

WORK-IN-PROGRESS

Family Therapy After the Divorce: Developing a Strategy

Class 13

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Family therapy with the whole family after a divorce has taken place provides a unique opportunity for intervention. Though the spouses have legally terminated their relationship, their parenting function remains. However, this reality is often clouded by the emotional conflicts generated by the divorce. Family therapy can be useful in facilitating life in the post-divorce period.

A four-part model for intervention is described. The first task is to redefine the family as existentially including all members. Next, generational boundaries are affirmed in order to reduce the parentification process, often intensified by the parent's physical absence. Third, the family needs to have a replay of the history of the marriage to correct developmental distortions and offer a chance to mourn the loss of the intact family. Finally, the therapists attempt to facilitate an emotional divorce. A case study is presented to elucidate the manner in which these steps unfold in treatment.

ALTHOUGH MUCH has been written about family therapy when divorce is imminent (7, 8), there is little guidance or few settings available to the family once divorce has taken place. Yet we know that divorce does not end many disturbed marital relationships. Cline and Westman (2) found in reviewing 105 families who had gone through divorce in a Wisconsin court and were followed for a two-year period that some 52 per cent had hostile post-divorce interactions requiring one or more court interventions. The

legal reasons focused on familiar conflict areas of money and children, but underlying dynamic patterns were observed to be related to continued conflict. Such conflict sometimes involved parenting roles and was sometimes directly perpetuated by the children or extended family. Often the legal divorce is an attempt to effect an emotional divorce when two people realize they do not have a constructive future together. Such efforts at emotional separation are frequently ineffective.

Warkenton and Whitaker (2) have characterized the investment in a marital relationship as involving feelings by the partners of being irrevocably committed to each other. These feelings cannot then be withdrawn and placed elsewhere. Westman (7) corroborates this view, add-

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ing that "contrary to popular belief, divorce is not an event but a way of life. Divorce does not 'end everything' but rather alters the nature of family relationships. Conflicts leading to divorce persist afterward and the child can remain a pawn in parental maneuvers after the divorce as well as before."

Bohannon (1) points out that divorce is made more difficult because it involves a purposeful and active rejection by another person. The difficulty is also exacerbated because the community takes a less helpful role in divorce than in bereavement, yet both involve equally the loss of a human relationship. In divorce, therefore, the working through of emotions becomes complicated, and the legal process has no provision for the discharge of those affects evoked during the emotional divorce and the sequence of phases of the legal divorce (1). In fact, the legal process often increases anger and alienation by its focus on custody and the division of material goods.

Divorce is predominantly a family matter, since three out of four divorces occur in families with children (7). Specific effects on the child depend on such factors as the child's age, sex, relation to departing parent, relation to parent of custody, relation to siblings, and personal developmental history. Westman (7) goes on to note that in the absence of the natural father there is a tendency to idealize the absent parent. This has consequences also for the self-image in that the child identifies with a myth. Also contributing to the tendency is the usual role of the father as the one who takes the child out while realistic discipline is left to the mother. The absence of the father further detracts from limit-setting on impulses and often produces economic deprivation as a result of the strain on the father's funds.

Divorce lies in the background of many forms of later psychopathological development (6). It can present a crisis period

when it occurs in the lives of young children, producing acute behavior changes resulting in management problems in a majority of an observed population (4). In light of this, it is surprising that so little attempt has been made to work with the family after the divorce has occurred. Viewed in terms of epidemiological standards, it is a glaring high-risk situation for all participants.

A systematic review of the literature in the last ten years fails to disclose even one article on family therapy with divorced parents seen together with their children. These same ten years have seen divorce reach epidemic proportions. Only one article even suggests that the non-custodial parent be involved in a treatment situation in which the child is the presented patient; and here the author cautions that the absent parent be seen either individually or with the children—never with the former spouse (3).

The present authors assert that what is too hot to handle by the standards of 1962 is too hot *not* to handle by today's standards. Family therapy with the whole family after divorce has occurred can be a crucial moment in preventive mental health. As a crisis period, it is a unique opportunity for intervention. But there are special problems inherent in working with such families. It is these issues to which we would like now to turn our attention.

Case Study

History

The B. family, white, middle-class, and Catholic in background, came for treatment as a unit consisting of mother and five children. Father, divorced, visited weekly. Mrs. B. was a small, attractive blond woman who described her family as chaotic. She noted special problems of fighting between her two boys. Mrs. B. (37) had a small voice and looked down in her lap as she spoke; she seemed non-assertive and depressed. Jenny, 16, was

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talkative and able to express a range of affect, but anger predominated. Sally, a pixieish beauty of 15, was somewhat withdrawn and seemed a blond miniature of her mother. Freckled-faced John at 13 appeared a Huck Finn image of boyhood. He was described as having difficulties handling aggression, as was his younger brother, angelic looking Peter, 10. Peter appeared perplexed and at times hard to engage. Molly, 9, was a smiling, attractive child who had been diagnosed as brain-damaged and mildly mentally retarded.

Mrs. B. complained of John's and Peter's fighting, Jenny's alienation, and Peter's school problems. She felt that the children did not understand her situation and that they were unappreciative of her maternal efforts. The children complained of overwhelming domestic responsibilities and unfair assignment of duties. The seating arrangement was notable in that there was a separation by sexes: Mother and the two adolescent girls together, John and Peter together. Molly stayed close and protective of her mother. It became clear that Mother felt overwhelmed and that there was a division of maternal relationships by sex. Father was being excluded by Mother from his parenting function in her attempt to separate from him, while at the same time she continued her relationship with him through the two boys. Mr. B. had found out about the family coming for help and wanted to join. Mrs. B. feared his domination, intrusiveness, and potential destructiveness as she perceived it. When the therapists suggested that she ask Mr. B. to join the sessions, she agreed reluctantly.

Mr. B. presented himself as extroverted and assertive, a former alcoholic who had seen the error in his ways. Now he was concerned about Mrs. B.'s inability to take care of the children. He was currently living with his mother and commuting to work in another city. Initially he did ap-

pear to dominate the sessions, and Mrs. B. did appear to be helpless to assert some direct control. The therapists tried to establish the therapy as a place of protected communication where other methods of dealing with former impasses could be explored.

Mr. and Mrs. B. reported family problems as being chronic since their separation five years before. Previous to the separation, there was an acute period of heightened discord around the issue of father's inability to accept Molly's retardation. There had been a brief attempt at couple therapy, which was considered unsuccessful. A long term deterioration of the marriage had followed from such stressful factors as his alcoholism and her serious depression and continuous pregnancies. She had had nine pregnancies (with four miscarriages) in their ten-year marriage. Mrs. B. had also been hospitalized once for depression.

Mrs. B. left the family because Mr. B. would not. The children remained with their father who was often intoxicated. John, Jr., at 10, was in charge of taking care of his father. Mrs. B. removed the adolescent girls one by one. This left John as the parenting person for Peter, Molly, and Father. Finally, Mrs. B. regained the house and the children, and Mr. B. moved back with his mother. They were divorced two years after separation but never did make a property settlement. As a result, there was joint ownership of the house, and the car remained in his name. Both were a symbol of the underlying lack of separation of the couple.

Indeed, on both relational and individual levels, the B. Family was beset by unresolved issues of separation and individuation. Both marital partners had hoped for a satisfying symbiotic union, and both had had their expectations decidedly denied. They both experienced enormous dependency needs and minimal skills in getting these needs met without others suffering developmentally stunt-

ing consequences. This situation was ripe for parentification of the children. A division of parenting functions was established with Jenny mediating reality as well as actively expressing the hostility in the family; Sally was strongly identified with mother and seemed delegated to be her spokesperson and in charge of her care. John was father's surrogate and his advocate. Peter, as lowest on the totem pole, seemed to be attempting to disrupt the parentification process by contesting the many directives of which he was usually the recipient. Molly was most concerned about negative affect and would attempt by physical proximity to individuals to reduce conflict. Thus, all of the fighting in the family could be seen as attempts to stabilize the shaky equilibrium resulting from parentification, since the children had inadequate resources to really parent. This served to express the unresolved agendas of mother and father in conflict.

Both parents colluded in being taken care of by the children because both wanted protected positions inside the family. The children by their strong loyalty ties hoped to reinstitute a parental relationship that was physically divided. The divorce accentuated, in a unique way, parental and marital differences in that loyalties to parental position were the children's only choices, since linear, generational relationships were confused and distorted (5).

The family's manner of conflict resolution was expulsion. First the family had expelled father as a bad introject. At another juncture during treatment, Mrs. B. expelled John in the same way; a repetition in action of her oft-stated dissatisfaction with men.

The primary goal of treatment became to help Mr. and Mrs. B. perform the delicate task of remaining parents to their children while separating from a destructive, emotional bond that often sabotaged their parental functioning. This idea was

to form the central steering point for the course of therapy.

Treatment

It became clear in the beginning of therapy that there were some questionable notions about who was in the family and who was not. Thus, the first therapeutic task was to redefine the family as existentially including both parents, regardless of the divorce. Mr. B. thus reentered the group with a reality that became difficult for the family to deny. Confrontations were evoked and conflict was more directly explored. Talking about absent members as though they were dead was avoided.

Once the contention of who was and was not part of the family was settled, the slow and complex process of clarifying generational boundaries began. Father at first started to take responsibility for John and Peter, instructing them to do certain chores like mowing the lawn. As it became clear that father was father, the boys became more cooperative and less quarrelsome. Mrs. B. with the support of Mr. B. shifted her own work schedule to take more of an active, maternal role with Molly. This shift removed pressure from Jenny and Sally to fulfill maternal functions.

As the generational boundaries firmed, each parent reestablished relational ties to each child. This was a time-consuming but necessary process. Each child then had the opportunity to begin to separate and individuate. The family was no longer as polarized (male against female), but each member expressed his or her individual grievances and pleasures.

However, as these processes proceeded, the inevitable conflicts between Mr. and Mrs. B. became more intense. Mr. B.'s original fantasies of reunion with the family were unfulfilled, and he once again became Mrs. B.'s critical opponent. Feeling restricted in his own growth, he

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proceeded to attack his former wife. Mrs. B. felt more and more incapable of defending herself. It was at this point that the therapy terminated—at a similar impasse to that of the marriage itself. The B's were not able to finish the emotional divorce that was necessary to make co-existence as divorced partners smooth and tolerable. When it became apparent that the B. family could not continue treatment as a family, an alternative strategy might have been to divide the family sessions into meetings at which mother and the children and father and the children were each seen separately. This might have further reinforced the reality of the separation and the continuity of parenting roles. Although they decided to terminate, functioning as a family had improved, chiefly as a result of firmer generational boundaries.

That these gains were enduring ones for the family was attested to by several incidents reported by family members subsequently. One such incident concerned Jenny's graduation from high school. At her request, both mother and father cooperated in a special celebration dinner at a restaurant. Father contributed money for a party given by mother in Jenny's honor, which otherwise she could not have afforded. At another juncture, mother was informed by Molly's school that she was to be placed in a slower class. In spite of her trepidation about father's reaction, she called him in on the conference with school officials. Again, on Sally's birthday, father invited her to a dinner for the two of them, which she experienced as pleasurable—a remarkable change from her long-term resentment. John progressed in school as he had not previously and improved his relationships with all family members. In particular, he gave mother the thanks she had always craved. Peter and Molly, at last report, seemed to have continued as before.

A Conceptual Strategy for Family Therapy With Divorced Parents

The process of psychotherapy with a family already separated by divorce requires special considerations of their circumstances and an awareness of the implications of intervention. The family lives in an existential paradox for the children and the parents. Each child asks, "if my parents love me, why don't they love each other. How can I promote this?" Each parent says, "I love my children, but my ex-spouse threatens my future by our past." Everyone suffers from the guilt of omnipotence. The divorce is everyone's fault. Each individual fantasizes his or her own responsibility for family events.

With divorced families, the first task is to redefine the family as including all members. This may be needed in some families that are nominally intact but exclude members as being crazy or defective. In divorced families, it is a special problem because the noncustodial parent is physically absent and less able to clearly present a parenting function. This results in unique sequelae. A parental role needs to be filled. There is confusion over the noncustodial parent's function, and there is accentuated loyalty conflict for the children. Redefinition of the family as including all members attenuates these effects.

The second task is firming generational boundaries, reducing parentification, and encouraging parents to fight their own battles. In divorce when there is a vacant parent role, the loyalties polarize and the children become advocates for the parent's positions, which interferes with their own psychosocial development. There is a wish for the family to be intact again, and divorce is a monumental obstacle to this wish. This results in psychological attempts to reinstitute and resolve situations disallowed in reality.

Third, the family needs to experience a replay of the history of the marriage in order to correct developmental distortions. These distortions are perceptions of what happened based on the perspectives of each child at the age he or she was when the traumatic events took place. Additionally, current distortions resulting from the wish for reunion and from lack of contact have to be addressed in order to make relationships more realistic. Each child can then reestablish his or her ties to both parents based on individual needs and identities rather than on prior symbolic functions.

The fourth and most difficult task is to help the parents divorce emotionally. Fostering the emotional divorce without a coparental divorce is a tricky and painful process. One hopes to facilitate each partner's looking for other adult objects, thus breaking the cycle of nongratification implicit in the unsuccessful marital relationship. If accomplished, this has the potential to free the children from being redrawn into the orbit of parentification. It also would aid the parents in keeping their previous marital relationship apart from their ongoing function of coparenting allies.

What makes this last task so difficult is that it seems to be contingent on the degree of intrapsychic individuation each partner has achieved. As Bohannan points out, all too often marriage is used as a shield against becoming whole or autonomous. Divorce forces the individual to take up the work of individuation once more without the illusory support of the marriage. Through the process of examining the motivations for the marriage and for the divorce, including what conflicts in the spouses entered into these

processes family therapy after the divorce can provide a growth experience for the ex-spouses leading to greater autonomy. At the same time, the children are freed from their own appropriate developmental concerns.

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