting they had separated

multiple times. These periods of reconciliation may also be short-lived. About one-third of persons that reconciled had separated again within 1 year, and this number rose to about half within 3 years (Binstock & Thornton, 2003).

The relationship between separation and subsequent marital instability needs to be investigated further, and it may be that this relationship is moderated by the reason for staying in the marriage. For example, those who choose to stay in a marriage because of a lack of resources may feel less motivated to resolve the marital problems than those who choose to stay in a marriage because they want to preserve the relationship. If a couple chooses to stay together without resolving the problems that led to the initial separation, they may be more likely to experience those problems again, resulting in even greater marital distress or instability. On the other hand, couples that choose to stay together and work on resolving the marital problems may feel more positively about the relationship and confident in its trajectory. In one qualitative study on reconciliation following separation, some couples indicated that constraints initially drew them back together, and there were often several reconciliation attempts, but it was their efforts to restore the relationship that contributed to their eventual relationship stability (Plauche, Marks, & Hawkins, 2017). Future research could examine not only motivations and reasons for staying in a marriage, but also whether these reasons predict long-term outcomes.

### **Research Limitations**

The small body of separation research has primarily focused on prevalence, predictors of outcomes, and the instability of reconciled marriages. This research provides a useful foundation for investigating separation further, but it is not without

limitations. The datedness of this research, its scope, and methodological concerns all point to opportunities to advance this body of literature.

First, the marital separation literature is fairly dated. Most of this research was published in the 1980's and 1990's, perhaps in response to substantial shifts in marriage and family life and rising divorce rates in the United States. During that time, the average age of marriage had risen, the number of cohabiting couples increased, and traditional gender norms were increasingly challenged both in and outside the family (Cherlin, 2004; Knox, 1980). Additionally, divorce procedures changed. Starting with California in 1969, individual states began passing no-fault divorce laws. These laws allowed a person to file for divorce without the responsibility of demonstrating that the other spouse was guilty of breaching the marital contract or some other wrongdoing, thereby making divorce much easier to obtain. These changes seem to have been an impetus for more closely examining marital separation. Unfortunately, few researchers in the past two decades have continued this line of inquiry. Instead, the divorce literature has continued to reinforce the idea that separation results in divorce, even though the evidence has suggested otherwise.

Research findings are most meaningful when interpreted in their historical and social contexts, and updated research on marital separation is needed. While some findings may be relevant for some couples today, the degree to which they are relevant is unclear.

Given a number of social shifts over the last several years that might affect marital processes, such as the advancement of technology and social media, the legalization of same-sex marriage, and increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the United States, it is important that this literature be updated.

The separation literature is also limited in scope. Several questions remain unexplored about marital separation, which are crucial to ask in understanding this phenomenon. For example, little attention has been given to the emotional experience of being separated, differences in experiences between initiators and non-initiators, how spouses negotiate their relationship in what has been called a “socially ambiguous status” (Amato, 2010, p. 661), the effects of separation on children, or how long a couple needs to be separated in order for them to identify as such. Additionally, and of particular concern for this study, the experience of separation based on its intent has not been researched. Presumably, all couples that divorce undergo some kind of separation (Weiss, 1975). However, separation may not always be initiated with the intent to divorce. In fact, popular relationship sources actually promote separations – sometimes calling them trial or controlled separations – to gain clarity about whether to divorce or stay married (e.g., Hastings, n.d.; Lipe, 2010; Raffel, 1999). During these more ambiguous separations, couples essentially take a break from the marriage. While researchers have commented on ambiguous or trial separations (e.g., Tumin, Han, & Qian, 2015), no empirical work on them has been done. Little is known about the different ways couples use separation in response to marital strain, and the use of ambiguous separations in divorce decision-making has not been empirically investigated. Conceptualizing and inquiring about separation types could provide useful insight into the trajectories of separation experiences and outcomes, which may also provide direction for couples making decisions about the future of their marriage. This could be especially important given recent interest in understanding divorce decision-making processes (Hawkins et al., 2017)

and research suggesting that some couples proceed with divorce despite feelings of ambivalence about their decision (Willoughby, Doherty, & Peterson, 2011). Inquiring about processes that precede decisions to divorce is imperative if we desire to help couples make these decisions with more confidence.

There are also methodological concerns with the existing research. Chiefly, these studies primarily rely on secondary datasets for their analyses. The researchers conducting these studies were limited to the variables available in the datasets, and key variables may be missing from these analyses. Furthermore, critical variables may still need to be identified; most of this research is quantitative, and qualitative research can help point to ideas and concepts that researchers might have missed in their own conceptualizations of separation. Only one qualitative study that conceptualizes separation as a transition unique from divorce was located, but this study was conducted after most of the separation literature was published, and its focus was on reconciliation following separation rather than the separation itself (Plauche, Marks, & Hawkins, 2017). Given that so little empirical work has been done in this area, returning to purposeful samples of separated persons to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and a sense for what questions are important to ask is an imperative next step in advancing this literature, and asking those who are separated to share their experiences in their own words could provide unique insights into what is important to study.

### **Theory**

Given the limited number of studies on marital separation, it is not surprising that few studies have explicitly integrated theory into their research questions or designs.

However, there do seem to be implicit references to social exchange theory throughout this body of research (Morgan, 1988; Wineberg, 1994; Wineberg & McCarthy, 1994). Social exchange theory employs economic principles to describe the costs and rewards involved in making decisions about social relationships (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993, p. 385). These articles specifically draw attention to resources that make permanently ending a marriage a more viable option, and the rational process of weighing costs and rewards in deciding about a separation outcome. For example, Wineberg (1994) found that among separated women, there was an inverse relationship between levels of education and the likelihood of reconciliation. The author suggested that women who perceive less control or who have greater financial challenges might consider the rewards of reconciling more prominent than the costs of divorce. Similarly, Morgan (1988) discussed separation as a time when spouses weigh benefits and costs of both remaining married and legally divorcing. Like Wineberg (1994), Morgan (1988) hypothesized that women with fewer resources would be most likely to reconcile because “the troubled marriage may appear to be the optimal choice” (p. 494); the study’s findings provided evidence to support this hypothesis.

While social exchange principles may help explain cognitive elements of decision-making processes about whether to divorce or stay married during a separation, they fall short in capturing emotional, relational, and social influences. This study focuses on the experience of being separated from a spouse when the separation was initiated without clarity about how it would end. While I do not seek to validate theory through this study, the consideration of additional conceptual frameworks guided the

development of my study design and questions, based on previous research findings. These frameworks are: (1) Stanley and Markman's (1992) commitment model, (2) a feminist framework that emphasizes the inequitable distribution of power in the marital relationship, and (3) the concept of boundary ambiguity (Boss & Greenberg, 1984).

### **Commitment Model**

The first conceptual framework that may be useful is Stanley and Markman's (1992) commitment model. In this model, prosocial commitment to a relationship, which involves staying in a relationship for the sake of the relationship itself, is compared with constraint commitment, which involves staying in a relationship because the constraints are too great to leave. Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) use these different types of commitment to describe what they call an "inertia effect" in relationship progression (p. 503), a process by which couples progress in their relationship (e.g., cohabit, marry) as their lives become increasingly interdependent. Those who progress with more commitment to the relationship tend to be more stable than those who progress in the relationship because of constraint commitment, or the constraints to ending the relationship are too great. For example, couples who cohabit with higher levels of commitment to the relationship and later marry are less likely to divorce than those who "slide" into cohabitation, and eventually marriage, for other reasons (e.g., financial stability, convenience; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006, p. 505).

Similar processes may help explain some separation outcomes. Some couples, perhaps those with more financial and social resources, may perceive fewer constraints to divorce after they separate and essentially "slide" into divorce. On the other hand, those

with fewer resources may be more likely to attempt or consider reconciliation because of constraint commitment rather than prosocial commitment. While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine reconciled marriages, it is worth considering that motivations for deciding whether to stay married or divorce may also influence a reconciled marriage's trajectory. Those who choose to stay married because of prosocial commitment to the relationship may feel more motivated to resolve the marital problems than those who choose to stay married because of constraint commitment, who might be more likely to experience subsequent marital distress. Talking with separated persons about their experience of an ambiguous separation might help illuminate these kinds of processes.

### **Feminist Framework**

In addition to thinking about prosocial and constraint commitment, this research might also benefit from critical, feminist thought. A feminist framework would politicize the ways men and women experience separation differently, and it would give attention to intersecting identities that may influence the separation experience.

The findings of the existing separation literature suggest that those with fewer resources were more likely to reconcile, and even though they were most likely to initiate a separation, this may have been especially true for women (Bloom & Hodges, 1981). The predominant use of social exchange frameworks does speak to the role of resources and power in wielding personal gain (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993), but differences in power and resources are neither problematized nor connected to larger social contexts. It could be that the experience and outcomes of separation are deeply gendered. Within a feminist lens, gender is positioned as a "key axis on which power is distributed, deployed, and

misused in families” (Allen, Lloyd, & Few, 2009, p. 3), differences are used to legitimize power inequality in family and social life (Osmond & Thorne, 1993), and gender relations are shaped through interaction with surrounding political and social climates (Ferree, 2010). The historical backdrop of the separation literature is one of changing attitudes about and trends in gender relations. During that time, no-fault divorce laws began providing legal pathways for leaving unhealthy or unsafe marriages, but persistent social and economic barriers may have prevented some women from pursuing divorces they might have otherwise obtained. For example, separated women may anticipate assuming most of the parental responsibility and having lower earning potential, which would put them at disproportionate risk for financial hardship compared to men. A feminist framework would problematize social structures that reinforce these kinds of barriers while also calling for more balanced gender relations in the context of marriage and family.

Second, recent feminist scholarship has increasingly emphasized intersectionality (Allen, Lloyd, & Few, 2009), which examines the ways gender, race, sexual orientation, culture, and other categorizations or identities intersect in overlapping systems of privilege, power, and discrimination. Intersectionality assumes that experiences cannot be reduced to singular identities; instead, several identities overlap in formulating life experiences (Doucet & Lee, 2014). These overlapping identities could especially influence how separation is experienced across diverse populations. For example, men in female-male marriages might feel less distress during a period of separation than men in same-sex marriages. The latter group might feel more pressure to reconcile because of

societal assumptions that female-male relationships are superior. The current separation literature identifies gender effects in the separation experience, but a feminist framework would politicize those effects by situating them in the context of larger social structures and draw attention to the diverse ways separation could be experienced because of intersecting identities.

### **Boundary Ambiguity**

The final theoretical construct that could be useful in studying marital separation is family boundary ambiguity. Separation has been conceptualized as a “socially ambiguous status – not quite married, not quite divorced” (Amato, 2010, p. 661). Being clearly married or divorced might lead to clearer expectations for couple interactions based on societal and cultural norms, but the in-between nature of separation might render this transition more difficult to navigate. Family boundary ambiguity, which occurs when there is uncertainty about the permanence of a relational loss, might be especially pronounced if the outcome of a separation is unclear. This construct describes “a state in which family members are uncertain in their perception about who is in or out of the family and who is performing what roles and tasks within the family system” (Boss & Greenberg, 1984, p. 536). During a period of separation, couples likely find themselves negotiating unclear boundaries and expectations in unprecedented ways.

The experience of family boundary ambiguity can be related to structural family changes, but a family’s perception of and meaning for its structure most strongly predict their experience of boundary ambiguity (Carroll, Olson, & Buckmiller, 2007). Boss and Greenberg (1984) theorized that some boundary ambiguity is normative as families adapt

and change over the life cycle. However, when families experience more intense and prolonged boundary ambiguity, they are likely to experience higher levels of stress and dysfunction. The marital separation experience may be one such time, especially if the outcome of a separation is unclear. Separated couples may struggle to know how to interact with each other, or with friends and family, if they are unclear about who is considered part of the family and how each spouse interacts with and functions in the larger family system. Questions about how to define the relationship, manage finances or parenting responsibilities, or whether to continue a sexual relationship, date other people, or continue wearing a wedding ring all might feel nebulous and undefined. Separated couples who are uncertain about how a separation will end might find negotiating new ways of relating to be especially difficult because of uncertainty about whether their changes will be permanent. Inquiring about the nature of the marital relationship during an ambiguous separation may shed light on these processes.

### **The Current Study**

The research and conceptual frameworks described above provided direction and guidance for my study, which aims to advance what is known about marital separation. Specifically, the focus of my research is the experience of ambiguous separations – those that are initiated without clarity about how they will end. To date, no studies have examined the nature of ambiguous separations, though popular literature has promoted the use of separation in divorce decision-making (Hastings, n.d.; Lipe, 2010; Raffel, 1999). Furthermore, this study aims to inquire about the gendered nature of ambiguous separations, as inequitable consequences of divorce on men and women have been

documented (Gadalla, 2008; Kincaid & Caldwell, 1995), and previous research has demonstrated an inverse relationship between reconciling and access to financial and social resources (Bloom et al., 1977; Morgan, 1988; Tumin et al., 2015; Wineberg & McCarthy, 1994). The research question guiding this study is: *What is the experience of marital separation when the separation began without clarity about how it would end because one or both spouses is deciding whether to divorce or stay married?*

Because no research in this area exists, a hermeneutic phenomenological design is used to learn about this phenomenon. This methodology allows those who are separated to speak about their experiences in their own words, which may be useful in providing direction for future work in this area. Hermeneutic phenomenology also acknowledges the co-constructed, interpretive nature of representing any account of a phenomenon, which aligns with my epistemological assumptions about knowledge.

To accomplish the aims of this study, I recruited a purposeful, theoretical sample. Eligible participants included individual persons, both men and women, who were separated from their spouse at the time of the interview and whose separations began without clarity about how they would end. Each participant was asked to complete an in-depth, semi-structured interview about their experience, which was audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using procedures informed by van Manen's (1990) coding protocol for hermeneutic phenomenology. Throughout the analysis, I gave particular attention to the gendered nature of the participants' separation experiences with an emphasis on women's experiences. The next chapter provides a detailed articulation of the study's design and methods.

## **Chapter III: Methods**

### **Chapter Overview**

This chapter provides a detailed description of the study's design and methods. The chapter begins with an explication of my epistemological assumptions about knowledge and a description of the study design, including my position as a researcher in relation to the study of marital separation. Next, the target sample, recruitment strategies, and data collection procedures are explained. Finally, I end the chapter with a description of the analysis procedures, design elements intended to increase trustworthiness, and how I addressed potential ethical issues.

### **Study Design**

#### **Epistemology**

All researchers approach their work with a set of beliefs and assumptions about the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired or developed, though these beliefs and assumptions are not always made clear. In an attempt to be transparent about my own position, and because the chosen design rests on the assumption that the research process is an interpretive act (van Manen, 1990), it is important that I make clear some of my own beliefs about knowledge.

I identify as a postmodernist. I do not believe that one objective reality exists, and objectivity in social science inquiry is not possible (Barton & Bishop, 2014). Instead, there are multiple co-existing realities which are specific and local, and which are individually constructed and co-constructed through interaction with others and the surrounding social world (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). This means that throughout

the study, my present realities have interacted with the participants' realities, none of which are static, to produce a final result that is co-constructed and presented through my own interpretive lens. This also means that I have had to be mindful of the ways my own assumptions and experiences might differ from the participants' realities. This highlights the need to practice reflexivity throughout the entire research process, which is described in more detail below.

I also identify as an intersectional feminist who takes interest in power distribution in relationships. While power can be distributed across a variety of identities, I am especially interested in how gender differences are interpreted in ways that legitimize power inequality in family and social life (Osmond & Thorne, 1993). I am also interested in how gender relations are shaped through interaction with surrounding political and social climates (Ferree, 2010). As a researcher, I aim to draw attention to social structures that reinforce inequitable distributions of power and to promote more balanced gender relations in marriage and family life. This is a lens that I brought to this research.

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Qualitative methods are valuable at all stages of research, but they can be especially beneficial when little is known about a phenomenon. Using a phenomenological design, this study aimed to learn about the experience of marital separation when a separation begins without clarity about how it will end, as experienced by people who are currently separated. As both a philosophy and a methodology, phenomenology emphasizes the lived, meaning-filled experience of a phenomenon

(Giorgi, 2010; Wognar & Swanson, 2007), and it aims to “transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful” (van Manen, 1990). By inviting separated persons to share about their experiences in their own words, I intended to allow them to speak about what is most meaningful to them, which both contributes to a more democratic research process and provides direction for future research.

There are two primary forms of phenomenology. Transcendental, descriptive forms assume objectivity is possible, and researchers attempt to describe participants’ experiences under this assumption (Moustakas, 1994; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). However, my epistemological assumptions, which reject the idea of objectivity, lend to the use of hermeneutic phenomenology, which was used for this study. This form of phenomenology acknowledges the interpretive nature of experience, the collaborative interaction between researcher and participants, and the representation of the participants’ narratives as interpreted by the researcher (van Manen, 1990; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Hermeneutic phenomenology also emphasizes the situated nature of experience within larger and historical contexts (Chesla, 1995), which is more consistent with my identity as a feminist. As Wognar and Swanson (2007) state, “individuals cannot abstract themselves from various contexts that influence their choices and give meanings to lived experience” (p. 174). Learning about participants’ contexts and interpreting their experiences with those contexts in mind is critical for this kind of design.

## **Researcher and Reflexivity**

One of the cornerstones of hermeneutic inquiry is making clear the researcher's "forestructure of understanding" (Chesla, 1995, p. 67). All researchers approach their work with presuppositions and biases about that which they study. In addition to explicating my epistemological assumption about knowledge, I must also make clear some of my own experiences related to marital separation. While I do not believe I can objectively describe participants' experiences, as much as I am able, I have attempted to present the study findings in ways that are consistent with the participants' experiences. As such, practicing reflexivity, an ongoing process involving knowing, becoming aware of, and critically reflecting on my own experiences (Lincoln, Lynhan, & Guba, 2011), has been an important part of this study. Here I offer a summary of some of my own experiences related to and assumptions about marital separation.

I have long been interested in couple relationships, namely because of the ways they are unique from other kinds of relationships and the ways power has been distributed and enacted according to gender. When I entered my doctoral program, I knew I wanted to develop a program of research around couple relationships. As a student, I became involved with research on divorce decision-making processes with the National Divorce Decision-Making Project and the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project. Clinically, I also began seeing couples for Discernment Counseling, a protocol developed for couples in which one or both spouses are considering divorce. My interest in marital separation grew out of my involvement with these research projects and clinical experiences, as I

noticed that many couples have either separated or considered separation as a solution to their marital problems.

I do not know from personal experience what it is like to be separated. In January 2018, I joyfully celebrated 10 years of marriage with my spouse. Our marriage has had challenging seasons, but we have never separated or even discussed separation as an option. I do, however, have close friends and family who have experienced separation, one of whom separated while this study was underway. Some of these people went on to divorce while others reconciled, some only temporarily.

My social locations and beliefs about marriage are also important to name. I am a white, educated female who was raised in a middle-class, evangelical family in Midwestern Minnesota. My parents have been married for 35 years and, to my knowledge, have never separated. Growing up, our faith tradition espoused complementarian marriage as ideal, and divorce was primarily reserved for situations involving infidelity or abuse. Today, my beliefs about marriage are more complex. On one hand, I take issue with the patriarchal history of marriage and the ways marriage has been tied to power and privilege. I no longer see marriage as the only legitimate way to be in a committed relationship, and I believe marriage is culturally situated. I also think there are reasons to divorce beyond infidelity and abuse. On the other hand, marriage is an institution that continues to hold meaning and importance in the present-day United States. While not suggesting that all couples should marry, I have long advocated for all persons to have access to the privileges marriage affords. I also work hard to help couples

restore their marriages to health or arrive at decisions to end their marriages with clarity, because of the social, practical, and emotional consequences of divorce.

Because of my clinical experiences, I tend to assume ambiguous separations complicate decision-making processes about the future of a marriage. I have met with many separated couples who have spent considerable amounts of time arguing about violations of undefined boundaries. These arguments have then led them to feel less hopeful about the possibility of reconciling. However, I recognize that I work with a clinical population, and I went into this project feeling eager and open to learning from the study participants about their own experiences.

## **Sample**

### **Participants**

The sample for this study consisted of 20 individual persons who, at the time of the interviews, identified as being separated from their spouse and whose separations began without clarity about how they would end because one or both spouses was deciding whether to divorce or stay married. Eligible participants were at least 25 years old and parent to one or more child with their spouse, either biologically, by adoption, or through marriage (e.g., step-parenting). To account for variation in experience based on who initiated the separation, initiators, those whose spouses initiated, and those whose separations were mutually initiated were all eligible to participate. I excluded those who were geographically separated for reasons other than marital strain (e.g., military, employment) but whose relationships were intact, and those who separated with a clear intent to divorce.

Fourteen participants identified as women, and 6 identified as men. Participant ages ranged from 25-60 years old, and the average age was 36.4 years old. They had an average of 2.45 kids, ranging from 1-6 in number. On average, the participants had been separated for 10.8 months. However, one woman had been separated from her spouse for 9 years, which was significantly longer than what others reported. Without her, the average separation length was 5.68 months, ranging between 1-24 months. Sixteen participants identified as white, 1 as black or African American, 1 as Hispanic/Latino, and 2 as biracial. Fourteen of the participants initiated the separation, and 6 were non-initiators. Of the women, 12 initiated the separation; only 2 of the men were initiators. The reported annual household incomes were \$19,999 or less (10%), \$20-39,999 (5%), \$40-59,999 (20%), \$60-79,999 (30%), \$80-99,999 (5%), and \$100,000 or more (30%). All participants reported being in female-male marriages, and they were located in various geographical locations throughout the United States. A summary of demographic information for each participant is provided in Table 1; I intentionally omitted some demographic details to increase protection of the participants' identities.

### **Recruitment**

Because a list of persons in ambiguous separations was not obtainable, I used self-selected and snowball strategies to recruit a purposeful, theoretical sample. To reach potential participants from a variety of backgrounds and geographical areas, invitations to participate were extended through a number of mediums.

First, participants were recruited through social media advertisements, which proved to be the most effective recruitment tool. I created a Facebook page detailing the

Table 1

*Overview of participant demographics*

Participant ID	Sex	Age	Initiator	# of Children
P1	Female	42	Yes	2
P2	Female	38	Yes	1
P3	Female	30	Yes	1
P4	Female	28	Yes	1
P5	Female	30	No	3
P6	Female	25	Yes	2
P7	Female	29	Yes	1
P8	Male	31	Yes	4
P9	Female	31	No	2
P10	Male	37	No	2
P11	Male	38	Yes	2
P12	Female	39	Yes	3
P13	Female	34	Yes	3
P14	Female	29	Yes	2
P15	Male	26	No	2
P16	Female	34	Yes	2
P17	Male	53	No	3
P18	Female	55	Yes	4
P19	Female	60	Yes	6
P20	Male	38	No	3

study, which outlined the inclusion criteria and directed potential participants to an online consent form. Sponsored Facebook advertisements then targeted United States users who had: 1) listed a relationship status of “married” or “separated,” and 2) were 25 years of age or older. Initially, these advertisements were not limited to users of a particular

gender. However, far more women consented to participate than men, so eventually recruitment efforts targeted men only.

These advertisements directed potential participants to the Facebook page, where they could read more about the study. Most of the participants learned about the study through the Facebook advertisements. Announcements about the study were also shared with my social network, not to recruit personal contacts, but to see if they knew of others who might be interested in participating. Three participants were recruited through these personal connections.

All potential participants were directed to an online consent form hosted in Qualtrics, an online survey program. There they could read more about the study, consent to participating, complete demographic questions (for context and data collection only), indicate their preferred interview format, and provide their contact information, which I used to schedule an interview.

## **Interview Procedures**

### **Interview Format**

Upon providing consent, study participants were contacted by email to arrange a time for a 60-90-minute semi-structured interview. Interviews were completed by telephone, video-conferencing call, or in person, whichever the participant preferred. Eighteen participants chose to complete interviews via telephone, 1 chose a video-conference call, and 1 opted to meet in person. The in-person interview was held at my off-campus clinical office. The video-conference interview was hosted in WebEX, a

Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) service paid for by the University of Minnesota. The phone interviews were conducted over speakerphone in a private, closed-door room.

My decision to ask study participants to indicate their preference between in-person, video-conference, or telephone interviews was a departure from traditional qualitative methods. In-person interviews have historically been preferred by qualitative researchers, as they offer more access to the participants' natural environments, may enhance rapport-building, and promote the use of non-verbal cues in conducting the interview (Novick, 2008). However, there are disadvantages to in-person interviewing, such as potential logistical barriers (e.g., securing a meeting space) and being limited to participants in one geographical area (Sullivan, 2012). Trier-Brienek (2012) found that offering virtual interviews made participation possible for several participants in her study. She even described the use of technology in this way as a feminist, participant-centered method of interviewing because it removes barriers that might otherwise discourage a participant from engaging in a study, such as the need to arrange childcare or take time off of work.

Despite a long tradition of in-person interviewing in qualitative inquiry, only a small amount of empirical research on the differences between formats has been conducted. Most of these studies have compared telephone to in-person interviews. So far, the findings are inconclusive; some have found differences in data quality based on the interview format (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2012) while others have found no significant differences in the quality of data (Rahman, 2015; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004; Vogl, 2013). While fewer studies have examined the use of VoIP technologies, some

researchers have suggested that VoIP technologies could be a viable alternative to in-person interviews because the researcher and participants maintain face-to-face contact (Iacono, Symons, & Brown, 2015). For this study, I decided to offer the option of a VoIP interview because of a desire to offer an option that maintains face-to-face contact to mitigate the potential loss of non-verbal cues and to enhance rapport, while also reaching a geographically disparate sample and limiting barriers for those who might otherwise not participate. However, I expected that some participants may not feel comfortable speaking face-to-face at all because doing so provides less anonymity. Telephone interviews were offered as an option to provide more participant autonomy and to allow them to speak about their experiences in ways that were most convenient and comfortable for them. The vast majority of the participants selected this option.

### **Interview Protocol**

The interviews for this study focused on the participants' experience of marital separation when the separation began without clarity about how it would end. The questions for the interviews were centered around the participants' experiences of the separation period; these questions were informed by the current separation literature, the proposed theoretical frameworks, and epistemological assumptions that participants' contexts are important for their meaning-making (van Manen, 1990; Wognar & Swanson, 2007). The leading, grand-tour question for this interview was: *I am interested in learning more about what it is like to be separated from a spouse when the separation began without clarity about how it would end. Sometimes one, or maybe both, spouses decide they want to separate because they want to become clearer about whether to stay*

*married or divorce. Some might call this “taking a break,” “getting some space,” or a “trial separation.” Can you tell me about your experience?* I asked additional questions about areas such as the current nature of the marital relationship, reconciliation attempts, and how participants understood their experiences in relation to their gender. For the most part, the interview protocol remained consistent across the interviews. However, as the interviews commenced, one question in particular did not generate much by way of responses and was not asked in all interviews. This question asked about participants’ conceptualizations of separation before separating and how they might have changed as a result of their own experiences. The full interview protocol is provided in Appendix C.

Before beginning the interview, I reminded the participants of the contents of the informed consent document, including the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participating, and participant privacy and confidentiality. They had given written consent in the online form, but participants were asked to again give consent verbally before the audio-recorder was turned on and the interview began. After the interview, participants were sent a \$25 Amazon.com gift card to the email address of their choice. I also set aside approximately 20 minutes to write a summary of what the participant shared and to document my initial reactions and thematic ideas. All interviews were audio-recorded, and to protect the security of the data, recordings were stored in the encrypted University of Minnesota Box Secure Storage system.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Most of the transcription was completed by me, but two undergraduate students in the Department of Family Social Science who expressed interest in being involved with a research project each helped

transcribe 3 interviews. In exchange for her transcription work on this project, one of these students received research internship credit under the supervision of Dr. Harris. The other volunteered her time.

### **Coding and Analysis**

Data analysis followed procedures for thematic analysis informed by van Manen (1990), who is a hermeneutic phenomenologist. All coding was conducted in Microsoft Excel, with the text of the interview in the first column, a summary statement at the top of the page, and each iteration of codes in the columns to the right of the text.

Throughout the analysis process, my goal was to uncover themes within and across the participants' experiences. A theme, according to van Manen (1990), is an "element (motif, formula or device) which occurs frequently in the text" (p. 78) and an "experiential structure" that makes up part of the experience (p. 79). Collectively, themes provide an in-depth interpretation of participants' experiences of a phenomenon. These themes are not merely brief categorical statements, but rather full descriptions of different structures of an experience.

The process of identifying themes within and across interviews involved several interactions with the data. As mentioned above, I transcribed most of the interviews, which provided an additional opportunity to immerse myself in the data. Following transcription, each interview was read in its entirety to gain a holistic sense of the text, and from that reading, I wrote a summary statement. In brief sentence form, each summary statement attempted to capture the overall essence of the experience of being separated from a spouse, according to that participant. For the second phase of coding,

each interview was read in its entirety again with the intention of looking at what individual sentences or sentence clusters revealed about the experience of being separated from one's spouse, and which may have been missed when looking for larger key phrases. I assigned a code or group of codes to each sentence or sentence cluster that attempted to capture its essence. Finally, each interview was read a final time with the goal of identifying "key statement(s) or phrase(s) [that] seem particularly essential or revealing" about the experience of being separated from one's spouse (van Manen, 1990, p. 93). For each statement that seemed to be thematic, I developed and/or assigned a code that attempted to capture the essence of that statement. In accord with feminist scholarship, throughout the coding process, I gave special attention to the ways gender was related to the participants' experiences. Because there were proportionately more women than men in the sample, women's experiences were more heavily emphasized with the understanding that a more robust gender comparison could not be made.

The final step was to organize the themes that emerged into similar groupings with various levels of abstraction. To determine larger, essential themes, van Manen (1990) suggested asking "Is this phenomenon still the same if we imaginatively change or delete this theme from the phenomenon?" (p. 107). Those that would substantially change the essence of the phenomenon – namely, those that were most salient across the participants' experiences – were categorized as essential themes. Supporting themes that added complexity and depth were organized underneath the essential themes. Discerning essential from supporting themes was an iterative process that involved several additional immersions in the data. I brought theoretical orderings back to the data and subsequently

revised until the collection of structural experiences seemed to capture the similarities across and variations within the participants' experiences. Full descriptions of the essential themes and their supporting themes, including exemplar participant quotes, are provided in the study findings.

Throughout the entirety of the study, I continued practicing reflexivity (Lincoln, Lynhan, & Guba, 2011) by documenting personal, thematic, and theoretical memos. This was done to continue reflecting on my own biases and assumptions and to help make sense of what I was learning. While I do not believe that one objective reality of separation exists, or that objectivity in representing participants' experiences is possible, I have attempted to represent the participants' narratives in ways that were consistent with their experiences. Select memos have been weaved into the final report to make transparent some of what emerged for me and how what emerged may influence my interpretation of the participants' experiences.

### **Trustworthiness**

Several strategies were used to increase the trustworthiness, or the quality and rigor, of the study findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, to enhance study credibility, I engaged in ongoing conversations with Dr. Harris, who oversaw the entire study and served as an internal auditor for all procedures. We met regularly throughout the duration of the study to discuss the progress of the interviews, themes that were emerging from the data, and my own assumptions and biases about the experience of being separated from one's spouse. These meetings were especially helpful when someone close to me became

separated during the study, as I was better able to think through differences and similarities between this person's experience and those of the study participants.

To enhance dependability, two external auditors were used. These auditors were outside researchers with content expertise in divorce decision-making and knowledge of qualitative methods. Each of the external auditors received a pair of randomly selected, de-identified, and coded interviews, one from a participant who initiated the separation, and a second from a participant whose spouse initiated the separation. The auditors received different transcripts to review; that is, they did not review the same sets of transcripts. I asked them to assess the degree to which the coding captured the essences of participants' experiences and provide feedback about additional thoughts or perspectives on what they read. Their interpretations of the interviews were closely aligned with the interpretations I had developed, with no substantial deviations in meaning. The additional thoughts they provided helped me think in more nuanced ways about the themes, which helped me develop stronger articulations of the study findings.

Finally, to enhance confirmability, as mentioned above, I practiced ongoing reflexivity (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011) throughout the duration of the research study. In a single document, I documented my theoretical ideas, emotional responses, biases, and reflections on how the participants' narratives related to or were different from my own experiences. All memos were made available to the reviewing committee members, and select memos have been integrated into the final report to provide readers insight into my own process as the primary researcher.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Maintaining high ethical standards is an essential component of quality, democratic research. Several ethical issues were considered throughout this study. The target participants considered themselves separated at the time of the interview. For some, talking about their experience of being separated was expected to be emotionally upsetting. Before beginning the interview, participants were reminded that they would be free to decline any question or discontinue at any time. Though it was not needed, I had prepared a list of resources for locating therapists or other professional services near the participants' locations in the event such a list would be useful.

Protecting the participants' privacy was of utmost importance. I expected that some participants might still live with their spouse or with other people who could potentially overhear the interview if they were home. Those who participated from a distance were encouraged to schedule the interview when their spouse or other people living with them would not be able to overhear the conversation. To that end, I was as flexible as possible with my own schedule to accommodate their scheduling needs. Furthermore, while there are benefits to using VoIP services to conduct interviews, the security of interviews conducted through these services cannot be guaranteed. The chances of a third party accessing the conversation was small, but the participant who chose to participate via video-conference call was made aware of the potential that this could happen. The informed consent document included information about all of these risks.

The security of the data was also a chief concern, especially because of the private and sensitive nature of talking about one's separation experience. All audio files were stored in the University of Minnesota Box Secure Storage, an online, encrypted system for storing confidential materials. Documentation of consent, which included identifiable information, was also stored in the Box system. Each time this system is accessed, a user must verify their identity using a notification sent to a different device (e.g., mobile phone), which adds to the security of this system. The only person who was granted access to all confidential files was my adviser, Dr. Harris, who oversaw the entire research process. Audio files were made available to the undergraduate research assistants who helped with transcription; these students did not have access to consent documents or other identifying information. De-identified transcripts and documentation of coding was stored in a private folder on the University of Minnesota Google Drive system. Only Dr. Harris and the external auditors had access to these files.

Finally, I believe that research should have social implications and benefit the population of interest. Research should not be conducted for the sake of knowledge itself. My hope is that this research will help bring visibility to an under-represented experience, provide direction for practice with and research on helping couples arrive at decisions about the future of their marriage, and promote more equitable distribution of power in marriage and family life. As a researcher, I believe I am responsible to the people who contributed to this research and anticipate disseminating the study findings in ways that are accessible to them.

Approval for this study was granted by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Minnesota (#00001773). This project was funded by the Robert E. Keane Fellowship in Ambiguous Loss, which was awarded through the Department of Family Social Science, the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project, and personal researcher funds.

## Chapter IV: Findings

### Chapter Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to present the themes that emerged from the interviews with persons who were separated from a spouse and whose separations began without clarity about how they would end. In hermeneutic phenomenology, van Manen (1990) described essential themes as those that would substantially alter the essence of the phenomenon if changed or removed. Six essential themes emerged as a result of these interviews: 1) *Our relationship feels ambiguous*, 2) *separation is a private experience*, 3) *separation is a lonely experience*, 4) *there are benefits to separating*, 5) *separation is not sustainable*, and 6) *the way out is unclear*.

To demonstrate variation within and depth for each essential theme, various levels of supporting themes are provided and explained. Furthermore, participant quotations are included to give examples of statements that speak to each presented theme. Finally, select memos, which were recorded throughout the entirety of the study, have been included to make transparent some of what reactions or ideas emerged for me and how what emerged may have influenced my interpretation of the participants' experiences. These memos are written in red italics to differentiate them from the presentation of the study findings.

### Findings

#### Overview

The participants for this study all reported initially separating from their spouse without clarity about how the separation would end, and at the time of the interview, they

were still separated from their spouse. They cited initial desires – their own or their spouses’ – for space to gain clarity about the future of the marriage, time apart to reduce the intensity or frequency of arguments, or to demonstrate the seriousness of their marital complaints to their spouse (i.e., get their spouse’s attention). In only a couple of cases, the initiator was interested in someone else but opted for a separation because divorce felt too permanent. At the time of the interview, all participants lived apart from their spouse the majority of the time (i.e., no “in-house” or residential separations), though a few reported staying with their spouse from time to time. Additionally, 7 participants had separated from their spouse one or more times before the present separation.

At the time of the interview, most of the participants were still uncertain about how the separation would end; however, a small number had become clearer about their own or their spouse’s desire for divorce, though uncertainty remained about whether the divorce would happen. I describe these participants’ experiences in more detail throughout the presentation of the study findings.

Six essential themes emerged as a result of these interviews: 1) *Our relationship feels ambiguous*, 2) *separation is a private experience*, 3) *separation is a lonely experience*, 4) *benefits to separation*, 5) *separation is not sustainable*, and 6) *the way out is unclear*. These themes are each presented below, along with various levels of supporting themes (see Figure 1) and exemplar participant quotes.

*“I think I’ve found a way to present the core, essential themes that emerged from these interviews...at least as I interpret them now. I struggle a bit with what the interviews could continue to tell me if I continued pouring through them – as who I bring to them each time changes because my own experiences and perspectives are not static. It is baffling to acknowledge that these participants’ words, though spoken and transcribed,*

*are not fixed. Admittedly, this makes writing a document that then feels fixed feel kind of challenging.”*

Figure 1

*Summary of Study Findings*

<p><b>Theme 1: Our relationship feels ambiguous</b></p> <p><b>Ambiguous status</b></p> <p><b>Ambiguous marital boundaries</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Power in setting the boundaries</li> <li>Mixed signals</li> <li>Minimize confusion</li> <li>Fluid ambivalence</li> </ul> <p><b>Separation terms</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No rule book</li> <li>Intentional conversations</li> <li>Relied on assumptions and beliefs</li> </ul> <p><b>Familial relationships</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effects on their kids</li> <li>Relationships with extended family</li> </ul>
<p><b>Theme 2: Separation is a private experience</b></p> <p><b>Others' perceptions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fears of judgment</li> <li>Impression management</li> <li>Hard to explain</li> <li>Fear of burdening others</li> </ul> <p><b>Others' responses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support and encouragement</li> <li>One-sided feedback</li> </ul>
<p><b>Theme 3: Separation is a lonely experience</b></p> <p><b>Time apart</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Missing their spouse</li> <li>Missing their kids</li> </ul> <p><b>Daily reminders</b></p> <p><b>Responsibility for children</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Burdensome and lonely</li> <li>Newfound appreciation</li> </ul>
<p><b>Theme 4: There are benefits to separation</b></p> <p><b>Pressure off the relationship</b></p> <p><b>Impetus for change</b></p> <p><b>Easier daily life</b></p> <p><b>Realizations about self</b></p>
<p><b>Theme 5: Separation is not sustainable</b></p> <p><b>Emotional toll of uncertainty</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effects of needing to decide</li> <li>Waiting and making meaning</li> </ul> <p><b>Life is on hold</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decision-making about daily life</li> <li>Arrangements of the separation</li> </ul>
<p><b>Theme 6: The way out is unclear</b></p> <p><b>Separation brought clarity</b></p> <p><b>Separation has not brought clarity</b></p> <p><b>Factors in decision-making</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effects on kids</li> <li>Religious and cultural values</li> </ul>

Financial barriers to divorce  
 Spouse's change  
**Concern about inertia**  
 Function of time  
 Function of adjusting to life apart  
 Function of unclear solutions

### **Essential Theme 1: Our Relationship Feels Ambiguous**

The participants in this study reported separating without clarity about how the separation would end. One of the most salient themes within and across the interviews about this experience was the amount of ambiguity experienced in the relationship with one's spouse under such circumstances. The participants were often unsure how to navigate new relational boundaries with their spouse and subsequently, those affected by the separation. This relational ambiguity was primarily related to a lack of clarity about of the relationship status, uncertainty about boundaries in their relationship, and the degree to which the terms of the separation were clear or agreed upon. This relationship ambiguity also bled into uncertainty about how to manage other familial relationships.

**Ambiguous status.** The participants' experience of ambiguity was sometimes related to not knowing how to make sense or meaning of the status of their relationship, as they were still married, not with their spouse in a way they previously were, but not divorced. Many participants seemed to have clearer ideas about how to conceptualize what it would mean to be married and together or divorced, but meaning for this in-between status was difficult to find. In describing their understanding of separation, the participants used metaphors like grey space, being in limbo, sitting on a fence, being at a crossroads, or living in purgatory; these metaphors implied uncertainty, a sense of waiting, and that this in-between status was not a permanent resting place. One woman talked about the lack of clarity she felt about her marital status this way:

[The most challenging thing is] just figuring out where we stand as a couple. Are we a couple? Are we a married couple? Are we just...are we just dating? Where to do we stand? How, what category do we fall into when it comes to, I guess, a couple in general? And so, I think for me, I even struggle with it now ...because, we just really don't even have a stance. We just...there's not an answer. I can't give anyone an answer as to where we stand. (P14)

Another participant wanted to differentiate his decision to separate from a decision to divorce, but he struggled to find language to describe their current status: "To purposefully step away and you know, this was my decision. This was a decision...it wasn't like a break-up or, I don't know how else to put it" (P11).

Lacking clarity about the status of the relationship was especially felt by those participants who were still uncertain about how the separation would end. A couple of participants had reached more clarity about wanting a divorce, and they seemed to struggle less with defining the relationship status. For example, participants were more likely to use words like "ex" when talking about their spouse when divorce was now the expected outcome. In contrast, those who were still unclear about the outcome of the separation usually continued using language like "husband" or "wife" when referring to their spouse.

*"I'm surprised that so many of these participants have at least some desire for reconciliation, and I'm curious about the surprise I feel. The non-initiators seem more eager for reconciliation, but the initiators think about it as well. I wonder if I assumed that more people would separate with the message that they were unsure about whether to divorce or stay married, but that their underlying motives were to use separation as a gradual transition to divorce. That doesn't seem to be the case for the majority of these participants. Some leaned toward divorce and reported getting more clarity about it after separating. Most seem to have been really unsure about what they wanted. I suppose I have to acknowledge that I can't know the thought processes behind the spouses of the non-initiator participants.*

*I wonder if I'm surprised because I work with a clinical population, and in many of these clinical couples there is a clear "leaning out" spouse who has developed a thick, sometimes impenetrable narrative about why they should leave. This surprise could be*

*the result of my own assumptions, or it could be because this is a slightly different population. I suppose it could be both (or something else!).”*

**Ambiguous marital boundaries.** A lack of clarity about the relationship status subsequently resulted in ambiguity about how, and how often, to interact with one’s spouse. The participants and their spouses often had different ideas about or desires for how the relationship would look during this time, and more often than not, one spouse was hopeful about reconciliation while the other felt less certain. These dynamics resulted in confusion about the “right” way to interact with each other. Those who were less certain, typically the initiators, seemed to have more *power in setting the boundaries*. They were more inclined to establish what was okay or not in the relationship, which often left the spouse hoping for reconciliation in a one-down position, not knowing how to proceed, and feeling powerless over the situation. One woman talked about it this way: “I kind of feel like I keep getting rip blasts like I can’t catch up to the reality and there’s definitely a power dynamic there, you know. Not feeling like I have a lot of control over the situation” (P9). Another man, who initially pushed for answers from his wife before she moved out, struggled to make sense of the boundaries his wife requested:

She’s wanted to really, you know, keep the lines of communication closed some. Like I said, even when we were in the same house, she didn’t even want to...I mean, she didn’t mind talking while we were there, but you know, just in general terms, she didn’t want to talk about the relationship at all. Which, you know, I found it out because, you know if there’s something...if there’s an issue and you feel this drastic step is needed, why...wouldn’t you try to talk about what is wrong so things could be worked on at least while you’re separated? (P10)

Where relational boundaries in the participants’ marriages were set varied greatly. Some described maintaining close contact with their spouse after separating, while others

interacted on more of need-to-know, transactional basis about logistics like finances and kids. In some ways, the ambiguity seemed higher for those who maintained less frequent contact with their spouse, as questions about how and whether to close the distance emerged. These participants also felt less aware of what their spouse wanted, which made it more challenging to know how to relate with them. Ambiguity was still present for those who maintained close contact with their spouse, however. These participants had found some clarity about how to relate with one another, but the boundaries were not always entirely clear.

Sometimes ambiguity about the relationship boundaries was felt because of receiving *mixed signals* from a spouse about whether he or she was leaning toward divorce or reconciliation. On one hand, there were signs that reminded the participant that the couple was not together in the way they were before the separation, such as living apart, limited contact, or arranging visits with kids. On the other hand, there were times when one or both spouses engaged in behaviors that were interpreted as more symbolic of a possible desire to reconcile, such as demonstrations of affection, requests for time together, flirtatious messages, or not giving a clear answer about whether they were divorcing. The content of these mixed signals, namely *what* was confusing or not, varied across the participants' experiences. The *experience* of mixed signals, however, was consistent. One man, whose wife had moved out a few months before the interview, described these mixed signals as especially confusing in the beginning of their separation when he tried to make sense of what had happened: "Every now and then she was giving the message, or sending me a text message asking me if I'm okay, or telling me she loves

me, not “I love you” but little hearts and stuff, you know?” (P18). In a similar vein, one woman talked about the confusion she felt after spending time with her husband and kids early in their separation, but then feeling the painful reminder that they were separated when he left:

What was really hard and jarring then was we would have these really positive interactions- we’d have a meal together as a family, we’d be goofing around with our kids and it would feel like normal. And good. And then he would leave because... and it was like... kind of like remembering all over again the reality of our situation. (P9)

Mixed signals continued beyond the early days of separation. One woman, who had been separated for almost a year and whose husband recently began divorce paperwork, described how disorienting it was to receive text messages from him that read: “Good morning, beautiful. How are you?” (P14). This participant struggled to understand her husband’s intent because she interpreted his language as contradictory to his decision to begin divorce proceedings; they also continued having sex with one another. Another participant described his confusion about his wife’s pattern of contacting him after she initiated the separation: “I mean, why is she checking up on me when she’s the one who left me?” (P15).

For one participant, the ongoing nature of receiving mixed signals from a spouse felt so untenable that it propelled action to end it. She eventually decided she wanted a divorce after her husband initiated a separation. He had separated from her once before, and she decided that the back-and-forth messages she received from him were too confusing: “It doesn’t [provide peace of mind] because it’s like, “Is he going to come back? Or is he not coming back? Should I be open to move on? Or, you know, not?”

(P5). This participant's eventual desire for divorce had less to do with wanting to be apart from her husband, and more to do with not trusting that he would not ask for a separation again; ultimately, she wanted clarity about their relationship status and boundaries, even if it meant that they were not together.

Many participants also talked about trying to *minimize confusion* in their interactions with their spouse because they did not want to send mixed signals or unintended messages. This mostly related to a desire to maintain positive contact with their spouse, but not wanting to provide false hope for reconciliation when the separation's outcome was undecided. Some also spoke of wanting to respect their spouse's desire for more space, but in doing so they did not want to send a message that they were not interested in reconciling. One man's wife initiated the separation but shortly thereafter decided she wanted to reconcile. He, however, was less clear about what he wanted. He described how he felt about spending time with her given this dynamic:

I mean, it's less awkward for her I think because she wants that reconciliation path, she wants to try to build that connection, and I sort of feel awkward about it because, because I can hang out with her, but I don't want to give her... I don't want her to interpret that as... with too much hope because I don't necessarily know where I am... so I worry about giving her a false sense of hope or that things are in a different spot than they are. (P20)

Some participants spoke about wanting to minimize confusion to preserve the integrity of the decision-making process about the future of the marriage; there was a sense that being too close with their spouse during the separation would distract from or minimize the marital problems, which could subsequently mean that the issues would not be resolved if they decided to reconcile. One man, who initiated the separation and

sometimes found becoming comfortable with his wife easy, talked about his attempts to minimize confusion this way:

We were kind of, not really falling into old patterns...but it happens very quickly that I find I have to say, "Yeah, we're...I'm still leaving later." Like, this is not...this can't be our norm if we don't want to make a decision or if we don't want to pull the trigger. We can't keep going like this forever. (P11)

Another woman, who continued to have sex with her husband during the separation, attempted to minimize confusion for her husband and children by not allowing him to spend the night because to her, that would demonstrate a level of commitment to reconciliation that she was not ready to make:

He would love to have sex with me and spend the night [rather] than go back to his apartment...go back to the way things were. But that's not helpful for me, that's not helpful for him, and most importantly, my kids deserve more than that. (P1)

Another woman had drawn a different boundary around having sex with her husband while they were separated:

So, I'm trying to keep as much...and you know, it's so emotional. Like, [sex] was never a bad part of our marriage. That was always one of the great parts of our marriage...I'm finding that if we were to sleep together, it would be very difficult to maintain distance from him. Umm, and get what I want out of him...you know what I'm saying? I want him to be a better person, and if I fell back into our marriage and just become complacent once again, we got nowhere from this. You know? (P12)

Uncertainty about relational boundaries also extended to *symbols of commitment*, specifically wearing rings and other public displays of their relationships status. Some chose to continue wearing their rings, while others did not. Some participants struggled to know if they should continue displaying public symbols of commitment when their relationship status was hard to define, and the meaning underlying a decision to wear a

ring or not felt weighty. One man talked about a painful decision to hang his ring in a safe with his wife's ring after she removed hers:

For some reason that day that's just what felt right. And like I said, for me it's not...it's not that it means that I want to, you know, give up on it. I guess, maybe, in my mind, trying to...you know, if I tried to deduce it, it's maybe that my perspective is, when she puts hers back on, I'll back mine back on together. It'll be kind of a thing. You know? Something a little bit more meaningful. But, you know, like I said, it's not that I just don't want to wear mine...I started feeling kind of awkward about it, too. Umm, to the point where when she was around, I was wearing mine, she wasn't wearing hers. You know, like when I did see the kids or something, you know, they saw me wearing mine and they knew she wasn't wearing hers, so I guess, like I said, in that moment it just felt like the right thing to do. (P10)

Lastly, relationship boundaries were sometimes made less clear because there was variation in which partner leaned toward reconciliation. While the non-initiators seemed more likely to want reconciliation than the initiators, who were generally less clear about a desired outcome, this was not always the case. This *fluid ambivalence*, both within the participants and between them and their spouses, created more ambiguity in the relationship because the situation became less predictable. For example, one woman, who initially asked for a separation and struggled to make sense of their relationship status, talked about how surprised she was when her husband asked to separate again after a couple-month reconciliation period:

I was really upset with it. I thought everything was fine, so kind of when he came out of the blue to say that, I was just really shocked by it. You know? I mean, no more than a couple days later he packed his stuff. (P14)

*"I'm amazed at how resilient these participants are. Their ability to sit with ambiguity, especially after the immediate crisis wears off, is incredible. It doesn't seem like they can sit with the ambiguity indefinitely, though. It seems to have an expiration date."*

**Separation terms.** The marital relationship also felt ambiguous because many of the logistical terms of the separation were not always easy to negotiate or made explicit, and when they were, they were often challenging to execute. The participants seemed to have a clearer sense for what to expect for time together, time with kids, financial obligations, or dating other people as married or divorced persons; however, there was *no rule book* for how to negotiate these kinds of terms in a separation, which felt far less defined. Some participants talked about making some adjustments, but not too many, as they did not want to make changes that would be difficult to reverse if they decided to reconcile. One woman described trying to find a balance this way: “We haven't wanted to do like a cut and dry anything... because I think we both felt like there's just too many unknowns [about our future] to figure out” (P9). Ultimately, the participants and their spouses adjusted to this separation period in a myriad of ways. Some described making few financial changes while others became financially independent. Some spent time with their spouse and kids together while others only spent time with their kids apart from their spouse. Aside from who took primary responsibility for the children – this responsibility primarily rested with the women in all but 2 cases with school-aged children – the arrangements the participants described varied quite a lot.

The processes by which the terms of the separation were negotiated, however, seemed to contribute more to different levels of ambiguity in the relationship. Some participants had *intentional conversations* with their spouse about the separation terms. These conversations primarily centered around each spouse's time with the kids, how they would minimize the impact of the separation on the kids, and who would assume

various financial obligations. A few even talked with their spouse about whether they would date other people while they were separated. Most who intentionally talked about this agreed they would not see other people, as they had different motives for wanting a separation. One woman, however, talked about agreeing with her spouse that they could date other people, but they need to pay attention to how dating others feels:

It's okay to like...we've agreed, like, just to go on a date with another person, like...and if it feels right for you to date other people, then that's where our crossroads meet and where we go our separate ways. But if it doesn't feel right, and it's not...you know, it's just not there, then obviously we need to work on it between us because then obviously there is something there between us. (P14)

These conversations seemed to help bring more clarity to how the separation would look. However, even when intentional conversations about the separation terms happened, acting on the agreed upon terms still felt confusing at times. For example, one woman was a stay-at-home parent and initiated the separation. Her husband, as the sole income-earner, continued to financially provide for her needs and those of the kids after he moved out. She described the stress she felt about wanting to buy Christmas gifts for her children but feeling uncertain if she could ask for more money from her spouse given their ambiguous status and the need she felt to be more financially independent: "It's really hard for me to say, 'I need \$200 to get the kids Christmas presents.' I kind of feel like, I should be responsible for that myself" (P12). She went on to describe her willingness to sell some of her personal things to buy Christmas gifts for her children if she could not come up with another way to pay for them.

Another man found that the terms he and his wife set were ultimately not agreeable. His wife began dating other people shortly after she initiated a separation; they

had talked about this in advance. He was surprised to learn that his wife was upset when he decided to go on a date as well and hypothesized about her intentions and response this way:

I think from her perspective it was... she was begrudgingly going out because she was lonely and I wasn't there for her, even though she prefers it was me. Then was upset when I wanted to see somebody else, I didn't go to her when she would've been willing. (P20)

This was a turning point for this participant's wife, which he said led her to become clearer about wanting reconciliation, even though he was not sure if that was what he wanted. After this incident, they agreed to refrain from dating other people until a decision about whether to reconcile emerged.

While some participants described having intentional conversations with their spouse about the separation terms, many times these terms were not explicitly negotiated. Often participants *relied on assumptions and beliefs* about what separation would mean, in hopes their spouse operated out of the same set of assumptions. For some, relying on assumptions had not been problematic, in part because they refrained from making too many changes when they separated (e.g., continued to share finances). However, relying on assumptions did sometimes lead to conflict when the spouses did not share the same ideas about how the separation would look. Most talked about how this played out with spouses' different expectations for how they would handle their financial arrangements. In a few cases, financial cutoff was asserted by one of the spouses. Most often, the one with more financial resources was the one to assert these terms. One woman, who was the primary income-earner, described how her husband was affected when she stopped paying the bills after she moved out: "I devastated him when I left because I paid all the

bills in the house. And he didn't have anything when I left" (P18). Another man, who was also a sole income-earner, described his decision to stop paying for his wife's car, which he later learned had created a substantial amount of financial strain for her:

I told her point blank, I was like, "Here's your Jeep. I'm not paying for it, though. It's yours. And on top of that, you're going to have to pay the insurance." Because the insurance was on my name, but with her being way up there and not wanting to talk to me or anything like that, I did tell her that. I told her, "You know what? That Jeep...that's on you now." (P17)

Additionally, and as mentioned above, only a few participants talked about having explicit conversations with their spouse about whether to date other people during this time, even though many individually believed that being separated meant they would *not* date other people. One man, who had initially not given thought to discussing the potential for dating relationships, said: "The way I personally see it is...well, we're still, you know, technically married. So, that should be enough to kind of like tell you that hey, behave yourself" (P8). In hindsight, however, this man wished they had made these terms explicit when they originally separated. At the time of the interview, he thought it would be unfair to request these terms 5 months later. Another woman said:

We haven't talked about [seeing other people]. I'm not sure if that's something that he's done, but I'm very sensitive so he would never ever let on or tell me, and I think that that would be a deal-breaker, umm, at reuniting. I, like I said, I'm Catholic so to me, that would be a violation of our marriage. Even though we're separated, we are still married people and that's against the rules in my book. (P12)

One woman, who felt devastated when she learned that her husband had begun talking with another woman, described her own beliefs about what separation meant:

I mean, I know we are technically separated but it feels like a really weird grey area where I mean, we've been separated for only four weeks. And it's

technically, I mean we're still married, it doesn't feel... I don't know. It feels like there's still some commitment we owe each other or something. (P9)

This woman was willing to look past her husband being with another woman if he decided he wanted to reconcile, but several participants hypothesized that they themselves would opt for divorce if they learned their spouse was with another person. However, this was rarely made clear to the other spouse, which increased potential for violations of unspoken boundaries in their relationship.

**Familial relationships.** The ambiguity of the participants' relationships with their spouses also bled into relationships with others, namely their kids and extended family. More than those with adult children, the participants with school-aged children often worried about the *effects on their kids* and tried to navigate that in the best way they knew how. Those with adult children spoke less of the impact their separation might have on their kids. Most of the participants who were concerned about this described a desire to be to honest with their kids about what was happening, in part because they simply valued honesty with their kids, but also because of the potential for divorce; they did not want their kids to feel blindsided if that was the separation's outcome. Some even recalled their own family of origin experiences with separation, and the confusion they felt as kids when their parents were not honest with them about their marital difficulties. One woman described the ambiguous nature of her own parents' relationship, which she did not want to repeat with her own kids:

My parents...they were in and out of each other's lives. I mean, whether they were separated today or tomorrow depended on which way the wind blew. Sometimes he was there, sometimes he wasn't. Sometimes he was...it was just a very crazy relationship. On Monday, they were just the most closest people in the world. And maybe Tuesday, or maybe Monday night, they were at each other's

throats, you know, accusing each other of things, and it was just really dysfunctional. They were separated often. Umm, sometimes it would be for 6 months at a time, and then one day my father, or my mother, would walk back home and it was like nothing ever changed! (P1)

Another woman talked about her desire for honesty with her children, based on her own family of origin experiences, this way:

I've never wanted to hide anything from them, because growing up as a child, my parents always tried to hide it from us. You know? And it was always like, "Oh, he's on a business trip." "Oh, he's working again." Or "Yeah, he's gone to see grandma and grandpa." I feel like...I felt lied...you know, in that sense, to as a child. And I never wanted to give my children that, you know, I never wanted to do that to them. (P14)

In addition to being honest with the kids, the participants largely wanted to minimize the impact of the separation on their routines. Sometimes this meant arranging for the kids to have regular visits with the non-resident spouse. For others, this meant time together as a family or the non-resident spouse coming over to put the kids to bed before leaving for the night. One woman even described that her husband stayed over on the weekends so they could spend time together with their kids. Some participants thought their kids had adjusted well, but others knew their kids were struggling to understand what was happening and why one spouse was not staying in the home. One woman said: "We've tried to explain it to her, but then she's like...well, we just told her that things were best for right now with him staying somewhere else. And I...we needed a break, but she's still not understanding all of that" (P16).

Sometimes, finding the balance between honesty and minimizing the impact came with fear of creating even more confusion for their kids. One woman, who had been honest with her kids about the separation, talked about how difficult it was to wonder if

their efforts to “soften the blow” of the separation would actually create more confusion for them:

I feel like, also it’s like, we’re often kind of sheltering them from, you know, if we do get divorced? I don’t want it to feel like it was out of nowhere for them because we still kind of, we’ve done so much together. (P12)

Many participants also described *ambiguity in relationships with extended family*, who they often perceived as struggling to tolerate the couple’s unclear relationship status or had sided with their spouse. Much of this ambiguity was related to the other spouse’s family members. Some participants described not having close relationships with their in-laws, so they did not think separating had much of an effect on those relationships. Those who had close relationships with their spouse’s family, however, felt differently. They struggled to know how to maintain relationships with family members that may or may not be part of their future, or who did not approve or know how to make sense of their relationship. One man described his in-laws’ frustration with the ambiguous state of his relationship with his wife, which resulted in them pushing for a decision about whether they would divorce or reconcile: “The ambiguity is what’s bothersome to them. ‘Just, you just need to make a decision!’” (P11).

Other times, participants noticed that their in-laws silently pulled back after they separated, which resulted in not knowing how or if they could maintain those relationships. One woman felt hurt and confused when her mother-in-law, with whom she was previously close, had not responded to her attempts to connect after she initiated a separation:

That hurts. I mean, but at the same time, I can’t figure out why. Why... what have I done to her? What... well, it also makes me wonder has he told her something?

But it hurts, me thinking that I'm going to lose that relationship, too, because we've been really close... (P16)

She went on to describe a similar dynamic with her sister-in-law, who had also stopped responding to her attempts to reach out. Another woman, whose husband initiated the separation, described the confusion she had about her mother-in-law siding with her husband when she strongly opposed divorce because of religious reasons:

We've had some kind of messy back and forth about [our situation] and she felt like she's seen her son unhappy for years, and I think the implication of that it was because of me and that I in some way killed him, and so while he should be, while she doesn't believe in divorce, she wants him to be happy. (P9)

Most often, participants who had relationships with their in-laws desired to maintain these relationships through the separation, even when they were uncertain about how or if they could do that. However, one woman found it easier to disconnect from her in-laws all together, as she wanted more distance from them during this time than they wanted from her, primarily because they were vocal about not approving of her decision to separate and they kept asking about her husband's whereabouts: "[They're] too nosy, too judgmental, you know... I'm a grown woman. I don't need people telling me what to do or what not to do" (P5).

Some participants also talked about how their spouse's relationships with their own family members were affected. For example, one woman talked about not knowing how to manage the relationships her husband maintained with her family:

He was friends with all like... my family members and friends with you know my brothers on Facebook, and they still are some of them. Some of them completely cut him out when we broke up, and some of them still talk to him to this day. So it's kind of awkward in that sense. (P2)

Another talked about knowing that his mom felt torn in her loyalties between him and his wife:

She's gone out with my mom and they've had a couple drinks and talked. I know it's been, like I said, hard for my mom to straddle that line because...when I give her my perspective, you know, she seems understanding, and then she'll go and talk to my wife and come back and be like, Are you sure there's nothing that can be done?' or like... it's kind of hard for her to be in the middle. (P20)

### **Essential Theme 2: Separation is a Private Experience**

The second essential theme that emerged was related to the privacy with which the participants lived as separated persons and the degree to which they made their situations known to others. A couple participants were fairly public about their experiences, but in these cases, the participants had gained more clarity about hoping to pursue divorce. However, that came with time. When the outcome felt more ambiguous, however, they were more private about their situation.

Few of the participants talked publicly about their separations. Instead, they shared their experiences with only a small number of confidants because there was a sense that being separated was an experience that others need not know about. One woman said it this way: "To me, it's just kind of private and it doesn't, you know, it's nobody else's business unless I decide to tell them" (P19). Decisions to keep their experiences private were related to concerns about other's perceptions and the limited usefulness of feedback from those who did know.

**Others' perceptions.** Much of the privacy surrounding separation was related to fear of how other people might perceive the participants' situations. Most often, this was related to *fears of judgment*, specifically related to making a decision to separate or

having “failed” in the marriage. There was concern that if others knew, they would be looked down upon or would be the source of others’ gossip. One woman talked about her fear this way: “I just don’t want my bad news to become some gossip’s delight. You know? I don’t want it to run through my family rumor mill like some kind of wild fire” (P12).

While there was a general sense among the participants that others would judge them, the women tended to fear judgments that were directly tied to their gender and the pressures they felt about what was socially expected of them in the context of marriage. In contrast, the men in the sample did not comment on this. One woman described her choice to keep the separation private this way: “I feel like people think even if something happens, you should stay with your husband and work things out, and when you decide to leave with your kids, they judge you a lot” (P7). Another woman went on to talk about her expectation that others would perceive that she failed as a woman, based on the social expectations she felt as a wife, even though she was the one to initiate the separation:

I think it comes from society’s expectations of what a woman is supposed to do. I think that no matter how progressive people claim this society is, it really isn’t. I think women are taught to believe if we screw our husbands right and make a good dinner and take care of the kids, that then we’re perfect. We’re perfect spouses. And, that’s really not true. There’s a lot more to being a woman, feeling womanly, and being a woman than screwing your husband well and making a good pot roast. There’s a lot more to a woman than that, but I don’t think society is respectful of that. I think that that’s kind of what we’re expected...that’s what we’re expected to do. Cook, clean, and screw well. And then, we’re good. But when we stop doing one of those, then of course that’s the reason for the separation. Somehow, we didn’t make that pot roast as tasty as it should be, and somehow, we’re being less of a whore in the bedroom, and our children at each other’s throats...so I’ve failed. And I know that’s nonsense, but that’s the way society...that’s what society puts on us. (P1)

This same woman went on to say:

I think women view separation, at least for me, is that I failed somehow at not being able to make this work. That it's a reflection on me as a woman, as a mother, and as a spouse. That I somehow have failed in some way. I failed my husband. I failed my children. And in some ways, I failed myself. (P1)

When another woman finally told someone at her church about being separated, she described feeling like she had joined a "secret club" she previously knew nothing about (P9) – a club for people who have been through strenuous marital problems or periods of separation. She went on to describe learning from this person about others in her life who had experienced something similar, and the regret she felt about the social stigma she thought prevented these people from sharing about their experiences. Throughout the interview, this woman also described feeling guilty about her husband's dissatisfaction with their sexual relationship, and the fear she had that others, specifically those in her religious community, would see her as failing in her marital duties. While she intellectually rejected this narrative, she spoke of *feeling* differently, which made it difficult not to internalize a message of failure.

Sometimes the fear of a specific person's judgment prevented participants from disclosing a separation, often because they believed this person would cast judgment on them and such feedback would be unwelcome or potentially hurtful. For example, one woman wanted to keep her separation a secret from her grandmother after watching her grandmother's response to a cousin's divorce:

I think out of everybody in my family, my mom's mother, my grandmother, I mean she would be really judgmental on it. I had a cousin who, she was married maybe two years, and she just got divorced. And my grandmother made comments on it about, 'Oh, she wasn't married that long, she should've tried harder.' (P7)

*“There seem to be trends around keeping the separation mostly private. I wish people could be better confidants and not so judgmental. I wonder how friends or family have experienced me when they’ve come to me with relationship problems. These participants’ narratives are a good invitation to think carefully about my own response.”*

Many participants withheld their separations from others out of fear of judgment, and some even engaged in purposeful *impression management* behaviors to actively hide that they were separated; these behaviors portrayed a message to the outside world that the couple was still together. One woman created a cover story to hide her decision to separate from her siblings when she moved back in with her parents: “Because my family would have supported me no matter what, even if they knew really what was going on, especially because my brother and my sister, you know, just thought that I was coming home to take care of my grandma who was ill during the time” (P14). This same woman went on to talk about deciding whether to attend her brother-in-law’s wedding, which she thought would require a curated image for the couple’s relationship because few people attending the wedding would know about their separation:

It’s very hard because one of his brothers is getting married. So, you know, he wants us to go to the wedding and that’s a concern because it’s like, well, if we’re separated, you know, do we go together as a couple and put that smile on? Or do we not go? And that’s definitely like a hitting point right now. (P14)

Another woman talked about the ways she and her husband jointly managed their impression in public when they are out together with their school-aged children:

We’re not interested in people knowing what’s going on. So, in public, we’re able to put on the very brave front with the children. If there’s an event at the school, we go together, just like we have in the past. (P1)

Sometimes impression management happened on social media platforms as well, as described by this woman:

We post pictures on the weekend and things or post on our social media. We post them together, you know, like my husband is in the picture and he's with my daughter so I think it just seems like we're normally doing things. (P3)

Decisions to keep separation private or manage an impression of being together were also related to the idea that the participants' situations were *hard to explain*. This was closely tied to the idea from above that the participants themselves often struggled with the ambiguous nature of their situation, so trying to provide definition to someone else felt burdensome, especially when the outcome was unclear. One woman talked about it this way:

At the moment we're not saying we're not going to do anything... I mean we're not at making a big decision yet, so we don't really want to just say random things without knowing what the end thing is gonna be yet. (P3)

Similarly, one woman talked about not knowing how to talk with her mom, who knew about the separation but wanted to know more: "She wants to know what's going on, and it's hard to give her answers when I don't know" (P7). Another woman described not knowing what to say to friends at church when she began arriving alone with her children:

Last month I've just been coming [to church] just with my kids without my husband and like... I think, yeah... and yet not really wanting to make like a public statement about it at this point. And people kind of look at me weirdly or, you know, ask about [my husband] and I don't really know what to say. Yeah, it's odd. (P9)

Lastly, in addition to fear of judgment or not knowing how to explain their situation, some participants opted to keep their separation secret because of the *fear of burdening others*, usually because they thought others were struggling with something worse. For example, one man said:

I've actually been even more private with this because my mother is dealing with health issues, umm, so really trying to shelter my family from it because I don't want them to be worried about my situation while they're dealing with her health issues. And obviously I don't want her thinking of anything but her health issues. (P10)

Another woman, whose father recently lost his home in a natural disaster, described it this way:

You know, they just had a hurricane over there, and they have no electricity. No water. Who am I to complain when I have all of the above? And my dad was one of those that lost everything. The house and everything... I'm not calling him and telling him how bad I have it when he's having it 10 times worse. (P5)

**Others' responses.** While most participants had not talked publicly about their separations, they had usually confided in at least a small number of people. Some of what they got from sharing with others was *support and encouragement*, sometimes by way of positive words, but also by way of help with the kids or finances. Sometimes this support was well-received and provided relief. One woman, who had a two-year-old child at home and whose spouse lived out of state during the separation, received help with childcare from family: "My mom...she comes down from time to time to help me, and his mom lives down the street, so. She comes over on the weekends from time to time" (P4). Another woman talked about a couple friends who was tried to remain neutral but uplifting, which she found immensely helpful: "They can encourage me to just do whatever I want and whatever makes me happy" (P6).

Sometimes, however, others' support and encouragement felt too optimistic or hopeful. One man, whose spouse initiated the separation and wanted little contact for the time being, talked about others' optimism this way:

Because I don't even know if we're getting a divorce. I don't know. People tell me, "(name) she's coming home. You'll see. All of her stuff is still there at your house. She hasn't filed for divorce. She's coming home. You'll see." And I'm sorry...*(sniffles)*...but she doesn't even talk to me, how can I share your confidence? (P17)

Ultimately, many participants found that the feedback or responses they received were not helpful, which often led them to remain more private about their situations.

Much of what the participants received was *one-sided feedback*, as well-meaning friends and family would respond in ways that aligned with the participant but that did not honor the difficulty or complexity of the situation. Despite the ambiguity of their situation, most participants felt a need to protect their spouse from undue slander and saw their situations as far more complex than what others could see. One woman learned that talking with others about her separation made the situation worse, and she felt a need to defend her husband to her friends:

"Oh, no! You have to leave him. Oh, no! He has to do this. You need to lay down the law." Almost as if he's...as if he's one of my children. And it really doesn't work...it doesn't work that way, you know. I feel like I can't lay down the law. "Oh, no...you have to do this." He's not a baby! He's a grown man. He doesn't want to be spoken to that way. Quite frankly, I wouldn't want to be spoken to that way. (P1)

Another man, who was mostly private about his separation but had felt a need to defend his wife to others, talked about the one-sided nature of others' feedback this way:

I would not want anyone to think...I'm more likely to say, "Oh, it's me! Don't just...please don't blame her because really she's, she's a wonderful person." You know? I have my own faults, too. Yeah, I wouldn't want anyone making assumptions about why we're separated, or what the issues were. (P11)

*"I find myself feeling a ton of empathy for participants who are trying to decide whether to divorce or stay married, but less for someone whose ambivalence is hurting someone I love. I imagine that is, in part, because I'm more inclined to align with*

*someone I care about (something the participants talked about not always appreciating).”*

Sometimes this one-sided feedback increased worry. One woman talked about how others had suggested unhelpful narratives about what it meant that she and her husband were separated, which was challenging because she already felt like a jealous person and worried about her husband’s fidelity during the separation: “Oh, you know people. They would say, ‘Oh, I can’t believe...you know he’s being unfaithful while he’s up there. He’s up to no good. I told you to leave the relationship years ago’” (P4).

Other times others’ feedback suggested that participants “move on” and date other people so they could forget their spouse. However, these suggestions neglected the idea that reconciliation was possible, or even preferred. The participants largely rejected this kind of feedback because moving on in this way felt neither possible nor fitting. One participant described the responses he received from his male friends as particularly insensitive to what he was going through in waiting to learn if his wife would be interested in reconciling:

My male friends, all or almost all of them, with the exception of one who’s a hard-core Christian, all of them are telling me, “Yeah, you gotta get back out there. You gotta get what’s...you gotta go get with somebody else and you’ll feel...she’ll be gone. You’ll forget about her, and that’s what you need.” And I’m like, “I don’t, I don’t think that’s real. I don’t think that’s true. I don’t believe that.” I don’t think I can get over her just like that. (P17)

### **Essential Theme 3: Separation is a Lonely Experience**

The third essential theme captures the loneliness felt by the participants as they adjusted to life as separated persons. This theme is conceptually different from the idea that separation is a mostly private experience, which is about the degree to which

participants choose to make their experiences public. This theme of loneliness emphasizes the emotional, and often isolating, experience of living as a person who is separated from a spouse. Only one participant, who had been separated for 1 month and whose chief complaint about her husband was emotional abuse, described not feeling some sense of loneliness after separating. For all other participants, loneliness was, or had at one point been, a central part of their experience. The other participants' experiences of being lonely were primarily related to time apart from their spouse and kids, daily reminders of being separated and living alone, and feeling alone in assuming the primary responsibility for children.

**Time apart.** Except for one participant, who lived part-time with a family member and part-time at home when his wife worked overnight shifts, all participants lived separately from their spouse. Many of the participants, both initiators and non-initiators, talked about how *missing their spouse* contributed to feelings of loneliness. Despite marital problems and one of the spouses wanting time apart, participants often reported missing the spouse's company and presence, which contributed to feelings of sadness, pain, and longingness for things to be different. One woman acutely described the tension she felt about appreciating the space from her husband but missing his companionship and presence: "The least challenging thing is going to bed alone at night, and the most challenging thing is going to bed alone at night" (P1). Another woman talked about missing her spouse in moments when she wanted to share something with him in the way she would have before the separation:

I think going from having him here and being able to talk to somebody, like I told you before, he's like my best friend. Anything I had wrong, we would talk about

it. We were just so goofy together, and we acted stupid, we were immature, like the same stupid jokes and stuff and it's not that same way because I don't have him around. So, I'll think of something to tell him, and I'm like, "oh I can't." (P7)

Sometimes loneliness was not felt right away but rather emerged over time as initial feelings about the marital problems became less intense and more perspective on the relationship was gained. One woman, who initiated the separation and initially felt angry with her husband, talked about softening to feelings of sadness and loneliness as her anger dissipated:

It's all such a confusing situation. Umm, I think that the time apart has definitely let me know that I still care. Because I do miss him. So, it has kind of provided me with a sense of... I do love him, I want him in my life, and I want to work to make that happen again. Umm, where before, I was just so angry, and I was so hurt by him, I just wanted him out of my life, even if it was just for a little while. I just wanted him gone. And now, it's just kind of like, I feel like the time apart has taught me that our marriage was precious, and we just have to get back to the people that we were when we first met, if it's possible. Now, not exactly those same people, but the people with those temperaments that we had, the adoration that we had for each other. I think over time it's just kind of dwindled a little bit, you know, scars were built up over various hurts and issues, and it was hard to look past them when we were in the moment. And now that we have taken this step back, it's kind of easier to say, "I feel like this is worth fighting for. I feel like this is worth working on." And before, I was just kind of like, "You just leave." (P12)

This same woman went on to talk about how missing her husband sometimes tempted her to invite him back home, even though the marital problems had not yet been resolved. Her primary marital concerns were about the ways her husband would lose his temper; she feared that her sons would believe it was okay for men to treat women that way, and she initiated the separation in hopes that she would send a strong message to her sons and that her husband would work on controlling his anger. However, when she missed her husband, she felt tempted to invite him to come home:

Those are the times when I really, really, really like have a hard time not calling him and saying, “Please just bring all your stuff back. I can’t do this anymore.” You know? I have to remain strong, and I have to keep my courage because things will not change if I give in so soon. (P12)

For a few participants, however, the loneliness was initially present but faded over time, most often when clarity about a desire to divorce emerged. One woman gained more clarity about wanting divorce after separating from a spouse who abused drugs, and she compared the way she missed her husband when she first initiated the separation with the happiness she feels now:

Of course, the first few months were the hardest because, you know, you’re not sleeping in the same bed as that person. You know, you’re not sharing your life the way you were. You’re lonely, but now I’m the happiest person in the world. Time healed the wounds, as they say. (P2)

Arriving at clarity about a decision to divorce did not necessarily result in not missing a spouse, however. Another woman, who was clear about not wanting to live with her husband again but still lacked clarity about whether to divorce him, described the loneliness she felt now that she lived alone. As a retired person, she rarely had a contact with other people unless she made a conscious effort to leave her home:

And it’s lonely, but I live in [city]. I have the ability to go out and see people. I just have not. I’ve done a lot of online shopping, and stuff I don’t need. So...But yeah, this isn’t doing it for me anymore. The anticipation of a package arriving, that doesn’t exactly fit the bill. (P18)

Loneliness was also experienced in response to participants *missing their kids*. As a function of the separation, many participants spent less time with their kids because they lived apart, or the kids spent time away from home visiting the non-resident spouse. One woman described missing her daughter when her daughter stayed with her husband: “I’m at the point where I’m lonely too much when she’s with him” (P16). Another talked

about the ways her loneliness was eased when she was with her son, who primarily stayed with her husband:

I feel happy, and you know, we go to the park and...he plays with other kids, and we have a good ol' time together. [When I'm apart from him I feel] sad and, you know, lonely. Frustrated. Not knowing where he's at sometimes. (P6)

One man described having to be apart from his kids and wife as the most challenging thing he's experienced, which also felt more even more complicated because the separation was his decision:

It's awful. It's absolutely the worst thing, one of the worst things I've ever experienced. Being separated from my children and my wife...sometimes I just want to be there and be home, but you know, I just can't do that. (P11)

**Daily reminders.** Feelings of loneliness were also triggered by daily reminders of being apart from their spouse. These reminders were usually related to roles and responsibilities that the other spouse usually filled, or small realizations that the participants no longer needed to account for their spouse's presence in their daily routines. One woman described the loneliness she felt as she adjusted to a new routine without her husband: "It can get lonely. Because it's getting to the point that, you know...how to say...it's a routine. You get into a routine with that person. You've been with that person for so long" (P5).

Adjusting to a new routine without a spouse provided ample opportunity for being reminded of the spouse's absence, as described by this woman:

Even the little calculations in your life that are normally rudimentary that you don't even have to think about, that now you have to recalibrate. For one, like making coffee in the morning, or how much, what kind of groceries do you buy, or just all these little things that you, have become such routine based on who you became together that now everything's like up for question again. And then like, last night I had a fever and was up chilled and I was shaking, and I had a hard

time getting out of the bath by myself and the kids were asleep, and I was just struck by my loneliness and the fact that if I'm sick there's no one to help me out of the bath, you know? (P9)

She went on to say:

My light bulbs went out in certain areas of my house, that I don't even know how to even unscrew and... We have a long driveway and we don't have a snowplow and I don't know how I'm gonna, like how I'm gonna do that with two kids in the house and... lots of things that were practical and not, but practical to represent the emotional loneliness and the gap as well. They're just not so fun reminders. (P9)

Another man, who talked about attempting to cope with his loneliness on a day-by-day basis, described how small reminders of his wife's absence could unexpectedly and abruptly change his emotional experience:

I could be working feeling normal, I'm feeling alright because I'm going on about the day, get done with work, and then you know, go and as soon as I start to prepare dinner, I realize I'm cooking for myself only and, you know, my emotion can totally change. (P10)

**Responsibility for children.** In all but two of the cases with school-aged children (men included), the women assumed primary responsibility for the children during the separation. This was the case regardless of who moved out. When the men moved out, the children typically stayed with the women. When the women moved out, the children went with them. Interestingly, decisions about who the children would live with rarely involved conversations; rather, that the children stayed with the women was usually assumed.

*“It is interesting to notice that so far, I think, the women tend to keep the kids during this time and the men do not. I suppose this points to gendered family practices and assumptions about roles and responsibilities in family life.”*

Most of the women talked about how complicated it was being the primary caregivers for their children during the separation. On one hand, many found pride in their identities as mothers and were glad to be with their children. On the other hand, the responsibility of caring for children without the help of their spouse felt *burdensome and lonely*. One woman, whose spouse was on a temporary, out-of-state work assignment during the separation, talked about how she struggled to care for her daughter alone:

It's been a bit challenging because I had to do her whole birthday by myself, and we went to Disney, and it was just, you know, doing all these things. Having another set of hands can be nice. My mom comes down from (city). She helps me from time-to-time, but always having to do little activities and stuff with her and...there's not enough hours in a day being a parent to do all these things for a little one. It would just be nice to have another set of hands. (P4)

This woman went on to describe the surprise she felt over parenting alone being such a challenge, which became a source of shame when she saw other women who were parenting alone and who she perceived to have an easier time:

I have more of a harder time doing things than I thought I would. Being on your own with a 2-year-old is a bit stressful. And that's a bit surprising to me because I see all these other single moms doing it and making it look so easy, but it's not easy. It's rough. Well, it's rough. That's the only thing I can say. I'm in this group called "Super Moms" and I'm like, constantly doing all of these activities and things, you know, they make it look so easy to do all of these events and activities with your little ones, and really, it's just not easy, and it's stressful, and it's rough, and I thought it would be easy to do it on my own but it's not. I have friends that are single mothers, too, and they like...they do everything. (P4)

This participant's narrative about the challenges of functioning as a single parent was common. One mother of 3 talked about how she did not feel like she got breaks from parenting responsibilities in the way that her husband did, both before and during the separation. She felt alone in caring for the children, but she felt exhausted and wanted some alone time for herself: "I just wanted him to take the baby so I could take a nap.

Honestly. To take a nap without being, you know, picked on the face, thrown a bottle, puking up...” (P5).

Another woman talked about the burden of assuming primary responsibility for the children as extending beyond tasks at home:

It was the football practice, or the meetings with the teacher, or whatever. It’s just how, you know, two people are supposed to be here to take care of those things. But instead, it’s just...it’s just me running around doing everything. And sometimes I don’t know how to make it work. (P13)

Assuming primary responsibility for the kids also resulted in less availability for social time with friends, which increased feelings of loneliness. This was made even worse when they were also responsible for financially supporting themselves. One woman, whose spouse was involved with drugs and was not working, felt the burden of needing to work 2-3 jobs at a time to provide for her children. She went on to describe the effects of carrying that burden alone this way: “Being separated has put a damper on my financial situation, which forces me to work all the time. Me working all the time has put a damper on my social life” (P13).

*“Women seem especially burdened by the responsibility to care for the children. In all but 2 cases with school-aged children, the children have stayed with the women. They’re also talking about social pressures to keep it all together; men may have more social permission to live freer, not be as involved in family life, etc.”*

Sometimes bearing the primary responsibility for the children was juxtaposed with *newfound appreciation* for the ways their spouse had contributed to the day-to-day responsibilities of family life before the separation. One woman, who initiated the separation and whose husband moved out, talked about the difficulty of being alone with so much responsibility:

It's just, it's just so hard being alone, being a single parent, a lot of things that I didn't realize that he did and how much he... how much he took on for the family, for us. I mean, things that I have to do now. (P16)

One man, who maintained primary responsibility for his children after his wife asked for a separation, actually compared his experience to that of a single mother. He and his wife had separated a few times before, but his wife had always kept the children with her. This time, he kept the children with him and felt burdened by the responsibility to function as the primary parent:

I'm a single dad of 2 kids, I have to make sure they're up and ready for school, make sure their homework is done. Umm, you know, if... it is hard. It's not easy. Don't let anyone tell you it's easy. I mean, I'm basically feeling the same thing as a single mother. The only difference is I'm a guy. (P15)

*"I find myself wondering... How does a person stay in a marriage when their spouse has left several times? I don't think I would have it in me to stay or continue trying. At what point does a commitment to staying married do damage to someone? I can respect his decision to work on the marriage, but I wonder if staying sets him up to do this all over again."*

#### **Essential Theme 4: There are Benefits to Separating**

The fourth essential theme captures the ways the participants have benefited from being separated from their spouse. In talking about their experiences, the participants described several challenges of being separated, such relational ambiguity and feeling lonely. However, their experiences were not all negative. They also described several positive effects of the separation. Four categories of benefits emerged: 1) pressure off the relationship, 2) impetus for change, 3) easier daily life, and 4) realizations about oneself.

**Pressure off the relationship.** Like releasing air from a pressure cooker, for many participants, separation provided somewhat of a release from the strain of a distressed marriage. Participants describe gaining enough distance from their spouses that

they had fewer arguments or less intense feelings of jealousy, which felt personally relieving. One woman talked about historically arguing with her husband about not knowing his whereabouts because of his unpredictable work schedule; this made her routines less predictable as well. After she initiated the separation, she felt less of a need to know where he was all the time because his whereabouts had less of an effect on her routines, which subsequently resulted in fewer arguments and less anxiety: “Well, then I’m not waiting for him to get back from like a late flight, you know all those things add anxiety to my day and so it’s making it a lot better” (P3). She went on to describe the ways their sex life improved as a result of taking the pressure off the relationship: “It’s actually been better than before we were separated because we’ve been less stressed out” (P3).

Another woman talked about how the physical distance afforded by the separation allowed them to reduce the frequency of their arguments, which also created more opportunities for positive family time:

He works from home, and I’ve had...I have to be a stay-at-home mom because our kids require probably, between the two of them, about 15 appointments at therapists, a week. So, I can’t really work. So in our environment, we were always around each other, and we never had space. So I think now, we have space. Where before...I mean, we still have disagreements about things, but I feel like when he comes over, if we want to have a family dinner or something, you know, it’s important to my oldest that we still kind of, you know, do those family things. So, if I invite him over for family dinner and we’re sitting at dinner, we can go an entire dinner without a fight. Where we couldn’t really do that before. (P12)

One man, who initiated the separation because he and his wife argued a lot and was concerned about the effects of their arguments on their children, said he would

recommend a separation after noticing the ways that he and his wife's arguments were diffused when they began living apart:

Anybody I know who is kind of in that position, yeah, I would say absolutely yeah. Do a trial separation. Give yourself some space to kind of calm down and get through. (P11)

**Impetus for change.** For some participants, separating also created an impetus for positive change in themselves, their spouse, or their relationship. Sometimes these changes served to provide hope that the separation would not end with divorce. The woman who initiated a separation because she struggled with her husband's work schedule was relieved when he applied for a new job that would have him home more consistently, which led her to feel more hopeful that they could reconcile. Another woman talked about the benefits that she and her husband had seen as a result of their work in marriage counseling, which they began after separating:

It's kind of given us the tools to, umm, to kind of communicate with each other civilly. And like I said, I think we're now better friends than we ever were, and I think a lot of that has to do with not only the solo therapy, but the marriage counseling. Like, the group...the couples therapy. It's really kind of given us some tools to like, say, "Hey, you're kind of upsetting me right now, and I feel like I'm going to say something really ugly, so it would probably be best if you went back to your house." You know?" (P12)

Similarly, another woman talked about the benefits of seeking marriage counseling during a separation. When asked about what has been especially helpful for her, she responded:

First and foremost, at least for me, is communication. Like, you have to have communication in order for a marriage or a relationship or anything to work. You know, and if you can't communicate with your partner, you don't know how they're feeling, you don't know what they're thinking, and vice versa. So, definitely communication is key. (P14)

One man thought positively of his wife's commitment to therapy after years of "hostility," and he was curious to see what might come of her changes: "She's now doing individual therapy for herself for the first time, which I guess gives maybe hope and curiosity, like could there be something good that comes out of that that would change the relationship?" (P20).

**Easier daily life.** Another common benefit that emerged was the sense that living apart from a spouse made daily life easier, which was sometimes quite enjoyable. On one hand, the challenges of living alone, especially with kids, seemed burdensome and lonely. However, several participants also spoke about the appreciation they had for not having to consider their spouses' preferences, routines, or needs in daily life; it was much simpler to accommodate their own preferences and be responsible only for themselves (and their kids, if applicable). For example, one man talked about how peaceful he felt without his wife in the home:

Just having things done just how I want them to be done. You know, like...it's dumb, but she was a very loud person. And I mean like, not even just vocally, but just always slamming things, the cabinet doors in the kitchen, and just leaving a mess everywhere all the time, it's just like...well, things are a lot calmer now and peaceful. I don't have to stress out about any of that stuff. So, and not to mention, it's...it's just a pet-peeve of mine, but she always wakes up like, you know, 4 in the morning for work. I mean, not always, but usually. And, I have to hear those alarms going off starting at like 3-o'clock. And they go off like every 10 minutes, and it's always the most obnoxious thing. And it got to the point where I wouldn't even sleep in the bedroom because I don't want to be hearing that all the time. I'll just sleep upstairs. And even sleeping upstairs I would still hear it, so I would get on my phone and call her phone, so that way the alarm would stop. I don't have to deal with that anymore. I can just sleep through the night. (P8)

Living independently also allowed for easier decision-making about daily choices, as described by this woman:

I would say that there is a certain ease to independence in some ways like being the full decision maker of the house. It's been kind of nice to, especially because my husband and I are so different. We, decision making was always like kind of a laborious process and we're pretty different parents and prioritize different things and just like feeling like, yeah calling the shots with my kids and I'm organizing and structuring our day. (P9)

There seemed to be a gendered nature to feeling like daily life had, in some ways, become easier. Specifically, women tended to talk more about no longer orienting domestic tasks around their husbands' preferences:

It's constantly like, "Oh, she likes her foods, and I like my foods, and he likes his." So me and her usually are on the same page eating veggies and fruit, and healthy things, and he's more of like a fried chicken type of person, so...it's a, it's a lot less stressful to have to make one meal instead of making two different meals. I mean, that's easier. And I don't always have to buy him his special toothpaste, so that's easier. (P4)

One woman was surprised when she realized she was no longer doing certain things for her husband:

When we actually separated it was very, very odd. It was like, I didn't see him around. I didn't pick up after his mess, like I didn't have his mess to pick up after, or like I didn't take him food at work. It was, it was a shock to be honest with you. As weird as that sounds, in regards to our situation, it really was a shock. (P14)

However, this same woman also realized that her spouse had also gained benefits from being separated, which were not preferable to her. They had been separated for 8 months before reconciling. Two months later, he initiated a separation again. She spoke about his reasons for doing so this way:

He doesn't have any responsibilities, like...I take care of the kids all the time. I think he just kind of likes that, that he doesn't have to think about it. Nobody can tell him what to do when he's just... it's not that he's a poor husband, he's really not. You know, he's just...and he's not a poor father either. I just think he doesn't have that drive all the time. (P14)

**Realizations about self.** The final category of benefits that participants described captures new realizations participants gained about themselves. These were realizations that they had not expected but were grateful to have acquired as a result of being separated. One woman summarized this theme this way: “It’s kind of like, you really have an opportunity to figure out who you are and find out what you want, and that’s kind of the point that I’m at now and why it’s so important to me” (P14).

Often, these realizations felt empowering, as the participants discovered capacities and ways of being resilient that they had not previously known. One woman was surprised to learn from the separation that she had great capacity for independence:

We were together every day so I kind of became reliant on him like we always read a story together, we always did things, like sometimes he’d help me when I couldn’t do something and like he would put together stuff and like even today when she had a toy, I was like oh he always puts her toys together... I think it’s surprising cause I can do more than I thought I could. (P7)

Sometimes participants’ realizations about themselves resulted in more clarity about their desires for the future of the marriage. One woman, whose husband had a long history of abusing drugs, talked about the awareness she gained of her strength, independence, and resilience after initiating a separation:

I feel like it made me so much stronger to know that I’m like an independent person and I did it on my own, you know. Like he had left me with all the bills, for me to pay for this all by myself and doing it all by myself made me feel like, wow I don’t need somebody to, you know, I did it by myself. (P2)

*“It’s beautiful outside today, and I’m bringing that energy with me into this work! Today I’m thinking about some of the benefits that can come from separation. It seems that it does provide some space to reflect and assess. Despite feeling burdened by the responsibility to take care of the kids, some women are talking about how they realize they are also more independent than they previously realized. I love that they’re growing in that awareness and feel more empowered. It does seem to complicate their decision-*

*making, though, as they consider how, in some ways, life is easier without their spouse (e.g., just buy the groceries they want, etc.).”*

### **Essential Theme 5: Separation is Not Sustainable**

This essential theme refers to the notion that separation, while tolerable for the meantime, is an impermanent, unsustainable solution to marital problems. The participants almost unanimously talked about how they could not go on with separation long-term; the uncertainty about this time was too much to bear, and the impermanence of separation (compared with divorce) had other important implications. Most talked about needing to, at some point, make a decision either way, even if it meant moving forward with a divorce; a decision to divorce, though painful, would be more tolerable than living with ongoing ambiguity about the marriage’s current status and future. Many participants made comments like this one: “For our own kind of sanity, we would have to separate [permanently] at some point because, you know, I just don’t know how I could do that long term” (P3). Another woman talked about it this way: “I mean, it’ll eventually have to change. It will eventually, you know, go one way or another” (P13). This ambiguity was ultimately unsustainable because of the emotional toll of uncertainty and the ways separation puts life on hold.

**Emotional toll of uncertainty.** For most participants who were still unclear about whether to divorce or reconcile, whether initiators or non-initiators, the unsustainable nature of separation was related to the emotional toll they felt as a result of the ambiguity about the future of the marriage and their present relationship. Only one participant talked about being okay with the ambiguity around the future of his marriage and not feeling a

need to make a decision either way, at least for now. His wife, on the other hand, felt differently:

I would probably let this go on, and like everything feels kind of comfortable now. Like, well, I'll see you when I see you. Whatever, that's it. Whereas, she on the other hand, is like...very, very direct, and always wants to start something and have conversations. (P8)

For most others, ambiguity about the future was far less tolerable. Those who were still deciding whether to divorce or reconcile, usually initiators, felt the *effects of needing to decide*. When asked what was most challenging about being separated, one man talked about not knowing how to decide about the future of the marriage: "I think there's a couple elements of that. I think some of it is the struggles of figuring out what's next... I mean, that's kind of a big one that I think about a lot" (P20). Another participant, who initiated the separation, described her desire for the ambiguity to end. This woman hoped she and her husband would reconcile, but she was not ready to reconcile yet: "Let's just end this because [not knowing is] taking its toll on me emotionally. And I can't handle it much longer" (P1). Another woman, who also initiated the separation with hopes that she and her husband would grow closer together as a result of being apart, was devastated that they seemed to be growing further apart. She struggled with the ongoing uncertainty of their relationship status and longed for it to be over, and more specifically for things to be the way they were before they experienced marital problems:

I was just thinking that I wish it would be over, like...that it would go back to the way that it was. And I think that's why the problems...I mean, we're both on our own and growing apart and everything, but I just want things to go back to the way they used to be. (P16)

For those who wanted reconciliation but were unsure about how their spouse would decide, usually non-initiators, the emotional toll was most often related to *waiting and making meaning* for what had happened to the marriage. One man, whose wife said she wanted some space but gave little information about why, described the difficulty of not knowing her reasons, where they stood, or where they were headed as the most challenging part of his experience. He spent considerable amounts of energy trying to construct a narrative about her reasons that made sense, and he deduced that she must have something personal going on because he was unaware of any significant marital problems. However, he did not know, and this was emotionally taxing. At one point in the interview, he hypothesized that divorce would be incredibly painful, but at least it would be a decision that would bring him clarity. He described his need for an answer this way:

I don't know what will happen if this drags on too long, especially because of the type of person I am. Because like I said, I like to analyze, I like to figure stuff out. And, if this goes on for too long it's going to get to the point, I fear, where if I don't have information where I can determine which way we're going, that like you said, I want to know what the future looks like, and if I can't start seeing which direction it's going, I'm going to start wanting a clear-cut one way or the other. (P10)

*“How difficult it must be to not understand what is going on with your partner and not know how to make heads or tails of where you're at.”*

Another non-initiator described the emotional toll of ambiguity this way: “It's so confusing for me, and it's heartache, but it's more...the biggest problem I'm having with it is not knowing” (P17). He went on to use his occupation as a metaphor for not knowing his way out of a situation that felt so untenable:

That's the part that's probably the hardest for me, is just, like I've been saying, not knowing which direction to go. I don't know how to deal with that. I'm a truck driver. We always know where to go. I can't pull it up on my GPS. (P17)

Often, the participants' tolerance for ambiguity became *more tolerable over time*.

Early in the separation, participants described more intense feelings of sadness, pain, and confusion. Over time, they had adjusted to living with uncertainty about the marital status and future but talked about it as something to endure for a time; they did not want live with uncertainty indefinitely. One woman said so concisely: "I just want it to be over" (P12).

*"I continue to be amazed by the resilience of these people. They are able to sit with an enormous amount of ambiguity. Most are describing it as hard initially, but then they adjust to a new normal, which may or may not be permanent (that seems to be one of the hardest parts – not knowing)."*

**Life is on hold.** Many of the participants talked about the paralyzing effect of not knowing the outcome of a separation and feeling like much of life – both present and future – was on hold until a decision about the marriage was made. Recalling the metaphors listed above, many felt stuck in a state of limbo, not knowing how much to adjust their daily lives to accommodate an ambiguous new normal that felt ultimately unsustainable. One woman described it this way: "You don't know what's next so then every day you're kind of like, what's going on?" (P7).

One man described the difficulty he had in *decision-making about daily life* because of the unknown outcome of his separation:

I think, you know, the one thing that most people don't think about through all of this, is the little stuff. You know, a lot of people think about separation or divorce...they think about house, kids, car, money. But you don't understand that, you know, when you separate it goes down to, well, somebody's going to get the cooking pan. Somebody else is going to have to buy a cooking pan... Then, I was

going to get that, and I was going to go buy a set of pots and pans, and then I actually asked her, you know, “What do I do... what are we going to do about this if I go spend all this money on all of this stuff, and then in 3 months we, you know, reconcile everything and you come back, and now we have double of everything? And if we can just take it and sell it, and we’re going to lose so much money.” (P10)

This participant went on to describe how the lack of clarity about his marriage’s future affected not only his decision-making process about *what* household items to purchase, but *how much* to invest in purchasing these items. If he felt clearer about reconciliation, he would be more inclined to buy thrift store items to merely get by. If he felt clearer about divorce, he would invest in new, higher quality items that would last for many years. Being in a state of ambiguity had him feeling like he could not make informed decisions either way.

*“I’ve never thought about how profound it might be to wonder about buying another set of pots and pans. Should I buy another coffee pot? These become some of the difficult questions when separated from a spouse.”*

Another participant lived part-time with a family member and part-time on a couch in his home when his wife worked night shifts. He struggled with feeling like a guest wherever he went, but he felt stalled in making decisions that could change his situation:

Not having a place is probably the hardest thing, like, just having a place, um... yeah it just makes me feel stuck cause like I’m not... I’m not working to do anything, I’m not working to start a new life because I’m in my mom’s basement, I’m not where my new life’s gonna be, and I’m not working towards fixing the relationship where, you know, that would be my place. I’m just kinda not... not doing anything. (P20)

Sometimes the *arrangements of the separation*, such as financial responsibilities and time with kids, were what made it unsustainable in the long-run, as the arrangements

themselves would put a future life on hold. For example, one participant, who was still uncertain about whether to divorce or reconcile, had been spending time his wife and kids together. He would also help put the kids to bed before leaving for the night. While these arrangements worked for now, if he or his wife decided to divorce, he predicted that these arrangements might prevent either one of them from entering a new relationship. He knew something would eventually need to change if either of them chose that route:

That's one of the things we've talked about, like, "Hey, is this working better?" "Yeah..." But is it sustainable? Eventually, eventually we're going to want to date and eventually we're going to...you know, neither one of us wants to live alone or be single for the rest of our lives, so...umm, how would this work? You know, the more we talked about it we realized yeah, that's not really an option. We can't just keep doing this. (P11)

Other times, the sense that separation puts life on hold emerged in the absence of ambiguity about the relationship's future. Deciding to end the relationship but continue as legally married had implications for the future. The participants who had more clarity about desiring divorce talked about likely wanting to make the divorce official at some point. For example, one woman talked about the potential implications for remaining married if she ever decided to buy a house; she did not want her husband to be tied to a deed should she decide to sell it later on. Whether there was ambiguity about the future or not, separation was conceptualized as an impermanent, unsustainable relationship status.

### **Essential Theme 6: The Way Out is Unclear**

The final theme that emerged from the interviews was related to the role of a separation in the participants' decision-making about the future of their marriage. The participants initially separated without clarity about whether the separation would end in reconciliation or divorce, and initiators largely expected that separating would help them

decide on an outcome. For some, separation was a useful transition in deciding about the future of the marriage. Most participants, however, remained unclear about the future of the marriage. Some even said that separating made their situation feel more complicated, and they did not know how they would make a decision about whether to divorce or reconcile or how long they would wait before feeling a need to make a decision. Many ultimately feared they would end up divorcing, despite some desire for reconciliation. In part, they thought reconciliation seemed less likely with time. However, many also talked about divorce as likely because they did not know how else to solve the marital problems.

**Separation brought clarity.** A small number of participants had gained more clarity about wanting to end the relationship since separating. However, these participants had usually experienced more severe marital concerns, like a spouse's substance use, severe mental illness, or infidelity. Some of these participants talked about the ways that separating allowed them to gain new perspective on what previously felt normal. Initially, they felt less certain about what to do. Over time, they felt clearer about not wanting to return to emotionally taxing or unsafe circumstances. One woman, whose husband's severe mental illness went untreated, now said of the verbal and emotional abuse she endured before separating:

I pushed it back. You know, you minimize, you minimize. You minimize your own dysfunction. "Oh, it's not that bad." And then you even get to the point where, "I'm the one who caused this, you know. I had too much to drink last night." (P18)

This woman talked about separation as a strategy that helped her "get her head on straight" and see the marital problems, and her desire not to live with them long-term, more clearly.

Another woman, whose husband had an ongoing substance use problem, talked about the ways she emotionally struggled when she first separated from her husband. She cried a lot and missed him, and for a while she maintained hope that he could change. Over time, however, she did not see her husband's behavior changing. Paired with an increased sense of strength and independence, she discovered she was happier when she lived apart from what felt like a chaotic situation:

I guess that, because we've been apart for all this time now, that I thought, that I was like, you know, gonna give him another chance. But all this time, I'm like so happy so why am I gonna go back? Like I feel like I'm gonna ruin like everything that I've already fixed. I'm gonna go back to the same emotional stress that I've been under. Why would I wanna put myself through that? (P2)

One woman, whose spouse had initiated a separation once before, did not trust he would not want another separation in the future. Each time, he declared he was separating because he had interest in another woman but later decided he wanted to reconcile with the participant. She eventually decided she could not tolerate his back-and-forth position on the marriage and decided she wanted to pursue a divorce.

**Separation has not brought clarity.** While separating helped some participants become clearer about the future of the marriage, the majority of the participants remained unclear about how the separation would end. Those whose separations began because of less severe reasons, like frequent arguing, lack of affection, communication problems, or a spouse's work schedule, seemed to have a harder time discerning what to do next. Some talked about separation helping them gain more clarity about the marital problems, but not necessarily what to do with them. In response to a question about whether separating had helped her become clearer about the future of the marriage, one woman

gave what became a common response: “I don’t know. Really, I don’t. Umm, I mean it’s all such a confusing situation” (P12).

*“I continue to feel amazed that there is no research on this phenomenon. I also wonder how many therapists suggest separations, which feels especially concerning given that so many participants don’t feel like separating has helped them reach clarity about whether to reconcile (or how to do that, if that’s what they ultimately want). I have to remember, though, that I’m not interviewing a clinical sample. It would be interesting to talk with and/or survey therapists about their perspectives on separation, if they suggest it to couples who are struggling, and what kinds of parameters they might suggest. That might be an idea for a future study.”*

Some participants thought that separating had even made their situation worse.

One woman said this in response to a question about whether separating had helped her become clearer about what she wanted for the future of the marriage:

For me, it’s been more confusing, but I would love to know what his response is because, you know, for him nothing’s really changed. He still goes to work all the time, and you know, I...we’re living separately, but I still see him because now that we’re living in the same state and the same city, it’s a lot easier for us to... “Hey, let’s get a babysitter for the night. Let’s go do something.” And that aspect...it’s been fine, but it’s like, we still live apart. And it’s just really difficult when it comes to determining, you know, where we really stand. (P14)

This same woman talked about feeling disappointed when her husband did not fight for her to stay home when she told him she was going to live with her parents. She expected him to feel compelled to try and stop her, which would have shown her that he cared. Others also had unmet expectations for the ways separation would help them make decisions. One woman talked about how her intentions for the separation were not realized, which led her to feel even more confused about what to do:

I thought it was going to help. I thought this was going to be the answer, that this was going to be just exactly what we needed, and it’s not. It’s not what we needed. I think that it’s making things worse. It’s made us grow farther and more distant from each other. I think if I had to do it over again, and at this point where

we are now, I know I can't change that, but I wouldn't really want to do something like this. I would work on things we could have worked on. (P16)

*“I feel so sad thinking about how the separation did not accomplish what she wanted, and how she desires reconciliation but doesn't know how/if that would be possible. She doesn't know what to do to make a reconciliation happen. This seems to be a common theme.”*

Similarly, another woman talked about benefiting from the space she had from her husband and becoming clearer about the relationship issues, but also feeling regret for the ways the separation had created new stress:

I think that...umm...one of the main things that I've gotten from this is that it's what I believed from the beginning. Separation should never occur... You have to figure out some way to, umm, coexist in one home. I don't think you should leave. I think leaving is the worst possible. I think it's created more stress. (P1)

*“I'm struck by the feelings of being “stuck.” The way out of this from both sides seems to be unclear, and this limbo period seems to take an emotional toll on everyone.”*

**Factors in decision-making.** Most participants reported that separating did not, on its own, lead to more clarity about whether to divorce or reconcile. As mentioned above, most also indicated that separation was not a permanent, sustainable solution to the marital problems; a decision to divorce or reconcile would eventually need to be made, whatever the outcome. When asked how they would know when it would be time to make a decision, the participants referred to several factors that influenced how they were thinking about the future of the marriage.

Many participants considered the *effects of their decision on their kids*. They wondered what decision would be best for them, and sometimes kids were a primary reason for considering reconciliation at all. One man talked about how a decision to divorce would be much easier if he did not have kids. One of the most prominent factors

in his decision-making was whether his kids would benefit more from him and his wife reconciling or divorcing:

We do have small children who we know would be dramatically impacted if we were [divorced]. In reverse, they would recover and all those things...but we definitely...in my opinion, the two-year-old, she'll be fine. She'll...she won't be hurt and it won't really impact her. I mean, even the separation already hasn't really impacted her. But, we're just trying to weigh...is it worse for them if we're fighting? Is it worse for them if we're separated? (P11)

Another woman talked similarly about her daughter being a primary source of motivation for considering reconciliation: "I would say the most important thing right now is my daughter and her happiness and keeping the family together for her happiness, but, you know sometimes things don't work out that way, so..." (P4).

Another man, who had already been through a divorce with his two oldest kids, wondered how they might be affected if he divorced again. He felt some dissonance between his desire to protect them from the effects a second divorce and not knowing how to solve the marital problems:

They're just kids. And I mean, I know, you know you're supposed to work through things, and you know, fix things, change things, and you know, that would be the optimal solution, but I feel like we still haven't figured that out yet. So, until then, we're just...I don't know, at a stand-still I guess. A hiatus. (P8)

Sometimes, participants also remembered experiences of divorce in their own families and wanted something different for their own kids, as described by this woman:

I want them to have a different life than I had. Like, because my childhood was so sad and so awful, I made terrible decisions in my life. You know? And while all those bad decisions led me to my children, I really suffered for a long time, and I don't want that for them. (P12)

The participants with adult children talked less about how their decision would affect their kids. One woman, however, was an exception. She was married to a man she

described as emotionally abusive, and she was initially worried about how her adult children would respond if she made a decision to divorce. She was surprised to learn that they would be supportive of her: “The kids, with me, are like, ‘Why even give him the chance?’ You know? They're just like, ‘enjoy your life, Mom. You don’t need to put up with the bullshit anymore.’” (P19).

In their decision-making processes, some participants also considered *religious and cultural values* related to divorce and marriage. Sometimes, there was dissonance between their values and how they were raised, and their consideration of divorce. One woman, who initiated the separation, talked about the guilt she would feel if she decided to divorce because of her religious beliefs, even though she wondered if divorce would be better for her and her kids given her husband’s anger:

I’m not saying that it’s completely over. I’m Catholic so I really don’t believe in divorce, but he does believe in divorce. You know? He’s Baptist, so...umm, it’s just really hard for me. I would be really ashamed, you know, to have failed at this, but I have to do what’s best for me and my children. (P12)

Another participant talked about his upbringing in a Mexican, Catholic family:

I mean I think about it, and when you’re raise that way you’re raised to think, like, this is right, this is wrong. You’re supposed to do this, not that. And so, you know, you want to feel like you’re, or me personally at least, that you’re following those rules. But at the same time, you know, it’s not like a must. You know? You do what you gotta do. So, you can’t follow every rule, even though you might want to. It doesn’t always work out that way. (P8)

Another man, who was Italian and grew up in the south, described the values he had around marriage based on how he was raised: “I was raised with the mentality that a man is supposed to spoil and take care of his significant, his woman. His lady. And that’s

what I had done for her the entire time” (P17). These values led him to a commitment to reconciling if his wife decided to try for that as well.

Some also considered *financial barriers to divorce* as they considered how they would end the separation. In considering finances, the emphasis was primarily on limited financial means. Limited access to financial resources led some participants to more seriously consider reconciliation, or at least delay a formal divorce process, even if it meant they were unhappy. This consideration was especially strong for those who continued to share financial resources with their spouses during the separation. Those who had begun supporting themselves did not talk about finances as a barrier to divorce.

One woman, who had decided she wanted to be done with the marriage after her husband initiated a second separation, talked about the internal conflict she felt over wanting a divorce but needing her husband’s financial support. This felt especially challenging because she identified as a strong, Puerto Rican woman who valued independence and supporting herself:

Financially he still helps me. Sometimes I feel like I still have to take some of it because I need his help financially, because of the baby. So, I’m like, how much can I take? I don’t want no help, no nothing, but then I’m like, “dammit, I’m going to be screwed if I don’t take his help.” So that’s...that’s the most difficult thing. I want to make it officially over, but I think that I need his help...And I want to take it as slow as he wants to take it, but I’m like, “I’m fed up!” (P5)

Another woman, who initiated the separation with hopes she and her husband could reconcile, wondered how she would provide for herself if they proceeded with a divorce. She also feared the power her income-earning husband would have if he decided to seek full custody of the children:

I don't know what I'm going to do if we do separate [permanently] and he's like, "I'm not going to support you in a divorce." I mean, I know that he'll provide for the children, but you know, he's not going to continue to pay for two households. So, it's, I just kind of...I feel lost. I don't know what I should be doing in preparation if that happens. I don't like to be the kind of person that gets caught with my pants down, so to speak, and I feel like, you know, if he does meet someone, or if he said, "I'm not doing this anymore. We are done. You need to figure out how to take care of..." or if he said, "I want the kids." Like, if he fought me for custody over our children, I would be devastated. These kids are my whole life. So, I mean, it's just kind of...I worry about those things. (P12)

She went on to say what her fears might mean for her decision-making about the future of the marriage: "I mean, I'll be honest with you. I would stay in a miserable marriage for a hundred million years if it meant that my kids wouldn't be taken away from me" (P12).

In contrast, one man specifically talked about the luxury of not worrying about finances in his decision-making:

You know, we're lucky enough to have the time to have this angst, and to do this. I mean, I own an apartment. But I mean, we're financially comfortable enough that I can do this. I mean, I've seen other people where the dad is living in the basement, you know, and hot plates and they're...they can't separate because they can't afford to. We realize, you know, we're lucky enough that we can afford to divorce. (P11)

Finally, others hypothesized that they would make a decision based on their *spouse's changes*, primarily as they related to initial reasons for separating. For example, after a gradual decline in her marriage, one woman's (P7) eventual decision to initiate a separation followed her mother-in-law moving in. She described primarily waiting for her husband to tell his mother that she could no longer live at their house, after 4.5 months he still had not done this. She was not sure how she would make a decision if he did not ask his mother to leave, and she was equally uncertain how long she would wait.

Another had initiated the separation after learning about her husband's infidelity. She was uncertain about whether she was going to divorce or stay married, but her decision primarily rested on waiting for her husband to promise that they he would not have another affair, which he had not yet done. She said it this way: "[We could talk about figuring things out] if he said that...then we could move forward and stuff" (P6).

Others wanted to see lasting change in their spouses' behaviors. One man talked about how he and his wife had sexual problems prior to separating. They had improved during the separation, but he was unsure if that would last if he decided to return home. He knew, however, that the future held no guarantee of change, and he would need to make a decision at some point:

I'm going to have to go on my gut at some point and take a leap of faith, maybe. Umm, there's really, there's really no way of knowing whether or not it's going to be sustainable or not. I've kind of come to that conclusion on my own. At some point I'm just going to have to take her word or not, and just deal with the consequences of that...I'm...no, not quite [there] yet. I think I need a little more time, a little more evidence. (P11)

Another woman, who described her husband as angry and argumentative before the separation, was preparing to watch for evidence of change when they had another argument:

You know, if he had that fight and he's yelling at me in front of our children and not talking it out, or not taking a break and walking away from the fight, if he's adding fuel to the fight, if he's being sarcastic or antagonizing, um...I will know that he has not changed and it's not, not time. It's either not time to do it or we need to finally say maybe we're not the ones for each other. Because I have my personality, you have your personality, and obviously we're not going to make it work. (P12)

**Concern about inertia.** Most of the participants reported that separation had not provided clarity about a decision to divorce or stay married. They considered several

factors in thinking about how to make their decision, but they struggled to know how to make a final decision. In this sense, some were in somewhat of a holding pattern, which also felt unsustainable in the long-run. However, and as mentioned above, several reported that separation had made their situation worse. Not only was the outcome unclear, but so was the way to arriving at an outcome; there seemed to be no clear way out of being separated. Despite desire for or openness to reconciliation, several participants lacked confidence that they could achieve this and feared they were moving toward divorce. In this way, separation had created movement – or inertia – toward an outcome that began to feel inevitable.

Some described this inertia as a *function of time*. There was a sense that the longer they stayed separated, the harder it would be to reconcile. In part, time did help one of the participants, whose spouse had abused drugs who had decided she wanted a divorce, arrive at her decision:

Maybe if we hadn't stayed separated so long, we could have [reconciled], but the longer we stayed separated, it's just...it's just easier and clearer for me to actually turn for me. So, like I said, if we didn't stay separated this long...but this is the way, you never know how things are going to end up, but this is the way it's going to end up for me. If there's a way to not make it go this long and try to work things out sooner, then do it. But being separated this long, it's just...it's the end of our relationship. It's just easier. (P13)

This is exactly what some of the participants who had not yet arrived at a decision feared, especially because the ambiguity of not knowing felt ultimately unsustainable.

One woman, who wanted to reconcile, hypothesized about a time limit for how long she could continue in a separation before making a final decision: “I think I’ll know when, if

we're in the same place we are 6 months from now, then it's time to move on. It's time to either shit – excuse my French – shit or get off the pot” (P1).

*“I feel sad for her – loving her husband but not knowing how to solve their problems and feeling increasing worry over time that they will end the separation with divorce. What a tremendous dilemma. She seems to feel stuck without a clear path out and feels alone without anyone to guide them.”*

Others hypothesized about timelines as well. One woman thought she could withstand the ambiguity for about another year, but beyond that, she would feel more inclined to pursue a divorce:

I think I've sort of been seeing this as, “well, things will change.” You know I'm pretty flexible even if it was within a year or so, but I think much beyond that I'd have to really stop and reevaluate can I be alone this much. (P3)

One woman even wondered if there would be a relationship worth saving if they continued as they had been for too much longer: “if he continues to stay so distant, then there might not be a relationship to save when he comes back” (P4). Another woman talked about it this way: “Days turn into months and...nothing's changing and you kind of feel like it's gonna go there, but you really don't want it to. If it doesn't change, I do think it could, because I can't live that way” (P7).

While time made reconciliation more difficult, some specifically described inertia as a *function of adjusting to life apart*. For example, the woman who initiated a separation, but whose husband asked for another after a brief reconciliation attempt, wondered if he had gotten too used to being alone when they first separated:

When you go through that long without somebody, you just, you start developing other habits of doing things on your own, and you become independent. And I think that's what he liked about it, is you know, I guess just not being tied down. (P14)

One woman talked about her growing fear of divorce as she and her husband grew more distant and spent less time together: “It’s...as much as I don’t want it, I think it’s probably leading toward divorce. Just, I don’t know, the further we grow apart the more risky...the longer, too, and the more risky...it’s like, what is going to be next?” (P16).

Lastly, some participants described inertia as a *function of unclear solutions*.

When asked how they would know when it was time to make a decision, several participants commented on not knowing, and difficulty finding solutions to the marital problems led to fear that divorce would be the outcome. One woman talked about her concern that she would end up divorcing, not because she wanted to, but because she and her husband were at a loss for how to resolve their problems: “And it’s very tough because, I probably sound like a broken record, but we honestly want to try to figure it out. And I feel like there’s no blueprint for us.” (P1). This woman went on to talk about now believing that couples should only separate with a clear plan and goals for how they would try to resolve their issues, as separating without a plan was too likely to lead them to divorce.

*“I don’t know if I could tolerate the levels of ambiguity that they’re talking about. I wonder if that’s why separation may create some inertia toward divorce? Most are talking about how this is not sustainable in the long-run; at some point, they’re just going to have to call it. The sad part about this is that many are talking about desiring reconciliation, but not knowing what else to do. However, a clear decision to divorce seems to be more tolerable (though painful) than sitting in ambiguity for too long. I wonder if this accounts for some of the ambivalence among those who decide to divorce.”*

## **Chapter V: Discussion**

### **Chapter Overview**

The purpose of this final chapter is to offer a discussion of what emerged from the whole of the participants' experiences, including connections with previous research and the proposed theoretical frameworks. This chapter begins with a summary of the study findings, followed by acknowledgements of both the study's strengths and limitations. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the implications for the findings and suggestions for future research.

### **Summary of Findings**

A hermeneutic phenomenological design (van Manen, 1990) was utilized to inquire about the experience of being separated from one's spouse when separation begins without clarity about how it will end. Twenty participants from around the United States were interviewed about their experiences, and six essential themes emerged as a result of these interviews.

The first theme captures the ambiguous nature of a separated couple's relationship. This ambiguity was related to difficulty defining the relationship status, which was not as clear as being married or divorced. Subsequently, navigating boundaries with each other within this socially ambiguous status became more challenging. Sometimes, this was because the spouses had different hopes for the relationship or what the separation might mean. Those who were more ambivalent seemed to have more power in establishing the relationship boundaries. The boundaries also felt ambiguous because spouses often sent mixed signals about their position on the

marriage, participants wanted to minimize confusion by not sending mixed signals to their spouse, and which spouse was feeling more ambivalent about the marriage was not always fixed. Ambiguity about the relationship was also felt in attempts to minimize the impact of the separation on kids and manage relationships with family members.

The second theme captured the privacy with which the participants lived as separated persons. Those who were unclear about the status of their marriage tended to confide in only a small number of confidants about their experiences. In part, the participants refrained from talking with others because of the perceptions others might have. The participants feared judgment, and the women were inclined to wonder if others would see them as having failed in their role as wife. Some participants engaged in impression management behaviors with their spouse to conceal the nature of their relationship. Others held information back because the status of the relationship was hard to explain, or they feared burdening others with their difficulties. The participants also described the responses that they typically received from those they confided in. While some people offered support and encouragement, many participants found that others' feedback was one-sided and did not account for the complexity of the participants' situations and experiences.

The third theme captured the loneliness that participants felt while separated from their spouse. This was related to having time apart from their spouse. The participants often missed their spouse's companionship and presence, even when there had been challenges when they lived together. They also felt lonely as a result of being apart from their kids. As a function of living apart, the participants usually had less time with their

kids than they did before they separated. In addition to being apart from their spouse and kids, the participants talked about daily reminders of their spouse's absence, which increased feelings of loneliness. Sometimes these reminders took the form of completing tasks that had typically belonged to their spouse, and other times the participants happened upon reminders like making dinner for one. Finally, loneliness was felt as a result of assuming the primary responsibility for parenting. This was especially strong among the women, who were more likely to have the kids with them. They talked about the challenges of parenting alone, which also had an effect on their social time.

The fourth theme that emerged captured the benefits of separating, as the experience was not all challenging. Several participants talked about how the separation took pressure off the relationship, which resulted in fewer arguments and sometimes more positive time with their spouse. The separation also served as an impetus for change. Several had begun counseling with their spouse and were seeing improvements in certain areas of their relationship. Others saw the ways their spouse began to make change as a result of the separation. Another benefit to separating was feeling like daily routines were easier without their spouse. The participants had appreciation for the ways they no longer had to consider their spouse's needs, preferences, and routines in their daily decision-making. Finally, some participants talked about growing in awareness of their own capacities for resilience. Women felt especially empowered by their ability to live independently, even though they tended to feel burdened by what that sometimes meant.

The fifth theme was related to the unsustainability of separation in the long-run. The participants almost unanimously said they could tolerate the ambiguity of being separated for a while, but at some point, a decision to reconcile or would need to be made. Sometimes, the distress of the ambiguity was so high that even a decision to divorce, when reconciliation was desired, would be preferred over living with ongoing uncertainty about the marital status. The participants talked about the emotional toll of living with uncertainty about the future of their marriage, either as someone trying to decide whether to reconcile, or as someone waiting for a spouse to decide. The participants also talked about the ways their lives were put on hold as a result of this ambiguous status. In the present, decisions about daily life were made more complicated because of the implications of their decision on the future. The arrangements of the separation also felt unsustainable for the future, as any arrangements they had made were temporary and would not be conducive to life as married or divorced persons.

The sixth and final theme captured the sense that the way out of a separation is unclear. While some of the participants had arrived at clarity about wanting to divorce, most reported that separation had not helped them achieve clarity about what to do. In some cases, the separation had even made their decision-making more complicated. The participants considered several factors in their decision-making, such as the effects of the decision on kids, religious and cultural values, financial barriers to divorce, and the degree to which had seen change in their spouse. However, most were still unclear about how they would decide. Several feared that the separation had created momentum toward divorce, and that reconciliation had become less likely with time, as a function of

adjusting to living apart, and a lack of clarity about how to solve the marital problems. For many, the idea that they could end up divorcing, despite a desire for reconciliation, was saddening.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

#### **Strengths**

The themes that emerged from the participant's interviews must be understood in the context of the study's strengths and limitations. Until now, very few researchers have examined separation as a transition distinct from divorce, and those who have studied separation have not differentiated those that began with an intent to divorce from ambiguous separations – those that began without clarity about how they would end. Several popular sources promote the use of ambiguous separation for deciding whether to divorce or stay married (e.g., Hastings, n.d.; Lipe, 2010; Raffel, 1999), but prior to collecting these data, no research on this phenomenon could be found. This study is the first to provide empirical insights into otherwise undocumented elements of the experience of ambiguous marital separation.

Hermeneutic phenomenology was an appropriate research design given the limited amount of knowledge about ambiguous separations and the emphasis on lived experience. This design was also congruent with my epistemological position as a postmodernist. The possibility of objectivity is rejected with recognition that the entirety of the study is an interpretive act, and the study findings are co-constructed and situated in temporal and situational contexts (Wognar & Swanson, 2007). This design also afforded me ample opportunity to reflect on my own assumptions and biases about the

phenomenon of interest in order to present the findings in a way that captured the essence of the participants' experiences. To this end, I practiced ongoing reflexivity through memo-writing and discussions with my adviser, and I employed the use of auditors to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

There were also strengths to the study sample. The participants were geographically situated in a variety of locations around the United States. Talking with participants from different geographical contexts increased the potential to add richness and diversity to the study findings in a way that interviewing persons from a single geographical area may not. Furthermore, the sample was intentionally non-clinical. While recruiting separated persons through clinical channels (e.g., via therapists) may have been easier, doing so may have skewed the findings toward those who seek clinical services. Some of the participants had engaged clinical services, but this became part of what emerged rather than a methodological bias. The findings of this study help provide insight into how people use separation without a therapist's assistance.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without limitations. First, while saturation was reached in the essential themes, these findings cannot be generalized to all separated persons. The purpose of postmodern, hermeneutical phenomenology is not to assert a single truth about a phenomenon, but rather to reveal the essence of a phenomenon as told by a group of participants who are situated in particular contexts at a specific point in time (van Manen, 1990). Readers are cautioned against any other use of the findings.

Furthermore, while there were sample strengths, there were also sample limitations. Over 75% of the sample identified as white, which may bias the results toward those who identify similarly. Those who identify with other racial or ethnic backgrounds might experience separation differently. Additionally, 70% of the participants identified as women. While this provided an opportunity for more in-depth analysis of women's experiences of separation, a more thorough comparison with men could not be made. As a function of this limitation, readers are cautioned against drawing too strong of conclusions about the differences between women's and men's experiences. Lastly, all of the of the participants in the sample reported being in female-male marriages. This was not by design. In part, this may be because of there are proportionally fewer persons in same-sex marriages. It may be that the experience of being separated from a spouse is different for those in same-sex marriages, especially if there are felt stressors associated with the social privilege afforded to those in female-male relationships.

There are study design limitations as well. One of the most notable is the cross-sectional nature of this study. At the time of the interviews, all participants were still legally married but separated from their spouse. Though some had gained clarity about wanting to pursue divorce since initially separating, none of them had divorced yet. Furthermore, many participants talked about how separation had not helped them gain clarity about whether to divorce or stay married. However, the final outcomes of these separations have not been assessed, as one of the inclusion criteria was that participants were still married but separated. It may be that clarity does arrive at some point, but

because of the cross-sectional nature of the study design, the processes by which clarity is achieved could not be captured through these interviews. Collecting data across multiple time points may provide more insight into how ambiguous separations and related decision-making processes may progress across time.

Finally, there were limitations in the recruitment strategies. There were challenges in recruiting separated persons because of the informal nature of separation and the seemingly private nature of this experience. Most participants were recruited through paid Facebook advertisements. A couple participants were recruited through word-of-mouth referrals, but this proved more challenging, perhaps in part because of the private nature of this experience and difficulty accessing what one participant called “a secret club.” Because the majority of the participants were recruited through a single social media platform, questions emerge about whether the findings might differ for populations that do not use this technology.

## **Implications**

### **Divorce Trajectories and Decision-Making Processes**

The idea for this study was birthed out of work with the National Divorce Decision-Making Project and the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project. As deeper understanding of the processes involved in deciding whether to divorce or stay married has been sought, questions have emerged about the utility of separation for divorce decision-making. When I consulted the literature on these questions, very little information surfaced. In fact, I discovered a bias in the literature toward the inevitability of divorce following separation. In most divorce research, those who are reported being

separated or divorcing are treated the same; the date on which a couple separated has been treated as the date on which the marriage ended, regardless of whether they actually divorce. This assumption leaves little room for more nuanced understanding of what the separation experience itself may be like, as well as divorce decision-making processes and the many trajectories couples might follow in arriving at a final decision.

Recruitment efforts for this study targeted currently separated persons who separated without clarity about how the separation would end. Locating persons who fit this criterion provides evidence that separation is not always intended as movement toward divorce. The participants in this study largely talked about initial desires – their own or their spouse’s – for space from the marriage to make decisions about the future of the marriage or create space to sort through their marital problems. Furthermore, most of the participants in this study maintained some level of desire for reconciliation, though they often lacked clarity about how to achieve it. This suggests that decision-making about the future of a marriage sometimes extends well beyond a decision to separate; this process does not necessarily precede separation. These findings are consistent with others that suggest even decisions to divorce are often marked with ambivalence (Doherty, Willoughby, & Peterson, 2011). Researchers interested in better understanding divorce trajectories and divorce decision-making processes may consider taking a long view, examining how these processes may look across a variety of marital arrangements: married but considering divorce, separated without clarity about the separation’s outcome, and after deciding to pursue a divorce.

### **Boundary Ambiguity**

Beyond the evidence that couples sometimes separate without a clear intent to divorce, this study provides valuable insights into what being separated from a spouse without clarity about the separation's outcome is like. One of the most salient themes that emerged from the participants' experiences was the high amount of ambiguity about their marital status and what that meant for how to relate with a spouse. There seemed to be clearer expectations for what it means to live as married or divorced persons, at least as the participants understand these statuses in their own contexts; separation seemed to lack social definition.

While the purpose of this study was not to validate theory, a few theoretical frameworks provided guidance for the design and interview questions. One key theoretical construct that guided this study was Boss and Greenberg's (1984) idea of family boundary ambiguity, which occurs when there is a lack of clarity about the permanence of a relational loss. While structural changes to family life contribute to feelings of uncertainty, perception of and meaning for these structural changes are most predictive of experiencing boundary ambiguity (Carroll, Olson, & Buckmiller, 2007). The participants in this study seemed to experience various amounts and types of boundary ambiguity. They struggled to attribute concrete meaning to their own marital statuses and relied on metaphors like being in limbo, sitting on a fence, or waiting in purgatory to describe their situations. Not knowing how to define their marital status subsequently resulted in uncertainty about how to manage the marital relationship as well. Many described having different ideas from their spouse about how the separation

should look and not knowing how to interact with their spouse in the absence of this clarity. They also received mixed signals about their spouse's intentions or tried not to send unintended messages in return. Sometimes the terms of the separation were more clearly defined, but many times they were not. There seemed to be no precedent for how to navigate what Amato (2010) calls this "social ambiguous status – not quite married, not quite divorced" (p. 661).

One of the key ideas in Boss and Greenberg's (1984) theory is that higher levels and prolonged periods of boundary ambiguity result in increased levels of stress. This was the case for most of the participants, as they talked about separation as an unsustainable status. Most indicated that a decision about whether to divorce or reconcile would need to be made at some point, as the ambiguity of their current state was too much to tolerate long-term. Though painful, many talked about divorcing as a more tolerable option because of the clarity that it would bring. While the outcomes of these participants' separations are not known, it may be that for some people, there comes an eventual tipping point at which divorce provides a release from distress associated with ambiguity, even when divorce is not the preferred outcome. Questions emerge about whether a process like this may account for some of the ambivalence reported among divorcing persons (Doherty, Willoughby, & Peterson, 2011). Future research could measure boundary ambiguity among separated persons and look for associations with levels of distress, and subsequently look at levels of divorce ambivalence among those who eventually decide to divorce.

### **Utility of Separation for Decision-Making**

Several popular sources suggest that couples use separation as a strategy for deciding whether to stay married or divorce (Hastings, n.d.; Lipe, 2010; Raffel, 1999). However, to date, no empirical research has been done on the utility of separation for this purpose. Based on these participants' experiences, separation does not usually provide such clarity. A few of the participants had arrived at decisions to divorce, and in these cases, the reasons for separating were more severe (e.g., spouse's substance abuse, untreated severe mental illness). Under such circumstances, separating allowed enough distance from the marriage to see the severity of the marital problems with new perspective. Those who separated as a result of less severe reasons, however, were less likely to report that separating had given them clarity about how to proceed with the marriage, and desires for reconciliation were often paired with uncertainty about how to achieve it. Some participants even reported that separating added to their confusion. While it would be unwise to conclude that separation *only* provides clarity about the future of a marriage under severe circumstances, these findings do raise questions about the utility of separation as a strategy for arriving at a decision about whether to divorce or stay married.

In talking about their experiences, several participants described their concerns that they were moving toward divorce. In this way, separation had created movement – or inertia – toward divorce. Another theoretical framework that guided the conceptualization of this study was Stanley and Markman's (1992) commitment model, which speaks to this idea of inertia. This theory examines marital outcomes based on whether progression

through relationship stages is a function of prosocial commitment to the relationship or constraint commitment, which involves staying because the constraints are too great to leave. The latter type is described as an “inertia effect,” which results in couples “sliding versus deciding” about relationship progression, as leaving the relationship becomes more difficult as a couple becomes increasingly interdependent (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006, pp. 503-504). One of the reasons this model was considered was because of the possibility that separation creates inertia toward divorce, namely because of the disentangling of a couple’s life and growing accustomed to life apart. In other words, the constraints to staying married might become fewer as spouses adjust to daily life without each other. Adjusting to life apart did emerge as a way inertia toward divorce occurred. Despite feelings of loneliness, most participants also experienced personal benefits to living apart from their spouse, which seemed to create some movement toward permanently dissolving the marriage. However, many also talked about the unlikelihood of reconciliation as a function of time or not knowing how else to solve the marital problems. And, as mentioned above, divorce may ultimately occur because the ambiguity of being separated becomes intolerable. Based on these participants’ experiences, it seems that separation may create inertia toward divorce as couples slide in that direction, but it is not only a function of the spouses becoming less interdependent.

Decisions to remain in the marriage, however, may sometimes be a function of constraint commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Most of the participants described having desire for reconciliation, but in their thoughts about how to end the separation, some of these participants also considered barriers to divorce that might lead them to stay

in the marriage. One of the most tangible barriers was limited access to financial resources, which seemed especially prevalent among the women in the study. The women more often stayed home with their kids or worked less than their spouse, and they considered how they might make ends meet if they were without their spouse's income. During the separation, some of these women continued receiving financial support from their spouses that they knew would go away if they ended up divorcing. One woman had even gained clarity about her own desire for divorce but felt she needed to delay the divorce itself because she relied on her husband's financial resources to care for her children. Others feared they would lose their kids because of the financial power their spouse would have in a custody battle. Interestingly, in 14 of the 20 cases, the woman in the relationship initiated the separation, regardless of the participant's sex. This is consistent with other research suggesting that women are also more likely to petition for divorce (Kincaid & Caldwell, 1995). However, their decision-making about whether to divorce or stay married after separating may feel especially complicated because of additional constraints related to finances.

### **Women's Experiences**

The primary aim of this study was to inquire about the lived experience of being separated from one's spouse when the separation begins without clarity about how it would end. A secondary aim was to gain more insight into the gendered nature of ambiguous marital separation. Unfortunately, the recruitment efforts did not result in an equal number of women and men in the sample, which prevented a more robust

comparison between women and men. However, there were some consistencies across the women's experiences that are worth noting.

The first was the tendency for women of school-aged children to assume primary responsibility for caring for the children during a separation. Three participants had adult children who did not need to stay with either parent. Of the remaining 17 cases, the women assumed primary responsibility for the children in all but 2, regardless of whether they or their spouse moved out. This is consistent with research on child arrangements post-divorce; most often, children of female-male parents remain with their mothers (Amato, 2014). Interestingly, this arrangement was often assumed; only a few participants described having explicit conversations about who would stay with the children, which may point to underlying assumptions about gendered roles and responsibilities in family life. These arrangements also have implications for one's adjustment to the separation experience.

The women in this study seemed to identify strongly with their identities as mothers, and most reported feeling appreciative that they were not apart from their kids on a daily basis. They felt a heightened sense of responsibility for ensuring their kids' well-being. However, this responsibility also created excessive burden in daily life that did not seem to be shared by the men. The women talked about feeling the daily struggle of functioning as single parents, which subsequently increased feelings of loneliness. Sometimes they internalized the difficulty they felt as failure when they perceived other women as having an easier time managing these responsibilities. Other times, they talked about the increased sense of isolation from social networks, as the daily responsibilities

of parenting alone consumed much of their time. Some even talked about acquiring newfound appreciation for what their spouse had contributed when they lived together, which led to thoughts about reconciliation. These dynamics sometimes led to questions about how their lives would look if they ended up divorcing, which felt especially complicated given their expectations that financial support to care for their children would likely decrease.

In addition to assuming primary responsibility for parenting, many women talked about their gendered identities and the fear they had about not meeting social expectations for what it means to “succeed” as a wife. Regardless of gender, most participants described keeping their separation experiences private because of fear of judgment or gossip. However, the women often talked about this fear of judgment as related to their identities as women and what being a woman means in their social contexts. Some talked of fears that others would see their struggling marriage as a reflection of their inability to keep their relationship healthy, or that others might judge them for initiating the separation because of expectations that they would stay in the marriage. This is consistent with research reporting that women tend to feel more responsible for maintaining the health of a relationship and more often feel guilty when they initiate divorce (Baum, 2007). A couple participants talked about sexual difficulties in their marriages and wondered if they had failed in that regard. Some women even intellectually rejected these kinds of narratives but had a hard time not *feeling* them because of the external pressures they felt. This may be due to the ways expectations for gendered roles are often socialized (Baum, 2007).

Finally, despite the burden of taking on the primary responsibility for parenting, many women came to realizations about themselves that they did not know prior to separating. Several described feeling surprised that they had capacity to live apart from their spouse. Their increased sense of strength and independence felt empowering, which seemed to be a benefit to the women in this study.

### **Clinical Implications**

Therapists are often uniquely positioned to help couples and individual persons who are making decisions about the future of their marriages. While the sample used for this study was not clinical, the themes that emerged from the participants' experiences may help guide clinical decision-making in such circumstances.

First, therapists may find it useful to maintain a position that decision-making about the future of a marriage may continue beyond a decision to separate. While therapist attitudes about separation have not been studied empirically, it may be that some therapists share the assumption about separation that many researchers hold: separation inevitably and linearly leads to divorce. If therapists hold this assumption, they may be more inclined to prematurely refer clients to services that would help them proceed with a divorce before clarity about that decision has emerged. Holding space for more uncertainty in their decision-making may help preserve the integrity of a couple's decision-making.

Second, some therapists may suggest a separation to persons who are trying to decide whether to divorce or stay married. While therapist-proposed separations were not the phenomenon of interest here, there may be some important learnings about what

might be helpful for couples in these situations. Aside from more severe marital problems, most participants described that separation had not helped them achieve more clarity about whether to divorce or stay married. Some reported that separating actually created more confusion, and they feared that they would end up divorcing despite desire for reconciliation. Often, the participants were left without answers about how to solve their marital problems once they separated, especially when they were not actively working on personal and relational change. More research is needed to determine the outcomes of these separations and when or if they may be indicated, so therapists should be cautious about encouraging a separation for the purpose of deciding whether to divorce or stay married. However, if a couple decides to separate, therapists may be able to help separated persons articulate clearer goals for the purpose of the separation, as well as actions that could be taken to achieve those goals, to help prevent inertia toward an outcome they may ultimately not prefer.

Additionally, the amount of ambiguity felt during separation was quite high. The participants often struggled to know how and how often to interact with their spouse in what felt like a social ambiguous state. Therapists may be in a position to help couples who plan to or have separated negotiate clearer boundaries that allow them to preserve the integrity of their decision-making. While ambiguity may likely remain in the presence of some clear boundaries, helping to reduce the amount of ambiguity may help result in less stress and more purposeful decision-making.

Finally, therapists may be able to help couples purposefully negotiate terms of the separation that might otherwise disproportionately affect one spouse. The women in this

study seemed especially burdened by childrearing responsibilities, and there may be way to help couples share this load in a more equitable way. Explicit discussions about expectations for parenting responsibilities may help couples make more intentional, purposeful decisions.

### **Methodological Implications**

While the aim of this study was not to examine the intricacies of qualitative research methods, an interesting methodological pattern emerged that warrants discussion. As described above, the participants were asked to select their preferred interview format when they consented to participating in the study. The decision to allow participants a choice between phone, video-conference, or in-person interviews was primarily driven by a desire for a geographically disparate sample and to remove logistical barriers that might otherwise prevent someone from participating. This was a departure from traditional phenomenological methods, which have historically privileged in-person interviewing. Interestingly, when given the choice, 18 of the 20 participants opted to complete the interview by phone. In fact, during the interviews, a few even commented on their appreciation for the anonymity that this format provided. Paired with inconclusive research findings on the effect of format on interview quality (e.g., Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2012; Rahman, 2015; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004; Vogl, 2013), this pattern suggests that qualitative researchers might benefit from revisiting long-held assumptions about the necessity of in-person interviewing. Potential research participants may sometimes prefer formats that provide more anonymity, perhaps especially when the

content of an interview is highly personal or potentially stigmatizing, and offering these formats could improve recruitment efforts for qualitative studies.

### **Future Research**

Research studies often generate new questions about a phenomenon, which can serve to guide future empirical inquiries and advance bodies of literature. Several ideas for advancing the literature on marital separation emerged as a result of this study.

First, gaining more awareness of the prevalence of ambiguous marital separations may be useful. Estimates of prevalence suggest that 6% (Vennum et al., 2014) to 18% (Kitson, 1985) of still-married couples in the United States have temporarily separated at some point in the marriage, but little is known about how many of these separations began without clarity about how they would end. The prevalence of ambiguous separations is not yet known, and future research on separation should ask about the separation intent. This might also be useful ask of divorcing or divorced persons, as understanding intent could help provide insight into the varying pathways couples take in arriving at decisions to divorce. Those who begin with an ambiguous marital separation might subsequently be asked how they arrived at a decision to divorce, which could shed light on thresholds for ambiguity, lack of clarity about how to solve the marital problems, or other tipping points that may lead to this decision. It may be that some couples actually “slide” into divorce without confidence that divorce is truly the best option (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006, p. 505), and inertia created by separation could help account for some of the ambivalence about divorce among those who choose it without feeling certain about their decision.

Future research should also employ longitudinal time points to better understand how ambiguous marital separation is experienced over time. This may also provide more insight into decision-making processes while a couple is separated. Quantitative studies could measure levels of boundary ambiguity felt with a spouse, experiences of psychological distress, ambivalence about divorce, hope for reconciliation, motivations for reconciliation, or sources of external pressure toward an outcome. Analysis of outcomes could be predicted by some of these seemingly key variables or the relationships between them. Ideally, more dyadic data could be collected as well. Separation is a couple-level transition, and understanding how what happens with one partner might affect the other, and subsequently the outcome of the separation, would add richness and depth to what is known about this experience.

Additionally, this research could be further expanded with more in-depth analysis of how separation is experienced in more diverse samples, considering gender, sexual orientation, racial or ethnic identities, and cultural influences. The findings of any study must be understood in relation to participant demographics and the contexts from which the participants come. The experience of separation might look different for those whose identities are not as closely aligned with those of the sample for this study.

Finally, there would be value in researching therapist attitudes toward ambiguous marital separations. Given the popular notion that separations are helpful for decision-making, gaining a sense for whether and how therapists might encourage or discourage this type of process may help provide further direction for how to help couples through this experience.

## Conclusion

The study participants' experiences of being separated from a spouse were full of hurt, hope, and confusion as they tried to find what seemed to be an ever-changing north. Themes emerged related to relational ambiguity, maintaining privacy about being separated, feelings of loneliness, benefits to living apart, the unsustainable nature of ongoing ambiguity, and not always knowing how to find their way out of such an ambiguous situation. Based on my clinical experiences, I entered this work with an assumption that separation primarily complicates decision-making about the future of a marriage. While this assumption has not drastically shifted on the other end, I leave this work with a far deeper appreciation and respect for the honest ways people struggle with important decisions about marriage and family life. I also leave with concern for the lack of direction the participants often felt, and the ways women felt especially burdened by some of the implications for their situation.

When people ask me what I learned from these interviews, I happily tell them about the themes that emerged. I am also eager to share what I found particularly profound or striking: the effects of separation are as minute as deciding whether to buy a coffee pot, separation might often provide more confusion about how to proceed with the marriage, many separated persons worry they are moving toward divorce despite a desire to prevent it, or people are wildly resilient in their ability to tolerate high amounts of ambiguity for an extended but time-limited period. Countless times throughout this process I have wondered whether I could be so resilient. These people taught me so much.

As someone who believes that researchers have a responsibility to the populations they research, I feel compelled to continue this line of inquiry to better know how those who are faced with complex decisions about their marriages might be helped. As we talked, many of the participants shared that talking about their experiences was helpful. For that, I am grateful. If the process of contributing to this research has already benefited them in some way, I consider this a valuable use of my time and energy. And yet, there is so much to do. This feels like a humble but quite exciting place to begin a line of meaningful work.

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## Appendix A: Consent Form

### **Introduction**

We are interested in knowing more people's experiences of marital separation. We are specifically interested in knowing more about the experience of being separated when the outcome of the separation is unclear because one or both spouses is deciding whether to divorce or stay married. This research is being conducted by Sarah A. Crabtree, Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities and Steven M. Harris, Ph.D., Professor in the Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

### **Procedures**

We invite you to participate in an interview about your experience of marital separation. Interviews can be conducted in person (for those who are in or around the Minneapolis-St. Paul area), via a video call, or telephone – whichever you prefer. The interview should take around 60-90 minutes, and it will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Please know that your participation is completely voluntary, which means that you do not have to participate if you don't want to. If you choose to participate, you have the right to only answer the questions you choose to answer, and you can discontinue the interview at any time. Your decision whether to participate in the interview will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota.

### **Risks and Benefits**

While no imminent risks are expected, there are some potential risks you should know about. First, the questions asked in this interview may touch on topics that are personal to you and connected to feelings you have about your marriage. You are welcome to decline any question or to discontinue participating at any time. Additionally, while the chances are very small of someone gaining access to a video or telephone call as it is happening, the security of any call cannot be guaranteed. Finally, while the researchers will ensure privacy in their environment by conducting video and telephone interviews in a private, closed-door room, they cannot prevent others in your location from overhearing the interview. You are encouraged to choose a time and location where you can talk freely about your experience.

There are no direct benefits to participating. However, you may find that answering our questions may help you become clearer about your own goals, thoughts, and feelings regarding your separation.

### **Compensation**

You will receive a \$25 Amazon.com gift card for your participation, which will be sent to the email address of your choice.

### **Confidentiality**

Your participation and responses will be kept confidential. Any information you give will

be stored on a secure server, and information that would identify you will be removed from the interview transcript. If any professional publications or presentations result from this research, your responses will be reported in a way that you will not be identifiable. Research records, including audio recordings, will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Study data will be encrypted according to current University policy for protection and confidentiality. Audio recordings will be kept for up to 2 years.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting this relationship.

### **Contacts and Questions**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Sarah A. Crabtree, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Minnesota, at [crabt037@umn.edu](mailto:crabt037@umn.edu) or (218) 205-6962. If you would like to speak with someone other than the Principal Investigator, you may also contact the University of Minnesota Research Subjects' Advocate line at (612) 624-1650.

Thank you.

### **Statement of Consent:**

- I have read the information above and **do** give consent to participate in this interview (form will continue to provide additional information).
- I have read the information above and **do not** give consent to participate in this interview (form will end).

## Appendix B: Demographics Form

**Demographic Information** (for data collection purposes only)

1. Age in years: (open text)

2. Sex:

- Female
- Male
- Other (please describe):
- Prefer not to say

3. Spouse's Sex:

- Female
- Male
- Other (please describe):
- Prefer not to say

4. Race (please select all that apply):

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other (please describe):
- Prefer not to say

5. Annual household income:

- \$19,999 or less
- \$20,000 – 39,999
- \$40,000 – 59,999
- \$60,000 – 79,999
- \$80,000 – 99,999
- \$100,000 or more

6. How many children are you raising with your spouse? (open text)

- *New Page* -

7. Which interview format do you prefer?

- In-person (for those who live in or around the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro)
- Video conference call
- Telephone call

8. Contact Information (to be used to coordinate interview)

- Name:
- Phone Number:
- Email:

## Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. **Grand Tour:** I am interested in learning more about what it is like to be separated from a spouse when the separation began without clarity about how it would end. Sometimes one, or maybe both, spouses decide they want to separate because they want to become clearer about whether to stay married or divorce. Some might call this “taking a break,” “getting some space,” or a “trial separation.” Can you tell me about *your* experience?
  - a. (If needed): Ask about who initiated, length of separation, living arrangements, original intent, legal or informal?
  - b. Can you tell me about what led up to the separation, or how it came about?
2. What has your relationship with your spouse been like while you have been separated? (listen for boundary ambiguity, points of conflict, different expectations)
3. How have you and your spouse negotiated specific terms of your separation (e.g., finances, time with kids, seeing other people, etc.)?
  - a. Have you had to clarify any expectations about your relationship with each other or with others? If so, what?
4. What has your relationship with friends and family been like while you have been separated?
5. Have you and your spouse tried to get back together or work on improving your relationship during this time? Or have you thought about it? If so, how did that look?
6. Has being separated helped you arrive at more clarity in deciding about the future of your marriage? Why or why not?
7. How did you think or feel about the idea of a separation before you and your spouse separated? How do you think or feel about the idea of a separation now?
  - a. (If different): Why do you think there is a difference?
8. What has most influenced how you think about being separated from your spouse? (e.g., friends, family, social influences, culture, religion)
9. How is your experience of being separated from your spouse related to your identity as a (man/woman)? Do you think your experience might be different if you were a (man/woman)? If so, how?
10. What has been most challenging about being separated? What has been the least challenging?

11. What has been most surprising about being separated? What did you not expect?  
Is there anything you have not experienced that you thought you would have?
12. Would you recommend a separation to a friend who is deciding about the future of their marriage? Why or why not?
13. What else should I know about your experience of being separated from your spouse?

## Appendix D: Sample of Coding

	B	C	D
66	I: Yeah. It sounds like, maybe right now the interactions that you have with him...you know, you said you kind of email about your daughter, more than anything really, but it's not like you're talking with each other. You're not maybe hanging out just the two of you,		
67	P: Yeah, we haven't so far. We, we did go Christmas shopping with her, but yeah.It's hard to see that the whole interactions we do have is because of her. I don't know if she wasn't there if we would be...we would even be speaking or anything.	Relationship: not hanging out, did go Christmas shopping with daughter, interactions primarily revolve around daughter	Boundary ambiguity? Factor: kids
68	I: Yeah, do...		
69	P: I would like to, but I'm at this point, like, I don't know to how reach out, you know? I don't know how to...I feel weird. It's like, he's pushing me back and I don't want to reach out, you know? It's hard for me to reach back out to him. Because after trying for a long	Relationship: doesn't know how to reach out to him anymore, feels weird (boundary ambiguity)	Boundary ambiguity
70	I: Yeah, in the sense that you've tried so many things, but also now the situation is so		
71	P: Yeah.	Relationship: doesn't know how to reach out to him anymore,	
72	I: How do we get out of this now that we're here, right?		
73	P: Exactly. I was just thinking that I wish it would be over, like...that it would go back to the way that it was. And I think that's why the problems...I mean, we're both on our own and growing apart and everything, but I just want things to go back to the way they used	Separation unsustainable Wants to go back to how things were	Inertia Separation unsustainable
74	I: Yeah, yeah. When things...when you were more affectionate? Or before the separation, even though you weren't affectionate?		
75	P: Yes. Well, no...when we were actually interested and we cared for each other.	Misses when they were in love	
76	I: Yeah, yeah...I'm curious to know, too, during this time have you had different expectations at all for how this would go? You know, so some couples will say that, "I still expect that we'll have family dinner together a couple nights a week," or maybe different		
77	P: Yeah, I actually will...now, for me, like I just thought this was going to be the best thing for...I think it was going to be what we needed. And you know, I figured I'd get to go out and watch movies, or something. Have my mom babysit, or his parents. And, you know...go...I just thought it would make our love grow back. I thought...I was just looking at it in an instant, that we would be...that being separated we would miss each other, and we would want to come back to each other. But it's not been like that. It...I don't know, it	Expectations for separation: time together, would get a babysitter, invest in their love, would miss each other and want to be together Effects: growing even further	Inertia (growing apart) Boundary ambiguity (not sure how to relate now)
78	I: Yeah. What's it been like for you to realize that? That it's not turning out the way you		
79	P: Well, for me, I've kind of been...I've just kind of been dodging it. I haven't really tried to accept it yet. I don't think it's really hit me yet. I guess I'm kind of like him, too, in a way. That I've been trying to ignore it, and just keep hoping. I mean, I still have hope.	Outcome: still hopes, but in denial/avoidance about growing apart, unmet expectations	Inertia (unwanted) Unmet expectations
80	I: You do still have hope?		
81	P: Yes. I still have hope.	Outcome: still hopes for	Hopes for reconciliation
	◀ ▶ 9_F_111517 10_M_111517 11_M_111517 12_F_111717 13_F_112017 14_F_112017 +		