



Concluding Remarks: Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Impact of Separation and Divorce

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ABSTRACT

The experience of separation and divorce comes alive in this panel through film, case material from child and adult analyses, and from observational data of infants and toddlers and research interviews of adult children of divorce. Important questions are raised regarding how these separation and divorce processes and associated fantasies are intertwined with developmental progression and its variations. We have had the opportunity to view two analyses, one child and one adult, up close, to see how separation and divorce issues play themselves out in treatment and how they are skillfully addressed. We have also become more aware of how unsettling transitions back and forth between two homes remain prominent in the memory of children of separation and divorce. They never feel on solid ground, and their sense of “home” is adversely altered. Parenting declines as parents become preoccupied and frightened. Loss, intermittent deatthexis, interparent hatred, pathological envy, and parental alienation distract these parents and they actually harm their children.

Furthermore, the toll of separation and divorce on the now adult child of divorce is addressed. Fear and dread of marrying, having children, and then divorcing, are unbearable in anticipation of these steps. It is at this moment when we realize the scars of separation and divorce that have remained in the background until now come to the forefront in visible and dramatic ways.

KEYWORDS

Separation; divorce; home; interparent hatred; parental alienation

Separation and divorce have become the norm but their impact is not normal. As a result of separation and divorce occurring so frequently in families today, child and adult analysts might not realize how catastrophic the impact can be. The question must be raised as to whether separation and divorce are *events*, or *processes* that affect the trajectory of a child’s life through adulthood. When are the “separation event” and “divorce event” that mark and are embedded in these processes?

The separation and divorce process begins during the marriage.¹ Partners become disenchanted with each other and often there is increasing withdrawal, hostility, and acrimony that is felt by children of all ages. Babies sense the raising of voices and the disconnect from one or both parents toward the baby. Older children might understand the nature of the withdrawal, hostility, and acrimony as they put together the content of the parental fights. Sometimes children are told by one parent about plans to divorce before the other parent knows directly about the divorce from the partner (Gunsberg 2005).

For all children, the physical separation of the two parents, where one parent leaves the home to no longer return to live daily, is the separation event. The child visits that parent at another home. In addition, the parent with whom the child stays might move to another home as well. Thus the experience of home is altered, even if the child remains in the same house. There is an emptiness now, as an important family member no longer lives there.

Children and parents very often are out of sync with each other regarding both their knowledge that the divorce will happen and the stage that they are at in dealing with this profound change in their lives. Parents usually have knowledge of the separation and divorce well in advance of the children and therefore instead of being prepared to help the child with this news, they can feel bothered by or resentful of having to deal with the raw emotions and reactions of the child to separation and divorce at this somewhat later point in time. This leaves the child without the necessary parental guidance and support that the child requires to process the separation and divorce.

Furman and Furman (1984) explained a major disturbance in parental functioning, which they called *intermittent decathexis*. Usually, a parent has an “uninterrupted investment” in the child, even when the parent is not present. What happens is that this investment in the child is interfered with by a parental preoccupation, such as is the case in separation and divorce. The parent withdraws attention from the child for a brief period of time that leads to the child feeling abandoned. The child feels lost to the parent and lost to themselves. This type of intermittent decathexis is unconscious, can be momentary, but is near total, leaving the child vulnerable to distress and even danger. For normal development to take place, children need to feel that their parents are invested in them. The lack of investment, or decathexis, is then internalized by the child: “We invest in others, in things outside ourselves, as we invest in ourselves and we invest in ourselves as our parents initially invested in us” (45).

How a separation and divorce are announced and implemented by the parents are additional factors to be considered. Without adequate transition to these family changes, the child will not have had enough time to process what will happen. Such is the case for Bram’s patient, Justin, who is given little advance notice of his parents’ separation and divorce. Other children of parents separating and divorcing are fortunate to have parents who work together for the sake of the child in this transition phase.

What a child remembers of separation and divorce is another important consideration. For example, in my case illustration of Jamie, what she remembers of the divorce (and of her childhood) is the constant back and forth from house to house. As a matter of fact, when Jamie in her late twenties moved into a sunny apartment on her own, she spent many weekends at home doing nothing and liked to sit on her couch. This physical body memory fits with her age at the time of the parental separation and divorce, which was when she was 2 years old. Now, she does not have to go back and forth and loves to sit in one place, deciding for herself when she will get up and when she will leave her apartment.

Parents often bring their child to a therapist when the family is separating and divorcing. Sometimes, this is due to dramatic regressions and changes in the child’s behavior; other times, parents put their child into treatment to guarantee that the child will be “parented” while the parents themselves are emotionally depleted and preoccupied.

Ambitious child therapists and analysts might want to address the hurt, pain, anger, feelings of rejection, abandonment, and even the child’s sense of responsibility for the

divorce itself, as they are led to believe that these are the “child’s” reasons for being in therapy. However, the child is eager to enter the therapy room and engage with the therapist or analyst not around the separation and divorce, but rather to use the therapy and the therapy space to feel normal, to be able to play, and to have a relationship with an adult who, unlike their parents, is happy to see them, play with them, talk with them, and give them their undivided attention. This is so much in contrast to what the child is experiencing at home where sadness looms and depleted parents are minimally available, many of whom are already at war with each other over custody of their child.

The analyst or therapist must constantly be in touch with his or her own transference and countertransference not only to the child patient but also to the child’s parents who are separating and divorcing. Many therapists feel that they are hurting their child and adult patients by probing into the separation and divorce issues, and hurting them further by abandoning them when they are in the throes of the divorce process but are ready to terminate treatment. Dr. Bram speaks to this point in his presentation. For Justin, Bram’s child patient who began his treatment prior to the divorce and was in treatment during and after the divorce, the treatment had the optimal effect of providing him with a stable relationship when his important relationships with his parents were unreliable. Furthermore, the analyst might temporarily hate the parents for what they are doing to their child patient and might also temporarily hate the child patient themselves (Winnicott 1947).

There are a number of authors who have suggested that there is such a thing as “the good divorce” (Leonoff 2015). For a good divorce, parents must maintain a love for their child and have a wish to collaborate and coparent, even through this painful time of separation and divorce. They need to share responsibility for the failure of the marriage. However, not all parents have the ability to terminate their spousal relationship in a harmonious way.

Rather, as Straus addresses in his discussion, many parents cannot take responsibility for the failure of their marriage, and feel that the other partner is totally responsible for its dissolution and for the hurt and pain they are experiencing. Now they perceive the other parent as an enemy who wishes to take away from them what is most important to them, the child or children. This situation can lead to what Demby (2009) referred to as *interparent hatred*. Demby relied on Kernberg’s (1992) definition of hatred as “a derived, complex, aggressive affect characterized by a chronic, stable, characterologically anchored, internalized object relationship involving the self and a desperately needed and yet dreaded, persecutory object” (209). Demby stated that in pathological hatred, each parent creates a distorted family narrative in which that parent sees themselves as the victim and the other parent as the aggressor.

Donner (2006) illuminated how narcissistic parents suffering from pathological envy and perverse thoughts unconsciously wish to annihilate their own children and negate their own roles in what he referred to as “tearing the child apart.” These parents are blind to their child’s needs and to the impact of their behaviors on their child because they are preoccupied with their own needs. Therefore, they are destructive toward their own children. Very often these parents on the surface are fighting for time with their children, but the real battle is motivated by their wish to remain “psychically whole.” They cannot feel whole if their children enjoy time with the other parent and love the other parent. They experience their children’s relationship with the other parent as a “violent, persecutory attack” (547). They feel that they must take back what the other parent has taken

from them, regardless of how their actions might affect their child. Parental alienation is the active attempt by the narcissistic parent to destroy the child's relationship with the other parent, because the child is only allowed to love one parent. By extension, the child's relationship with the targeted parent's extended family, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, could also be destroyed.

This panel has addressed many important considerations regarding separation and divorce, and has illuminated the feelings that are attached to such disruptive processes in the life of the infant and toddler, child, adult child of separation and divorce, and the parent who is separating and divorcing. We have not addressed the question of whether separation and divorce are traumatic, or what aspects might be traumatic for a particular parent or a particular child. We also know that some children and parents are not traumatized by separation and divorce. We do know that many adult children of divorce are fearful of marriage and think it would be unbearable to divorce, from both the perspectives of themselves as prospective parents, and that of the child. In addition, we have not sufficiently addressed the issue of how separation and divorce concerns can be differentiated from developmental issues and variations that occur prior to, during, and after the separation and divorce but have become colored by the separation and divorce experience and associated fantasies. Lament raises this issue in her presentation.

We end by wondering what will become of Justin and Edward. If I were to make some educated guesses, Justin will get married and be a good father and marriage partner. He has learned how to play and how play provides the space for elaboration and working through significant intrapsychic and relational issues. He has learned quite a bit about waiting, letting things evolve, and ending experiences with advance notice. He has learned through his relationship with his analyst how to collaborate. He has acquired the ability to symbolize, which has led to greater regulation of his impulses and feelings. He knows what divorce is from the child's experience, and how "home" can become sad and empty. He has demanded the undivided attention of his analyst, and it would be unlikely that he would withdraw from his children the attention they need.

What about Edward? It is unclear from Dr. Lament's presentation whether he will go through with his divorce, but as a result of the analytic work, we see hope for his not being as controlling of his child as his father was of him. We can see the possibility that he will allow his wife more involvement in their child's life, and perhaps, through his work with his female analyst, he will have gained greater respect for women, particularly the mother of his child and any female children he should father. Also, he now understands that a child of separation and divorce deserves meaningful relationships with both parents. His world has expanded as he now understands the value of creative and autonomous thinking, and has experienced the fun in sharing these ideas with others. He has developed a more independent self. These changes can only have a positive impact on his parental role. If these or similar results do occur, the child and adult analyses for Justin and Edward will have been successful.

Note

1. Although discussion focuses on divorce as the dissolution of a marriage, separation and divorce can also refer to unmarried couples who live together and then break up. Children in this family configuration now live in two homes, and experience the moving out and loss of one

parent, even when they might continue to see that parent on a consistent basis. In the process of the dissolution of the partnership in both family configurations, there might be “trial” separations, where the partners attempt again to live together with the children. The divorce refers to the final stage of the dissolution of the partnership.

Notes on contributor

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