Individual and community practices for constructing communicative resilience: exploring the communicative processes of coping with parental alienation

Kristina M. Scharp a, Kyle F. Kubler a and Tiffany R. Wang b

a Department of Communication, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA; b Department of Communication, University of Montevallo, Montevallo, AL, USA

ABSTRACT

Parental alienation occurs after parents divorce and intentionally or even unintentionally persuade their children to distance themselves from or reject the other parent. Framed by the communication theory of resilience, this study explores the communicative practices that enable and constrain the targeted alienated parents’ ability to create normalcy at the individual and online community levels. We also examine the relationships between individual-level and online community-level resilience. Findings from 40 narrative interviews reveal communicative practices/processes that enable and constrain alienated parents at both the individual and online support group levels. Findings also suggest that there is a robust relationship between resilience practices at the individual and community levels. Theoretical implications and practical applications are discussed.

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Regardless of their form, families are the basic social foundation in every society and considered to be one of the most enduring relationships people will have. To some extent, every culture has a system by which parents and/or adults raise and socialize their children (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). What happens when this ubiquitous institution fails to be resilient? Researchers are beginning to question assumptions about the permanence and assumed benefit of all parent–child relationships, especially in the context of estrangement (see Scharp, 2019; Scharp & Thomas, 2016). Less is known about parental alienation which occurs after parents divorce and intentionally or even unintentionally persuade their children to distance themselves from or reject the other parent (Scharp, 2016a).

This oversight is problematic considering 13.4% of parents identified as being alienated by at least one or more child in a recent representative polling (Harman, Leder-Elder, & Biringen, 2016). These parents and their children not only have to negotiate a divorce, but also lengthy custody hearings, legal battles, and sometimes even court-appointed reunification interventions pertaining to the alienation (Reay, 2015; Sauber, 2013; Warshak, 2010). Alienated parents, in particular, must come to grips with the reality that not only is their marriage over, but their children are exhibiting at least one of these five behaviors: (a) feelings of hatred for the alienated parent, (b) refusing to visit the alienated
parent, (c) holding irrational beliefs about the alienated parent, (d) experiencing no guilt or remorse, and (e) being unwilling to forgive the alienated parent for past indiscretions (Darnall, 1998). Taken together, parental alienation is an extreme family disruption that upends fundamental assumptions about what a family is, who is in or out, and what to do when they experience this type of family disruption.

Individuals who experience major disruptions or trigger events react in different ways. Although some people can get stuck in a contaminated narrative (McAdams, 2006), others might engage in resilience processes at a variety of levels (e.g. individual, family, etc.). Buzzanell (2010) recently shifted the conceptualization of resilience from being an enduring trait to argue that human resilience is ‘constituted in and through communicative processes that enhance people’s abilities to create new normalcies’ (p. 9). In other words, when negative events occur, resilient individuals (Afifi, 2018) and communities (Houston, 2018) engage in communication practices with others that help them move forward. Yet, not everyone has access to the same resources during this renovation; both embedded ideologies and material resources enhance some people and groups’ abilities to be more resilient (Buzzanell, 2018). For example, family distancing research suggests that ideologies about the enduring bonds of the parent–child relationship can trap people in toxic family relationships (Scharp & Thomas, 2016, 2018). Material resources also enable and constrain people’s ability to successfully accomplish and maintain distance (Scharp, 2019; Scharp, Thomas, & Paxman, 2015). In this regard, the communication theory of resilience (CTR; Buzzanell, 2018) serves as an interpretive heuristic to describe resilience processes in a way that also acknowledges the role of power, privilege, and materiality as it intersects with interaction.

With this theoretical heuristic as our guide, we set out to illuminate the communicative practices/processes that enable and constrain alienated parents at both the individual and online support group levels as well as the relationship between those levels. In doing so, we make three broad contributions. First, we respond to the calls of Buzzanell (2018) and Houston (2018) who ask that communication scholars pursuing resilience research attend to (a) resilience situated in communication as opposed to conceptualized as a trait, (b) factors that both afford and constrain resilience processes, (c) resilience at multiple levels, and (d) the interaction between and within those levels. Second, we illuminate the experience of an understudied and marginalized population (i.e. alienated parents). In doing so, we problematize the assumption that the family institution (or any institution) is resilient in its own right. Finally, we call attention to the resilient ways people respond to a series of chronic interpersonal disruptions instead of a one-time event (see Pfefferbaum, Pfefferbaum, Nitiéma, Houston, & Van Horn, 2015) or a situational disruption (see Buzzanell & Turner, 2003). Indeed, parental alienation is a unique context because the alienated parent must repeatedly interact with the very people who catalyzed their distress. Toward realizing these goals, we begin by discussing parental alienation before turning to an explication of the CTR.

**Literature review**

*Family distancing: the case of parental alienation*

Although the majority of communication research on family distancing has been in the contexts of parent–child estrangement and family member marginalization (Scharp &
Dorrance Hall, 2019), parental alienation has begun to gain more attention despite the critiques of and lack of empirical evidence (Faller, 1998) based on its original conceptualization in the 1980s (see Gardner, 1982). This is important considering in a random sampling of 610 adults, 13.4% of parents identified as being alienated from at least one child regardless of socioeconomic or demographic factors (Harman et al., 2016). Researchers are now concluding that parental alienation is much more severe than it once was imagined which has prompted clinicians, researchers, and courts to question whether it is some sort of child abuse, collective abuse, and/or family violence (see Kruk, 2018). Baker and Fine (2014) call alienation for the targeted parent enduring anguish rife with uncertainty. Alienated parents, in particular, feel their well-being is threatened by their exposure to alienation tactics (Balmer, Matthewson, & Haines, 2018). This is exacerbated by reports that mental health services are inadequate in this context (Baker & Fine, 2014).

Despite the majority of research that characterizes the child perspective (see Baker & Eichler, 2016), scholars are just beginning to attend to what Poustie, Matthewson, and Balmer (2018) call the ‘forgotten parent’ (p. 3298). They found that these alienated or target parents discuss six common experiences: (a) distancing behaviors or tactics, (b) emotional and physical distance, (c) emotional and financial costs related to the alienation (e.g. court costs), (d) poor mental health and concern for their children’s psychological well-being, (e) considering the alienation a form of family violence, and (f) coping. Specifically, they noted that alienated parents engaged in a variety of coping activities such as seeking therapy, information seeking, and trying to be hopeful. They conclude that many target parents are attempting to be resilient which drove their recommendation that facilitating increased resilience should be an integral part of future family therapy and interventions. Because of the importance of resilience for alienated parents, we now turn to a theoretical resilience heuristic.

**Communication theory of resilience**

Although resilience research is robust, Afifi (2018) argues the concept remains elusive. Indeed, many researchers position resilience as a personal trait, even though communication scholars are advancing new theoretical heuristics that call this conceptualization into question (see Buzzanell, 2018). Specifically, Buzzanell argues that the CTR differs from other orientations to resilience in four essential ways; it challenges existing definitions by:

(a) focusing on ongoing communicative processes of adaptation and transformation, reactivity and proactivity, stability and change, disruption and reintegration, destabilization and restabilization; (b) situating resilience in interaction and relationships, integrating scholarship from interpersonal, family, organizational, health, and mediated communication contexts; (c) refocusing inability to ‘bounce back’ from individual deficit approaches to politicized contexts in which material resources, policies, and ideological structures about the nature and characteristics of families are socially constructed and enacted; (d) recognizing that there are both benefits and costs for the particular ways in which resilience is constituted (p. 99).

As Buzzanell (2010) argues, resilience is a relational process by which people not only construct but also co-construct new stories, organizing logics, and framings that allow them to reintegrate new realities and constitute new normalcies into their everyday lives. Buzzanell (2018) contends that several processes can promote communicative
resilience: ‘(a) crafting normalcy, (b) foregrounding productive action while backgrounding negative feelings, (c) affirming identity anchors, (d) maintaining and using communication networks, and (e) putting alternative logics to work’ (p. 100). Specifically, crafting normalcy is a process that emphasizes language, routines, rituals, interactions, and storytelling as communicative practices that integrate loss to construct a new normal. This process acknowledges the dialectical tension between hope and reality as people speak normalcy into existence (Buzzanell, 2010). Second, foregrounding productive action and backgrounding negative feelings captures the decisions people make to address their problems and the supportive communication they might receive from others (Buzzanell, 2018). (Re)affirming identity anchors is the third process by which people perform the salient parts of who they are as a reminder of what is meaningful to them. Fourth, people might maintain and use their communication networks by solidifying close ties and expanding their networks either face-to-face or through social media. Finally, putting alternative logics to work is a process by which people might engage in transformative action when old ways of behaving fail to make sense or are no longer an option. It is ultimately a process that emphasizes change and adaption. Taken together, the CTR is a heuristic frame that acknowledges that these processes overlap and are ‘socially constructed in holistic and intertwined systems’ (Buzzanell, 2018, p. 103). We now discuss the nuances of parental alienation that make it a fruitful site to explore resilience.

**Parental alienation and resilience at the individual-level**

As argued, parent alienation is a traumatic experience with a variety of adverse psychological outcomes (see Kruk, 2018). This lengthy process is exacerbated by the fact that alienated parents regularly have to interact with both their ex-spouse and child either in court or by court appointment (Reay, 2015; Warshak, 2010). Put simply, alienated parents do not have to respond to one major event, but rather a series of interpersonal events that might change from day to day depending on a particular custody arrangement. Uncertainty surrounding the alienation is likely also worsened by the alienated parents’ inability to determine what is being said about them, how to reconnect with their children, or how to stop the rejection from growing. Based on this upheaval to the targeted parents’ lives, it stands to reason that they could be engaging in a variety of individual-level resilience processes. Yet, cultural expectations surrounding the meaning of the parent–child relationship could also serve as a barrier in the resilience process (see Scharp & Thomas, 2016, 2018). Based on the parent–child estrangement literature (the closest conceptually to parental alienation), alienated parents could be caught with a desire to regain normalcy in a culture that suggests their experience is anything but normal. Given the complexity of the parental alienation process, we pose our first question:

**RQ1**: What are the communicative practices/processes that (a) enhance and (b) constrain alienated parents’ ability to create new normalcies at the individual-level?

**Parental alienation and resilience at the community-level**

Parental alienation is a unique process in that alienated parents might not have as much ability to construct and benefit from family-level resilience given their situation. Indeed,
alienated parents by definition lack support from both their former spouse and children. They cannot pool their resources together, share ownership of, and communally cope with their difficult circumstances pertaining to the alienation (see Afifi, Hutchinson, & Krouse, 2006). Furthermore, alienated parents, similar to estranged parents, likely have to contend with the stigma and confusion surrounding the loss of a relationship people assume has no possibility of ending (Scharp & Thomas, 2018). Indeed, research suggests that parents (Aglias, 2011), children (Scharp, 2016b), and immediate family members in the estrangement process (Scharp, 2020) report that other family members are not only unhelpful but actually make it harder to cope with the distance.

When people lack familial support, it is possible that they turn to a larger community to respond to their difficulties. Unlike situations such as natural disasters where people who share a disruptive experience are proximal, alienated parents might turn to an online community. Community-level resilience provides a complex picture of a collective response (Houston, 2018). As Houston argues, ‘community resilience is specifically a collective [emphasis in the original] activity focused on adaptation at the community level’ (p. 19). Acosta, Chandra, and Madrigano (2017) add that community resilience aligns with systems thinking in that community resilience is not merely the sum of its resilient (or non-resilient) members but rather is dependent upon the interplay within and between different resilience levels. As such, community-level resilience is an adaptive process often grounded in information and communication, connection and caring, as well as community competence and capital (see Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, & Pfefferbaum, 2008; Pfefferbaum et al., 2015).

Despite what we know about community resilience, Houston (2018) makes three important calls for action. First, he laments that scholars know little about what people within communities are talking about and subsequently calls for research that illuminates the interconnections between individual-level and community-level resilience. Second, he asks that scholars attend to the role of social media in community resilience talk. Although referencing disaster communication specifically, Tandoc and Takahashi (2017) argue that social media allows people to collectively share their difficulties and emotions following a major life disruption. Based on this logic, we contend that online communities might be particularly germane to alienated parents who lack more robust family ties. Finally, Houston as well as Acosta et al. (2017) implore researchers to not only attend to the processes that facilitate resilience but also to the structural and material inequities that impede resilience. Consequently, we seek to answer Houston’s three calls by posing our last two research questions:

**RQ2:** What are the communicative practices/processes that (a) enhance and (b) constrain alienated parents’ ability to create new normalcies at the online community-level?

**RQ3:** What is the relationship between individual-level and online community-level resilience?

**Method**

According to Buzzanell (2018), the CTR is an interpretive theory that acknowledges the structures and consequences that can constrain agency in complex ways. In some ways, her resilience theorizing echoes the narrative literatures that suggest that when people
are faced with adversity throughout the life course, some are able to redemptively re-story their lives, whereas others become stuck in contaminated stories (McAdams, 2006). Indeed, Buzzanell (2010) notes the importance of (co-)constructing stories in resilience processes. Houston and Buzzanell (2018) claim, ‘Studying narratives of resilience within and among levels could also foster both a general understanding of resilience as well as components that can foster resilience’ (p. 27). This emphasis on social construction and narrative is fortuitous, especially considering researchers argue that ‘the depth of the parental alienation experience can be captured only by qualitative research’ (Kruk, 2018, p. 142). Consequently, we now discuss our interpretive analysis of narrative interviews and the ways in which we attended to the discursive and material constraints experienced by our sample of alienated parents.

**Data collection**

With Institutional Review Board approval and as part of a larger project on family distancing, we recruited individuals who were (a) 18 years of age or older, (b) who felt comfortable reading and speaking English, (c) perceived that they were estranged or alienated by a parent, child, and/or sibling, and (d) had experienced that distance at least, in part, through social media. Of the 47 participants who qualified and participated in our present study, 40 identified as parents alienated by their children and were included in this analysis. To garner these responses, we engaged in convenience and snowball sampling. First, we responded to unsolicited requests to participate in the first author’s research, which alienated parents had heard about in popular press outlets. Second, we shared our research announcement through listservs and on social media. Finally, we relied on snowball sampling, which yielded the majority of our participants.

Given the heuristic value of narratives identified by the CTR and after a brief demographic survey, we conducted narrative interviews (Langellier, 1989). Narrative interviews are the least structured type of interview and let participants tell their story their way. We asked participants to ‘tell me the story of how a family member distanced him/her/themselves from you, at least in part via social media.’ In addition, we followed with a series of semi-structured questions and probes. For example, we asked, ‘Was there anything you did in response to what was happening’ and ‘Was there anything/anyone that made your experience more difficult?’ The majority of interviews were conducted over the phone although two interviews were conducted in person.

On average, narrative interviews lasted 75 min (SD = 30) which ranged from 35 to 160 min. Each interview was recorded and transcribed by the authors and a team of research assistants who replaced names with pseudonyms. Transcriptions totaled 793 pages of single-spaced text. All participants identified as being a member of at least one online community which were largely comprised of Facebook groups for alienated parents.

**Participant demographics**

Parents were a mean age of 51.5 (SD = 8.1) and reported being alienated for an average of six years. Twenty-four identified as women and 16 men. The majority (n = 38) were White. Despite not intending to collect an international sample, participants came from
six countries; 32 from the US, 4 from Canada, as well as 1 person each from Denmark, South Africa, Mexico, and New Zealand. We recognize our (inter)national sample comes with affordances and limitations. Specifically, our call illustrates that parental alienation is a global problem. The presence of international voices also alludes to broader patterns of communicative resilience and the ways social media can create an opportunity for community-level resilience that could not exist without it. We also recognize that people embedded in different cultures might be enabled or constrained in idiosyncratic ways. We determined by closely analyzing the data, however, that there were no idiosyncratic themes based on country of origin.

**Data analysis and verification**

To answer our first two research questions, we engaged in Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step thematic analysis procedure checked against Owen’s (1984) standards for thematic analysis. Our six-step process included (a) reading and re-reading the data, (b) creating coding subcategories and/or coding categories, (c) organizing those codes into themes, (d) reviewing those themes, (e) labeling the themes, and (f) selecting evocative exemplars (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We also familiarized ourselves with the data through the process of transcription. Because thematic analysis is an iterative process, we organized themes after pertinent features of the data cohered in systematic ways. We also held our themes to the standards of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984). Recurrence pertains to how often participants spoke to a theme; repetition pertains to the extent to which participants used the same phrasing; the standard for forcefulness was met when participants discussed a theme in particularly effusive ways or with emphasis on particular words and/or phrases. For RQ1 and RQ2, we engaged in the thematic analysis and then applied the CTR as a heuristic as a second step. Thus, communicative resilience practices independently emerged and were then organized and labeled with the CTR in mind. For RQ3, we engaged in an additional step whereby we examined the relationship between themes. To do so, we looked at the themes within each narrative interview, documenting co-presence (i.e. which themes regularly appeared together) and participant perceptions of cause–effect (whether participants discussed connections between the themes).

To verify our analysis, we engaged in the five verification processes: (a) peer debriefing, (b) data conferencing, (c) referential adequacy, (d) audit trail, and (e) exemplar identification. Specifically, the first and second authors independently reviewed the data and then met to discuss their initial findings, argue through differences, and come to a consensus (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Per Braithwaite, Allen, and Moore’s (2017) data conferencing technique, we then gathered a group of researchers across specializations and traditions to meet with the entire research team. The first author acted as the facilitator in this data conferencing process which occurred partially face-to-face and partially mediated. The group of researchers confirmed that the themes were clear and that the selected exemplars reflected each theme. Third, we engaged in referential adequacy after we hit saturation at interview #15 (see Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This means that we coded the first half of the data independently from the second half and compared. No new themes emerged in the second half of the data. Throughout our entire process, the whole team kept a detailed record of our decisions and conclusions (i.e. the audit trail) which facilitated the selection of evocative exemplars (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Findings

**RQ1: individual-level communicative practices and processes**

At the individual-level, alienated parents engaged in four communicative practices/processes to create new normalcies: (a) crafting normalcy, (b) foregrounding productive action while backgrounding negative feelings, (c) maintaining and using communication networks, and (d) putting alternative logics to work. Although we retained Buzzanell’s (2018) original language for these practices, we detail exactly what these looked like for alienated parents below. We then detail illustrative examples of the four emergent types of resilience constraints: (a) ideological power constraints, (b) institutionalized power constraints, (c) interactional constraints, and (d) psycho-social constraints that emerged in response to our second research question.

**Crafting normalcy.** To craft normalcy, alienated parents adopted new behaviors, initiated new relationships, and developed new routines that helped them stabilize their life and provide them with a sense of control. Beatrice explained:

I write them letters every day, and I put it in a binder, and I save it for them, and I’ll give it to them one day so they’ll know I always thought about them … Probably about once a month, I make up an excuse to drive to their house and drop something off for them. Whether it’s you know, brownies or a Valentine’s Day gift, or a Christmas card or gift. (Interview #25)

For Beatrice, writing letters and making crafts helps her stay connected to her daughter even if she does not always get a direct interaction. Other alienated parents picked up new hobbies and some even started doing things their children liked as a way to maintain closeness (e.g. Interview #2). Parents reported that filling their time and creating a routine helped them cope with the alienation.

**Foregrounding productive action while backgrounding negative feelings.** Although alienated parents discussed experiencing many negative emotions, many were able to push their negative emotions to the background by engaging in productive actions that would change their situation (i.e. foregrounding-backgrounding). Mark shared:

The best chance that I have of combating what they’re getting from their mother is to be the healthiest individual that I can be and to model for them a better way … and it’s not perfect, but … I’m very intentional about trying to try and make time with my second daughter to make sure that it is positive and uplifting. (Interview #36)

Although Mark initially expressed despair about his situation, he was able to lessen his negative emotions and focus on modeling more positive behaviors for his children. For other alienated parents, the action took different forms such as developing their own support group (e.g. Interview #8).

**Maintaining and using communication networks.** Relying on important others and even seeking out new relationships to provide support was an essential component of leveraging communication networks. Many alienated parents recalled how their friends were supportive. Kelly explained, ‘Yeah, I have friends from my work to help me through’ (Interview #15). Other alienated parents sought out a professional counselor (e.g. Interview 1, 7, 8, 13, etc.) or new romantic partners. Harry shared:

I started dating again and I got lucky; I’m dating that nurse and she’s also a very spiritual leader in her church also. I’ve been very active in the church. And so I reach out to
pastors asking for special prayers for my kids as well as myself and I do pray on a regular basis with the person I’m dating. (Interview #32)

Thus, for many alienated parents, creating new and maintaining former relationships was pivotal in the resilience process.

**Putting alternative logics to work.** Finally, and perhaps the most robust theme was putting alternative logics to work. This theme took on two different forms. First, traditional beliefs about the permanence of family originally drove alienated parents to engage all of their time and resources to addressing the alienation. When they could no longer enact this strategy, they shifted to trying to preserve themselves and/or what was left of their relationship with their children. Thus, the logic shifted from reaction to self-preservation. Alice explained:

There were things like that where it’s sort of self-preservation, right? I don’t want to blame them, but at the same time until they’re ready, I’ve come to a point where I have to stop torturing myself. And when you send a card - picking out a card is very difficult, right? So, you pick out a card, try to say everything you want to say, sending messages to them, and then you wait, you know? … You’re hoping to hear something. And it’s come to a point where I can’t keep sending these messages and hoping that - I don’t know, something will change. (Interview #1)

This example is illustrative of the ways alienated parents came to the recognition that they could not continue expending all of their energy and resources into battling the alienation. At a certain point, multiple parents came to the conclusion that they needed boundaries so that they could survive and not worsen their relationship. Another complex example emerged when alienated parents recognized their material constraints and identified the ideological barriers that constrained their personal agency. Although this might not appear productive on its face, alienated parents coped with this in a resilient way. By moving away from the desire to or belief that they, personally, could control their situation, some alienated parents were able to relinquish their ‘responsibility’ to more amorphous powers such as time, hope, and/or God. For example, Victoria shared that she did not feel the need to take action against her ex-husband who had alienated her son from her even though, ‘He cut off the bank accounts while I was trying to live off of $900 a month’ (Interview #22). She told him:

‘You need to apologize to your son for alienating him.’ And I told him that God would make him pay … I said, ‘You are going to have a price to pay when you face God someday for what you did. It’s bad enough what you did to me, but you did it to your own kid.’ (Interview #22)

Thus, Victoria realized that she could not overcome her material constraints and relied on God to serve justice. Thus, recognition of these barriers did not serve as an excuse to give up; rather, recognition of these barriers helped alienated parents let go of not being able to personally overcome their situation. Similar to the patterns in McAdams’ (2006) research, God arguably served as a path to overcoming difficulty.

**Ideological power constraints.** As alluded to above, alienated parents were relatively aware of the different types of power (e.g. ideological, institutionalized, interaction, and psychosocial) that constrained their ability to craft a new normal. First, ideologically, alienated parents had to cope with the violation of two cultural expectations: (a) only bad parents have their children taken away from them (i.e. intensive parenting) and (b) the conflation of biology and permanence (i.e. family relationships have no ability to end). Bella explained:
And a lot of people, you know when you’re talking to somebody and you tell them something they kind of look at you funny? You feel it. I moved out here to this really small town and the school’s the biggest employer and how does that look? That school bus driver lost custody of her kid; doesn’t look very good right? (Interview #2)

From Bella’s perspective, she did not necessarily even have to hear negative evaluation from someone in person. The cultural ideologies surrounding parents and families generated anticipatory judgement.

**Institutionalized power constraints.** Second, the law and lack of material resources served as institutionalized power constraints to individuals trying to take action. Specifically, alienated parents often discussed a corrupt court system, whereby local courts and representatives of the court (lawyers, judges, and guardians ad litem) failed them as parents. Navigating a complicated legal system also served as a constraint. In other instances, financial constraints, lack of child care, or unemployment created material barriers. Zoe remembered:

But like I said, at the time I just felt outnumbered and out; he has way more money than me. … I just wasted so much money for an attorney. It was a major-major setback in my life. I have no savings now; I have to start all over. (Interview #24)

For many alienated parents, problems with the courts and lack of material resources were an integrated problem. Parents were trying to fight complex legal battles without many resources and not a lot of information. Perceived corruption and court interference were rampant in the data corpus (e.g. Interviews #2, #4, #7, #8, #13 #17, #21, #28, #32, #34, #40, etc.)

**Interactional constraints.** Other times, the people closest to the alienated parents (e.g. other family members and friends) created the largest hurdles when they took sides, interfered in legal battles, or blamed them for their situation (i.e. interactional barriers). Kelly talked about being betrayed:

I told my middle sister that I was being abused … she said, we, I will always support you Kelly, I will always support you in whatever you want to do. But that, that was a lie … and then my oldest sister found all the emails with my son … I had divulged everything to her about the problems that I had with my ex-husband and she was the one who completely betrayed me. (Interview #15)

This example illustrates the toll many alienated parents experienced when an immediate family member took the side of the ex-spouse. Kelly, for example, not only had to cope with the loss of her child but also with the perceived betrayal by her sister. Ultimately, this example alludes to the larger issue that when the disruption is relational, especially in a family system, there are other ongoing considerations that can interfere with the resilience process. This finding also potentially illustrates why so many alienated parents felt so alone.

**Psycho-social constraints.** Finally, individual mental health issues, both pre-existing and those brought on by the alienation, created physical/psychological limitations for resilient responding. Evette shared:

I started feeling a little healthier; then all of a sudden you wake up and it’s like, ‘Oh shit, now I don’t have my kids and I’m alone and I have nothing.’ And so that led to a very intense period of depression, which I think also contributed, you know, to, maybe them [her children] being hesitant. ‘Is she going to cry all the time? What are we going to see?’ But it was, it was horrible every day. (Interview #29)
In this example, Evette brought up a common issue throughout that data corpus; par-
ental alienation is an ongoing process and changing parts (e.g. a bad mental health day) 
might continuously impact the severity or duration of the alienation. Thus, this particular 
constraint helps elucidate the way that the alienation might exacerbate a resilience con-
straint, which further exacerbates the alienation.

RQ2: online community-level communicative practices and processes

At the online community-level, alienated parents engaged in three communicative prac-
tices/processes to create new normalcies: (a) sharing in the experience, (b) sense-
making collectively, and (c) communicating to provide support. We also detail two inter-
actional constraints that emerged in online communities: (a) sharing negative emotions 
and (b) communicating in unsupportive ways.

Sharing in the experience. First, alienated parents found strength in sharing in the alien-
ation experience in two different ways (i.e. subthemes). Specifically, they discussed the 
importance of knowing that they were not the only people who had experienced alien-
ation. Victoria shared, ‘When I tell my story I get someone giving me some sympathy, 
ah, it just feels so good and I just know that somebody understands what I’ve been 
through, and that I’m not crazy and that this really did happen’ (Interview #22). Thus, 
for the majority of the alienated parents, being in a group was a relief that they were 
not alone and echoes existing literature that illustrates how online groups work in this 
way (see Thomas, Scharp, & Paxman, 2014). They then moved on to recognizing that 
many people were trying to cope with being alienated from a child. Danielle explained, 
‘I thought, for a long time that this was something that primarily happened to dads, 
you know? Um, being kept from their kids and whatnot, and you know, come to find 
out that it does happen to women’ (Interview #4). Thus, because alienated parents only 
had their own experience to reference, joining an online community helped them perspec-
tive-take and realize that it was not an individual characteristic (e.g. gender and ethnicity) 
that was the target of this experience. Rather, hearing from all different people helped them 
expand their own perceptions about alienation, the court system, and what it means to be a 
family.

Sense-making collectively. Second, when individuals did not understand what was going 
on or what they could or should do, social support groups served as a way for people to 
make sense of their particular experience together. Delroy explained:

But it made me feel like part of a community that had a common problem and we were all 
there helping each other… while everyone’s circumstances are different, we’re all dealing 
with the same you know underlying theme which is a parent despises us more than they 
love the kids. (Interview #13)

This example illustrates the common sentiment that their online community helped the 
larger group decipher patterns among their experiences. These patterns were helpful in the 
sense-making process.

Communicating to provide support. Finally, providing and receiving support from 
people ‘who get it’ was important for alienated parents in the resilience process. This 
emerged in two types of social support: (a) emotional support and (b) informational 
support (e.g. Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). Specifically, alienated parents discussed feeling
comforted when their experiences were validated and their emotions were acknowledged. When alienated parents came up against obstacles that they could not tackle on their own, they also turned to their online community for advice. Here, parents discussed ‘learning a lot’ (Interview #7). Alternatively, they also provided advice when they engaged in behaviors that yielded successful results. As it happens, receiving support was not the only benefit from being in the community. Alienated parents also felt good when they were able to share how they successfully overcame obstacles with others so that they might also overcome similar obstacles (e.g. Interview #35).

*Sharing negative emotions.* Unlike individuals who had a variety of constraints, online community members typically only experienced interactional constraints. Sometimes referred to as negative emotion contagion, alienated parents discussed perceiving that other people in the group were too angry or sad, which then subsequently influenced their emotions in a negative way. For example, Bella explained,

> And it’s been so hard and so social media is my only way to be able to reach out to somebody and there’s no one there because everybody is so angry. And I can’t talk to an angry person because they’re not where I’m at and talking to an angry person just makes me angry. (Interview #2)

Indeed, this was the largest issue that alienated parents identified as a constraint of being in groups with other alienated parents. Less frequently, alienated parents discussed two unsupportive interactions they had online. The first pertained to receiving what they considered to be bad, unhelpful, and/or unwanted advice. Benjamin explained:

> I don’t think waiting in limbo is a comfortable place for a lot of people. So, when they enter this conversation they’re kind of aware of what’s going on; it’s very painful and hurtful and they want to fix it. You know they want the pain to go away and you know unfortunately, in the court process, there’s not always a quick way to fix it. (Interview #9)

This example is a particularly good illustration that people made meaning of advice in different ways. What some people perceived to be helpful information, others perceived to be unsupportive. Thus, it is important to recognize that it is possible that the content of the message itself is not inherently facilitating the resilience process. Rather, and in concert with existing social support research (see MacGeorge, Feng, & Burleson, 2011), the perception of the support matters, not inherently that it is being given or the content of the supportive interaction.

*Communicating in unsupportive ways.* The second unsupportive interaction pertained to accounts of being personally criticized or being personally attacked (e.g. Interview #26) and being attacked by internet trolls (e.g. Interview #8). Although not very common, it is important to recognize that not all online interactions facilitated alienated parents’ communicative resilience.

**RQ3: relationship between individual-level and online community-level resilience**

Our data analysis also revealed patterns between individual and online community constraints and resilience practices. After transcribing, reading, and re-reading the transcripts two reciprocal relationships emerged; to address individual-level constraints, people turned to community resilience practices/processes and to address community-level
constraints, alienated parents relied on individual-level resilience practices/processes. This reciprocal relationship illustrates the importance of looking at resilience at multiple levels.

**Individual constraints – online community resilience.** Individual-level resilience processes/practices did not seem to mitigate individual-level constraints but online community-level practices appeared to be more effective in three instances. First, ideological and interactional constraints at the individual-level were often addressed and/or abated when people turned to their online communities to share in the experience and engage in collective sense-making. Ursula explained,

> Thankfully I have other people that are going through it, and that’s really helpful, and, if social media, if we didn’t have that I would be like … I would be a mess on the floor worrying about what people think of me. (Interview #21)

In this example, the social judgement is an example of the ideological and interactional pressures Ursula might worry about if she did not have an online community of ‘other people that are going through it.’ Put simply, the presence of others helped Ursula combat potential negative social evaluation. Second, alienated parents were able to address some of their institutionalized power constraints by getting advice from their online communities. Ken shared:

> When you get these guys, they were just desperate. They don’t know what to do - they don’t know how to navigate the family court system. I represented myself for a couple of years so I know the family law pretty well, so we could give these guys advice from this standpoint, you know, just support. (Interview #35)

As Ken explained, when people had legal issues (i.e. institutionalized constraints), he shared information (i.e. ‘advice’) to help those in his online communities respond. Finally, when alienated parents discussed their debilitating mental health issues (i.e. psycho-social problems), they often found comfort in their online communities. Helene described:

> One emergency doctor said that I was in there because I thought I was having a damn heart attack but it was really a panic attack and he thought I had PTSD and if not, he said I have complex PTSD from the ongoing trauma. Now I’ve had another, well I’ve talked to two, uh three psychiatrists, and one of them recently so I can stay on the Zoloft or whatever so I’m not crying all the time.

When asked how she managed the anxiety, she followed up with, ‘I’d say the most support I’ve had, uh, emotionally would be the people in my group. Or any of these parental alienation groups – and I’m talking about men and women both have been very supportive’ (Interview #8). For Helene, the supportive communication she received from the people in her groups, regardless of gender, served to help her through the extensive mental health issues she was facing. Taken together, these two exemplars illustrate the ways emotional support from her online community helped her face a very individual constraint.

**Online community constraints – individual resilience**

Based on the analysis, another important relationship emerged between the different levels of resilience. Specifically, when alienated parents experienced online community-level constraints, they engaged in individual-level resilience processes/practices to address
them. This occurred in two forms. For example, to cope with negative contagion, alienated parents discussed backgrounding those negative emotions and foregrounding productive action in concert with putting alternative logics to work. For example, Felicia described her online group experience:

It was positive but eventually it got to become a negative thing just because so many of these groups are so negative. I would get onto these groups and find myself falling back into that frustration or resentment along with them even though I was starting to pick myself out of that so … A lot of people who first start going through this you do face a lot of frustration and anger and negative feelings and you need some of those groups to know that people are feeling the same as you but eventually you get to a point where your life starts to become a little more positive and that’s when I started not being able to find the groups that I needed, and so it sort of inspired me to start my own YouTube channel. (Interview #6)

As Felicia describes, as she progressed through the alienation process she was able to dampen her negative emotions and found that the groups could suck her back in to feeling frustrated or resentful. In response, she decided to take action by creating a space for more positivity. Importantly, she notes, however, that the online communities were not a bad place. Rather, they were necessary for her to grow. Now, to stay positive (i.e. self-preserve), she formed an individual YouTube channel so that her daughter could learn more about her life. To address individuals who were unsupportive in the online communities, alienated parents relied on crafting normalcy as well as maintaining and using communication networks. Frank shared:

Even if I speak from my experience, it’s such an easy thing for others to say ‘Oh that’s wrong’ and make it a personal thing … kind of getting attacked back … so I’ve done a lot of, well, again more work on myself … going and having some sort of intense exercise it will kind of distract me … going to therapy - I definitely learned a lot about what healthy friendships are so I cultivated having new friends and figured out what people were safe that I could talk about it. My parents and my sister, I have one sister, who was very supportive through it all, in the darkest of times, so that has helped. (Interview #26)

This example illustrates that when Frank was feeling attacked in his online community, he engaged in new behaviors (e.g. exercising, going to therapy, and making new friends) while simultaneously relying on his immediate family for support. Consequently, the combination of individual-level and community-level resilience helped alienated parents mix and match a set of strategies to both cope with the alienation and address constraints.

**Discussion**

In their concluding thoughts and key issues for future research, Houston and Buzzanell (2018) asked scholars to both attend to resilience at multiple levels and acknowledge issues of power in resilience processes. In response, we began this study with three primary goals: (a) respond to calls for multilevel communicative resilience research in face-to-face and mediated contexts that address issues of power, (b) give voice to an understudied and stigmatized experience, and (c) illustrate the complexities of engaging in resilient practices when the disruption is on-going. The present study revealed that alienated parents engaged in four individual-level and three online community-level resilient practices/processes as well as identified three individual-level and two online community-level constraints. Overall, our findings support the heuristic value of the CTR. Our findings also
suggest that there are distinct and meaningful relationships between individual and community-level resilience. We now discuss these findings as they inform theoretical implications and practical applications.

Resilience and constraints as a double-edged sword

Throughout the data corpus, we observed multiple occasions when resilience practices and constraints cut both ways. In other words, not all resilience practices were potentially helpful and not all constraints were hurtful. Rather, the interplay of practices illuminates a much more complex picture. This is particularly evidenced in the context of supportive communication. Although providing and receiving support is often comforting (see Mac-George et al., 2011), alienated parents did not find having a common place to vent, advice, or even shared information to be helpful in all contexts. What complicates this finding is that even the participants recognized that the perception of support varied across both the content of the messages and in relationship to their progression in the resilience process. Thus, it might not be effective to develop a one-size-fits all intervention comprised of particular messages in the case of alienation. Our findings also illustrate the complexity around perceived constraints. For example, interfering network members often prompted people to search for support online, which in turn, helped people become more resilient. Likewise, community-level constraints sometimes served as a catalyst for alienated parents to create normalcy or background negative emotions. This is particularly evident with negative emotion contagion. According to Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson (1994), emotion contagion describes instances when individuals are particularly sensitive to others’ emotions and unintentionally catch or mimic the emotions they perceive. Although often considered positive, Weisbuch, Ambady, Slepian, and Jimerson (2011) conclude that individuals who reap the psychological benefits of being in supportive contexts also might suffer the consequences of being in negative ones. Findings from our study suggest that not only do alienated parents experience negative emotion contagion, they also do not require face-to-face interaction to catch the groups’ emotions (e.g. anger). Perhaps even more interesting is the idea that alienated parents find this negativity online to serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, expressed frustration and negativity helped some alienated parents feel less alone. On the other hand, the negative emotion contagion served as a resilience constraint when alienated parents were unable to back-ground their negative emotion. Although there is burgeoning experimental evidence that emotion contagion occurs through online social networks (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014), researchers might consider taking a qualitative approach to further parse out how negative emotion contagion creates group identification or even, as our findings suggest, spurs people to make resilient changes at the individual-level.

Embracing distance as an alternative logic

Another important theoretical finding emerged from the CTR-informed resilient practice of putting alternative logics to work. Specifically, our findings suggest that alienated parents were able to embrace, and in some cases even increase, the distance they were experiencing with their children despite the fact that the distance with their children was the catalyst for their distress in the first place. Ultimately, by embracing this alternative
logic, alienated parents were able to resist the cultural expectation that families are stuck in an obligatory relationship. This also echoes Scharp and Thomas’ (2016) finding that estranged adult children were able to resist pressures to forgive their parents by giving voice to a discourse of individualism. An important distinction, however, is that the estranged adult children in the Scharp and Thomas study were the initiators of distance as opposed to those who had been distanced such as in the case of the present study. Together, these findings provide mounting evidence that families are not inherently non-voluntary and resilient institutions in their own right. Rather, these findings illustrate the important role of communication in constructing or deconstructing all relationships, regardless of biological or legal ties. In sum, these findings illustrate the ways the CTR allows for flexibility in thinking and reimagining cultural ideologies which ultimately support communicative resilience.

The promise of CTR to inform intervention

We contend that the most robust finding from this study pertains to the interplay between individual and community-level resilience and constraints. Not only did alienated parents rely on resilience processes/practices to respond to their distress pertaining to their family situation, they also were able to engage in these processes/practices to face their resilience constraints. Thus, our study suggests the importance of looking at both practices and constraints as well as these across multiple levels. Without all of these ingredients, it would be more difficult to see how resilience is part of a larger system of communicative behaviors that are contingent on circumstance, interaction, and time. Nevertheless, with these ingredients, we pose several potential practical applications that could inform a resilience intervention for alienated parents. First, we think it would be fruitful for an intervention designer to create a multi-step campaign to support alienated parents by educating them about Buzzanell’s (2018) five communicative resilience processes. Developing and disseminating online resources would help alienated parents navigate the ongoing communicative process of resilience at their own pace. These online resources might take the form of research-based short video modules, smartphone apps, infographics, and/or digital toolkits. Specifically, they could provide descriptive, as opposed to evaluative language, outlining the resilience strategies given that would help mitigate problems people have with the negative contagion they experience in online support groups. The designer might also build a forum where alienated parents could provide examples of how the communicative resilience behaviors worked in their lives. By giving alienated parents a framework for action, they could be more reflexive about what those practices mean for them specifically. Indeed, we noticed that alienated parents did not discuss reaffirming identity anchors in this study. It is possible that reaffirming identity anchors could be a helpful practice if alienated parents were more aware of that possibility. Finally, a campaign might also include workshops that help alienated parents be more strategic about seeking and providing supportive communication. Because support was both helpful and hurtful, someone designing an intervention might draw alienated parents’ attention to the consequences of advice. This way, people might be able to make more educated decisions about what they say and how they respond to others. Taken together, a CTR-based campaign could provide avenues for alienated parents to more quickly begin their resilience journey.
Limitations and directions for future research

With all studies, there are limitations. Specifically, parental alienation is often a lengthy process and our data only provide one snapshot of people’s experiences. Researchers might benefit from following alienated parents longitudinally to better understand whether resilience practices develop in systematic ways. This snapshot is also limited to a predominantly White sample where we did not have access to the reasons for alienation. Because power disparities historically have afforded some races/ethnicities with more/less resources than others, researchers would benefit from studying a more diverse sample, examining how disparities enable/constrain the resilience process, and identifying how the reasons for alienation could play an important role in alienation and resilience. In addition, despite the potential for more critical resilience research, we only described the constraints alienated parents face. Indeed, findings from this study suggest that the practices/process that enable and constrain resilience do not exist in isolation. Rather, there were instances throughout our corpus (e.g. putting alternative logics to work) that suggest that people vary in their awareness of structures that oppress them. In the future, researchers could advance the CTR by elucidating ways people and communities’ own awareness of power enables and/or constrains their ability to be resilient. They also might consider examining how people resist these barriers both individually and collectively.

Despite these limitations, we contend parent alienation is still a fruitful site for additional inquiry. For example, we encourage scholars to attend to the potential downsides of resilience. Engaging in resilience practices in response to a particular trauma does not mean that those practices facilitate or integrate into other aspects of a person’s life. As such, people might be experiencing multiple traumatic events or continuous traumatic events such that the practices that would enable a new normal stall and/constrain the ability of a person to gain a sense of normalcy in another context. In the future, researchers should further consider systems of resilience at the intersections of (ongoing) trigger events. Based on our findings, we also invite researchers to explore the relationships between different levels of resilience more fully. It is possible that it is necessary to engage in resilience practices at multiple levels to off-set different constraints. Finally, it will be important for researchers to garner the perspectives of other involved family members involved to better understand what is happening at the family system level.

In conclusion, alienated parents engage in a variety of resilience processes/practices to overcome the distress of being alienated by their children at both the individual and online community levels. When addressed at these two levels, alienated parents were able to overcome many of their constraints when they engaged in the communicative practices outlined in the CTR. Consequently, we contend that a CTR intervention that teaches both individual-level and community-level resiliency techniques might be particularly effective.

Disclosure statement

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ORCID

Kristina M. Scharp http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9280-6313
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