



HIDDEN PERSPECTIVES IN THE DISCOURSE OF DIVORCE

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ABSTRACT

The political discourse about the consequences of divorce is dominated to a large extent by clichés about fathers and mothers. Further research into this area is often not objective being ideologically driven and favouring the concept of ‘the enemy’. Such research cannot contribute to finding a solution to conflicts and is therefore unsuitable for divorcing couples or the development of health-political strategies. We urgently need solution-oriented research about consequences of divorce and its legal framework that is based on a detailed analysis of the underlying relationships.

Keywords: divorce, fathers, mothers, public health policy, legal proceedings

INTRODUCTION

I advance the claim that almost no one will take a divorce-related reduction of his or her standard of living as a reason for refraining from divorce. A decline in the incidence of divorce is therefore hardly to be expected from that quarter. Likewise, complaints about broken homes and the suffering of children will not decrease. Yet that will also do nothing to change divorce statistics.¹

Nevertheless, a matter that involves a personal decision is emerging also as a social conflict with far-reaching ramifications. For children at all age levels, the high probability of divorce represents an ever-present uncertainty that makes them feel threatened.

It is against this backdrop that the idea has taken hold that father and mother should continue to provide care for the children jointly after separation. Both of them are then legally mandated to devote themselves to the children after the divorce. Regardless of any unresolved conflicts and emotional tension between the divorced parties, they are expected to cooperate for the well-being of their children. This does not infringe on the freedom that divorce brings, although it does restrict the customary liberty to ride roughshod over a child's desire to have both parents.

BACKGROUND

According to all experience, the expectation that parents will cooperate remains an illusion in many cases. Our research also showed that unresolved relationship problems always have a negative effect on the children. In particular, visitation negotiations are highly emotionally charged when they occur in close temporal proximity to the divorce. Something similar can be observed in the payment behavior of divorced fathers, and of divorced mothers. It has been documented that the reliability of support payments is determined by whether the ex-partner recognizes, promotes or obstructs the father's wish for contact with his children. The more an

¹ Shortened and edited version of the final chapter from Amendt, G. (2008). *I Didn't Divorce my Kids! How Fathers Deal With Family Break-ups*. Frankfurt: Campus Verlag.

ex-wife restricts a man's father role, the greater the likelihood that the divorced father will react by cutting off her money supply. This strikes a painful blow to his ex-partner, because this creates an atmosphere of existential danger. In any event, legally mandated joint custody represents a change that requires the parties to have greater motivation before embarking on a dispute.

In light of the suffering children endure because of their parents' inability to deal with conflict, society must become active on the social policy level to protect the interests of children. This involves a large-scale social project that has yet to be set in motion. The available institutions and sources of assistance must be examined for suitability.

As our survey showed, divorced fathers often find only a limited measure of understanding and empathy at youth welfare offices, which hampers solution-oriented action. This appears to be particularly pronounced among female youth welfare office workers, especially in urban areas where divorced fathers are more likely to encounter bias and rejection than a receptive ear.

Official family policy tends to restrict the multitude of divorce-related problems to the question of support payments, thereby confusing the symptom of a conflict with its complex core. Such policies represent a denial of reality. Above all, it is the government-funded research on the economic consequences of divorce that not only fails to recognize the problem, but is actually misleading because it takes no interest in the detrimental effects on the interests of fathers and children.² For divorce problems are not financial problems. At best, the financial problems ensue as a consequence. And even then they are always a symptom of narcissistic injuries and the power struggles in relationships that have disintegrated.

In addition to the interests of the children, there is still the demographic perspective on how divorce is perceived, which has been neglected until now. It applies primarily to men.³ We

² A typical example of a psychodynamically uninformed view of payment behavior can be seen in a study conducted by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth by Andreß, H.-J. & Lohmann, H. (2000). *Die wirtschaftlichen Folgen von Trennung und Scheidung [Schriftenreihe des Bundesministeriums für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, vol. 180]*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

³ Along these lines, see Schirmacher, F. (2006). *Minimum: Vom Vergehen und Neuentstehen unserer Gemeinschaft*. Munich: Karl Blessing Verlag.

live in a social environment where there is a tendency to question men's ideas about their roles as fathers. The father is desirable as a functioning provider. In the meantime, this no longer reflects the ideas of a growing segment of young men. Since a father's role is increasingly viewed in passionate terms, husbands are often experienced as annoying intruders in the mother's sovereign domain. Fatherliness that has been structured autonomously, and no longer coincides with what the mother envisions, is therefore viewed with scepticism. It is perceived as a curtailment of the mother's competencies.

It is a high priority challenge for society to support and at the same time promote fatherliness. The fact that this desire is not honoured represents contempt of the right of men to a fatherly role that encompasses more than earning money. It cannot remain without consequences, if fatherliness is devalued even more and is permissible only as an adaptation of benevolent motherliness. This causes fatherliness to lose its autonomy, and children lose a representation of fatherliness in their lives.⁴ Many factors determine whether men and women decide to have children. One of them is the willingness to become a father and to be able to shape one's own specific fatherly role after a child is born.

Men and women have differing reasons for wanting to have children, which cannot be portrayed here. It is inarguable, however, that the desire to become a father, due to its weaker biological and anatomical foundation, represents a personal decision that hinges upon recognition of fatherhood by society to a much greater degree. A man's desire to have children is not as vital and pronounced and therefore requires stronger cultural encouragement. Conception, pregnancy, birth, and an infant's direct dependence on its mother put women on a different biological-anatomical footing with their children. It has the effect of a "voluntary coercion" to stay with the child after it is born, and not to release it offhandedly into life even later. Children need parental opposites for the development of their gender identity.

⁴ According to this, men are merely supposed to mimic standardized motherliness. See Rabe-Kleberg, U. (2005). *Feminisierung der Erziehung: Chancen oder Gefahren für die Bildungsprozesse von Mädchen und Jungen?* In P. Pasternack, A. Schildberg, U. Rabe-Kleberg, K. Bock-Famulla & F. Larra (Eds.), *Entwicklungspotenziale institutioneller Angebote im Elementarbereich [Materialien zum Zwölften Kinder- und Jugendbericht, vol. 2]* (pp. 135–171). Munich: DJI Verlag. (2nd volume with additional material for the Twelfth Report on Children and Youth, published by the German Federal Government.)

SOCIAL DECLINE OR THE ROAD TO POVERTY

People who divorce liberate themselves from an unhappy relationship in the hope of finding a better relationship. But the price of their new happiness, can be discouragingly high. People who speak of happiness and newly won freedom cannot overlook the effects of their separation on their children. Thus, new happiness cannot be obtained without burdening the children. Where there is light, there is simply also shadow.

We would therefore like to outline several changes that divorce always entails for the separated couple, as well as for the children with their need for parenting.

The entire body of research indicates that divorce lowers the standard of living for the majority of *all* the people involved. Those who assume custody of the children frequently find themselves in smaller quarters. They are able to take less vacation and must cut back their own lifestyle as well as the lifestyle of their children. Particularly in the lower income groups, divorce ends in social degradation. In many cases, the future can only be mastered with government assistance, which creates dependence on welfare. This often leads to an entitlement mindset that demands wish fulfilment without prior performance. It is not so much the poverty that harms children, but rather the experience that there is a stream of money that cannot be attributed to the labor of a beloved individual and therefore be seen as an expression of his or her care. This creates shame in the children, and, in addition, is accompanied by a noticeable loss of sensitivity for future interpersonal relationships.

THE STEREOTYPE OF THE UNWILLING FATHER

After a divorce, social degradation causes impoverishment, but there is also a subjectively determined impoverishment that can be traced to the hostilities between the separated parties. We therefore made an attempt to examine in greater detail the dubious stereotype of the father who is unwilling to pay. On the one hand, it is undeniable that among divorced fathers there are such who refuse to pay as a matter of principle. On the other hand, it also cannot be overlooked that, as a rule, refusal of payment marks the endpoint of unpleasant disputes, generally over visitation rights. The future of separated individuals is determined to a great extent by the dynamics of the fighting between them and by poverty.

For this reason we focused our attention on the dynamics of emotional injury and their copious negative effects. Most divorced fathers miss their payments because the divorce has pushed them either to the brink of poverty or over the edge.⁵ Thus, when their ex-wives head for the welfare office or seek out charities, it is generally not due to their ex-husbands' arbitrariness, but rather to the men's impoverishment.

What evokes sympathy for women usually results in accusations against men. As long as the myth of men as unwilling payees still holds sway in public opinion, most people will continue to hope that the impoverishment of "single mothers" can be brought to an end through external disciplinary action against undependable men. Or, by having the FBI issue "Wanted" posters for deadbeat dads under president Bill Clinton as a means of raising their payment morale. The object was to pillory the men and use shame to induce them to pay.

For many men, divorce is the road to poverty and entails a social decline which most of them did not foresee. As a consequence, the remarriage rate for divorced men has been steadily declining for years. In 1965, 79 out of 100 divorced men remarried. By 1994, the number had dropped to 58 out of 100.⁶

Research has been conducted on the factors that contribute to arbitrary as opposed to disciplined payment practices.⁷ But we know virtually nothing about the causes of the destructive behavior of many divorced mothers, who do not balk at harshly enlisting their children in the service of hostility toward their former partners.

⁵ Andreß, H.-J. & Güllner, M. (2001). Scheidung als Armutsrisiko. In E. Barlösius & W. Ludwig-Mayerhofer (Eds.), *Die Armut der Gesellschaft* (pp. 169–197). Opladen: Leske + Budrich Verlag.

⁶ In Germany's eastern states, i.e. the former GDR, the number declined during a comparable period from 78 to 51. See Engstler, H. & Menning, S. (1997). *Die Familie im Spiegel der amtlichen Statistik: Lebensformen, Familienstrukturen, wirtschaftliche Situation der Familien und familiendemographische Entwicklung in Deutschland*. Bonn: Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth).

⁷ See Weitzman, L. J. (1985). *The Divorce Revolution: The Unexpected Social and Economic Consequences for Women and Children in America*. New York: Free Press. For a critical analysis of Weitzman, see Braver, S. F. & O'Connell, D. (1996). Divorced Dads: Shattering the Myths. New York: Putnam and Peterson, R.R. (1996). A Re-Evaluation of the Economic Consequences of Divorce. *American Sociological Review*, 61, 528–36. In a replication of the study, Peterson could not validate Weitzman's hypothesis that women are impoverished and men enriched after divorce.

THE STEROTYPE OF THE MALICIOUS MOTHER

The *Divorce-Related Malicious Mother Syndrome*⁸ and the *Parental Alienation Syndrome* (PAS)⁹ describe this phenomenon, which is increasingly attracting public attention.

A description of the syndrome should allow us to analyze the malicious conflict resolution strategies of female ex-partners and thereby gain an understanding of the strategies' effects, primarily on their children. While the destructiveness seen in *Divorce-Related Malicious Mother Syndrome* makes men's anger and disappointment over their ex-wives appear understandable, it does not explain why these women behave in this manner. Even though most divorces are filed by women, on the psychodynamic level that apparently does not exclude the formation of unconscious reactions, which are governed by emotions that strike one as archaic, such as envy and resentment.¹⁰

If a divorce is based on a woman's own desire, then her envy and resentment should actually be contained. Neither benevolence nor malevolence is nature-given in men or women. Rather, they represent successful or unsuccessful attempts at coping with life's conflicts. We therefore see in *Divorce-Related Malicious Mother Syndrome* an attempt to structure their everyday lives. Serious consequences notwithstanding, they strive to preserve their customary areas of responsibility, thereby simultaneously staking out their dominion over their children, at all costs. These strategies are detrimental to all of the players. Because of the serious consequences this creates for the children, they will someday accuse their mother of having taken their father away and thereby casting a pall over their childhood in an autocratic style.

⁸ Turka, I. D. (1995). *Divorce-Related Malicious Mother Syndrome*. *Journal of Family Violence*, 10(3), 253-264; Turka, I. D. (1999). *Divorce-Related Malicious Parent Syndrome*. *Journal of Family Violence*, 14(1), 95-97.

⁹ A different approach, namely, to describe the alienation that arises between divorced parties and their children and to render it diagnosable, was first formulated from a psychiatric perspective. See Gardener, R. A. (1987). *The Parental Alienation Syndrome and the Differentiation Between Fabricated and Genuine Child Sex Abuse*, Cresskill, NJ: Creative Therapeutics. In the meantime, this diagnostic procedure has gained acceptance.

¹⁰ See Donner, M. B. (2006). *Tearing the Child Apart: The Contribution of Narcissism, Envy, and Perverse Modes of Thought to Child Custody Wars*. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 23(3), 542-553.

DIVORCE – WHAT IT MEANS FOR CHILDREN

The most far-reaching consequences of any divorce are its effects on the children. Paradoxically, this topic is discussed rather cautiously. It could plunge parents and society alike into conflict. For the experiences of children are depressing, if not to say quite often traumatic. Regardless of the physical or emotional symptoms they develop, they suffer under their parents' separation. Most parents are aware of this, or, at a minimum, they are intuitively apprehensive about it, which creates ambivalence about their decision.

It is not at all surprising that most parents try to find solutions for their children's stress. They seek consolation for "what the divorce has done to their children". This is not an indication of detailed knowledge about what lies in store for the children, although it does point to a widespread uneasiness associated with it. Yet to a considerable degree it remains unclear to them (or they avoid realizing with disturbing certainty) what the essential issues of their separation consist of, beyond living arrangements, conflict-laden visitation schedules, skin rashes, one-sided expectations of loyalty, and other symptoms of illness. In addition, one should not forget that many parents are themselves the children of divorced marriages. As a result, when they divorce they draw on previous emotional experiences which could resonate with the feelings of their children. These parents have first-hand knowledge of the horrors that they, in turn, are now causing for their own children.

I would therefore like to suggest an approach that at least brings us a step closer to fulfilling the demand for truthfulness. It involves not only those who are divorced, but adults in general. In their own imagination, people should expose themselves to the horror that children experience when their parents break up. If this were a simple task, it would be common practice. But since it is difficult, that is not the case. I believe that people whose minds are set on divorce are incapable of realizing what their separation unleashes for their children, regardless of whether they are married or merely partners. In many cases, they already begin to observe the effects of the separation on their children while the process is still under way. The children experience problems such as bedwetting, nail biting, skin rashes, and nervous twitching around the eyes, or psychosomatic symptoms such as sleep disturbances, attention deficit disorders, endless daydreaming, depression, and many other atypical behaviors. Or, the parents notice that their children simply aren't as happy overall as they were before. They realize that the children

lack the common parenthood that was only possible as long as Mother and Father were a couple.

They realize that the separation has removed the important continuity of the children's daily lives. And continuity is what imparts security, especially in children. Daily life has crumbled; something new and extremely uncertain looms ahead. By the same token, after the separation something new begins for the father and mother in their relationship to their children. Generally, they cannot imagine what this might be. Nor is there an existing body of knowledge on the subject. After all, nobody discusses these particular aspects of a separation. Yet parents realize that their children experience the separation as serious interference with their lives, and that they don't want it because it disturbs them and takes away something they find indispensable.

What further aggravates the position of the children is the unmistakable silence with which society responds to their experiences. For the children, it is probably not so much a sign of disinterest as a clear signal not to discuss the matter, because they will otherwise annoy their parents and, in addition, raise disapproving eyebrows among adults.

THE DESTRUCTION OF PARENTHOOD

How can we describe a child's core experience in a fundamentally changed world? They experience the separation in terms of Father and Mother ending their relationship as a couple and therefore parents. This represents the essence of divorce for adults as well. But for children it involves much more. In the future, they will no longer experience Mother and Father as a parental unit as they have until now, and they will no longer be able to alternate seamlessly between the two. In the past, particularly when there was friction with one parent, the children were able to seek safe haven with the other, with whom they were still "on good terms." The parents confirm the children's loss inasmuch as they themselves no longer feel like the parents they were before. They don't act the way they once did, either. They no longer operate in tandem, and when they do, they still remain separate individuals, noticeably no longer a couple. It is not lost on the children that their parents have stopped functioning as a parental unit connected by a sexual-erotic dynamic. Parents can only act jointly as father and mother as long as they remain bound to one another as a couple through erotic-libidinal ties and a shared love of their children. Children are quick to realize that they must make do without common parenthood after the separation, because it simply no longer exists. What remains are Father and

Mother as individual entities. Consequently, in the future the separated partners will only be able to present themselves to the children as singles, as Father and as Mother, each one of them his or her own person. But they will no longer be united as a richly ambivalent couple that is nevertheless bound together through erotic and sexual energy. Above all, the loss of parenthood becomes obvious through the fact that the father and mother no longer want to raise children together, or watch them grow up, as a couple. This may or may not be clear to the children, but they perceive it as an irretrievable loss and a sign that their parents have turned away from them. There is an unfamiliar aggressive quality about this that the children haven't previously experienced with their parents.

AGGRESSIVE PARENTAL INDIVIDUALIZATION

Since divorces frequently involve an effort to subject children to as little stress as possible, the hope often arises that conducting the divorce as peacefully as possible will prevent the fundamental change in the children's world from ever occurring in the first place. While the parents may intensely long for this kind of consolation, for the children it is irrelevant whether Father and Mother separate in anger and rage, with mutual respect and recognition of the positive aspects of the past, or without any ado whatsoever. It is irrelevant for the children that Father and Mother would like to sweeten the change which is about to befall their world. For the children, the fact remains that they are losing the parental qualities they have become accustomed to from Father and Mother as a unit. A profound change has taken place in their lives. As a result, in the future they will only be able to encounter Mother and Father in two distinct forms. First, as a memory from the good old days, when their parents anchored the family history and conflicts were ultimately still solvable. Second, as the free-floating Father or Mother of the present and their uncertain future.

There is an ever-recurring situation where children experience that the fundamental change in their relationship to their parents has life-long aftereffects; it is not some unpleasant episode that can be offset through post-divorce kindnesses and avoided through good will on all sides. The situation I refer to consists of leaving their permanent residence and going to see the parent who has been granted visitation rights. Generally, that means their father.

It doesn't matter whether the children's visit with the "other" parent is consensual or court-ordered, whether the father is still permitted to enter his former dwelling or, as a sign of

smouldering animosity, is only allowed as far as the corridor where the children are handed over to him as they put on their shoes, or whether he is timid and reluctant to enter the former residence. All of these factors have no effect on the children's painful observation, namely, that their two parents no longer form a parental unit. If the children nevertheless try to turn them back into a "bonded" couple, they risk shaming or even annoying both of them. In their childish way, they want to reverse the calamity that has struck. This gives rise to guilt feelings in sensitive parents, who are at the same time saddened that their children suffer from an unfulfillable longing.

Parents who are especially insightful and sense the abyss that has opened for their children hope that they will occasionally be able to offer them the old kind of parenthood. But such arrangements have a contrived quality about them. They serve to comfort and soothe the parents' own unease. For the children, they represent a perished world in masquerade, a loss they are not allowed to complain about openly. We do not know whether children prefer such shams over the subtle or crass animosities that they, as powerless children, must endure when they go to see the "visitation parent." But in any case, it is painful when Father and Mother are grim and cold when they deliver the children to one another, as if the children weren't visual evidence that the parents once felt love and sexual-erotic desire for each other, as if the very individuals who are being delivered hadn't issued from that relationship, and as if the parents hadn't enjoyed their mutual affection for the children primarily as a *couple*. In such situations at the latest, the children of divorce no longer understand how they are supposed to experience the past and the present as components of a continuing story. They are internally torn and desperately seek a conciliatory solution, with no hope of assistance forthcoming from their parents as in the past.

The divorce of one's own parents is not only a depressing experience. The high divorce rate has also shaken belief in the viability of partner relationships. Surveys reflect that young people in particular desire such relationships. Thus, the socio-political consequences of divorce emerge.

PAST AND FUTURE OF CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

Research has yet to address these consequences. Isolated studies already indicate that even when post-relationship modes of interaction are civilized and not by any means bleak, a special problem always remains for the children.¹¹ How are they to reconcile the new, separated worlds of their parents with their own internal reality? Which past experiences with their parents are the children permitted to keep sufficiently alive that their personal life history and the one they shared with their parents can be recalled without anxiety ("back then I . . ." or, "that day, it was Dad and not you . . ." and, "wasn't it that Mom wanted to but you didn't . . .?") Each childhood memory is burdened by an ever-present sense of uncertainty that it might collide with the devalued history of their parents as a couple, and that their parents simply aren't interested in hearing about it any more.

Which forms of behavior can (or must) children adopt toward Father and Mother so that they don't hurt or criticize their parents through their hopes and memories? A child of divorce lives in constant fear that one small misstep will suffice to make its mother or father, or even both, abandon it with the same finality that characterizes their separation from one another. The smaller the children, the less they are able to understand the reasons that led their parents to separate. Depending on their psychosexual development, the children fantasize reasons that place the guilt for the separation upon themselves, because of their "naughty thoughts." "What did I do wrong that my parents got divorced?" In many cases, children are not permitted to remember parenthood as it once was, or they are afraid to do so, because they might connect with memories that their parents have already dismissed. Yet the past surrounds the children in a particularly intense way because they were trustingly embedded in their parents' relationship. As a result, in these cases the past that the parents have repressed encounters the children's passionate insistence on memories, that is, their desire to preserve the past in memory, particularly since they no longer experience common parenthood in the present. Many parents, therefore, can no longer relate to their children with the same intimacy and sensitive understanding that the children had grown accustomed to, and they are even less in a position

¹¹ Cf. Marquardt (2006). *The Revolution in Parenthood: The Emerging Global Clash Between Adult Rights and Children's Needs*. New York: Institute for American Values.

to continue sharing unreserved joy with them.

What children find particularly paralyzing in this constellation is the impossibility of changing their circumstances. The loss is final. Many parents exhaust themselves in the hope of making amends for this finality, but to no avail. It stands to reason, therefore, that the dissolution of joint parenthood makes children become aggressive and inexplicably recalcitrant. Parents do not want to attribute such behavior to recent events. That attribution only becomes possible by taking into consideration the fundamental change that has occurred in the children's world. Before parents can grasp these supposedly incomprehensible aspects of their children's behavior, they must recognize this fundamental change. But since this has been generally very burdensome until now, they means easy to cope with their new situation. Expressing the desire that the children be considerate most frequently devolves to mothers, who provide the children's home after the divorce in 85 percent of the cases. In the event that the children cannot be dissuaded from their aggressive nagging, then parents are correct in interpreting it as a bewildered criticism of their separation. If the parents do not set limits to such aggressive nagging, it can quickly consolidate into explicit criticism. At that point, it is only a short step from diffuse aggressiveness to outright accusations. It is difficult for parents to endure, when their children's diffuse irritability erupts in bombshell remarks such as, "I think it's really stupid that you guys got divorced! Why did you even *have* me in the first place, if you don't want to have me together?" Or, "Are you going to leave me, too, if I get on your nerves?" Many parents have come to know comments like that; they recall only with horror the way the remarks unexpectedly surfaced from the emotional depths of their children. It is not without reason that parents are tormented by such fears, especially those who are themselves children of divorce and at one time had comparable experiences, which memories they now suppress.

DENYING THE CHANGES IN CHILDREN'S POST-DIVORCE LIFE

There is a wide spread tendency in society to mystify the fundamental change in the world of children and keep it from becoming public. This can cause a depressive mood or even lead to outright depression in children. For many of them, life after divorce entails emotional ambivalence that is difficult to resolve. They are no longer permitted to simply consolidate the emotional past and present of their lives into the one cohesive experiential world that once existed under their parents' protection. Just as little are they able to reconcile their negative

feelings for their parents with the positive ones.

Most parents do not knowingly intend to hurt their children through the plans they make for their own lives. Thus, when the children search for a new orientation, it triggers efforts on the part of the parents to alleviate the gravity of the situation. As a direct result, they lovingly ignore any comments from their children that are tinged with blame, or they interpret them in a manner they themselves can endure. Parents utilize a psychological mechanism that offers protection for themselves. For the children, however, the upshot is that they are not allowed to expose the truth to the light of day, which is important to them as well as being a prerequisite for their emotional balance. Through empathetic listening, the children learn what their parents could not endure if it were to come from the children themselves.

The children's search for truth in a fundamentally changed world is hampered by the fact that not only the public, but also relatives, colleagues and friends of the family likewise turn a benevolently deaf ear when children attempt to voice an opinion on divorce. This also explains why not only divorced individuals, but also politicians, researchers, child protection authorities and churches have difficulty recognizing the fundamental change that divorce signifies in a child's world. And as long as there is no awareness of the fundamental changes, no one will draw a connection between children's emotional suffering and their parents' divorce.

It is indeed surprising that the changes parents force upon the world of their children have not become the subject of passionate debate, even though research has already drawn attention to numerous impairments and downsides in children's daily lives. In coming generations, these negative aspects will have a cumulative impact as risk factors for society.

INSTRUMENTAL VIOLENCE: A CLICHÉ TO COVER UP SUBTLETIES OF CHILD-NEGLECT

To a large extent, the neglect of these societal risks has to do with the way the debate on the interests of children has been conducted since the 1960s. Initially, the problems of parents and children, no less than those of men and women, were viewed from a relational perspective. At the end of the 20th century, however, an approach took hold that simplified all of the problematic aspects by reducing them to "violence." Ultimately, it became only a question of who perpetrated the violence and who was the victim, and, naturally, no one wanted to side with anyone but the victims. But neither the public nor the so-called field of "violence research,"

inquired into the causes and effects of conflict. Sensitive attempts at understanding conflict in human relationships were impossible, at least in this scientific environment. Every aspect of conflict – which must first be understood before it can be resolved – was immediately categorized as "instrumental violence."¹² A hysterically charged atmosphere arose; not only was everything oppressive characterized as violence,¹³ even differentiated questions were dismissed as such. As a consequence of this discussion, inquiry into the effect of the fundamental change that divorce produces in the world of children also fell by the wayside. As a rule, this fundamental change appears to come about without violence, and there are no context-independent studies that might point to the opposite. Consequently, the everyday reactions of children to the dissolution of the parental unit, received no attention whatsoever. That explains why divorce was never studied from the vantage point of children. Children's experience did not conform to the cliché of instrumental violence, to which battering, kicking, knives, bleeding wounds, broken legs and the like were attributed. Divorce, on the other hand, irrevocably robs children of common parenthood, but it is classified under the limited aspect of "the good right" of adults to shape their lives without constraint.

THE IDEALIZATION OF MOTHERS: SELF-SACRIFICE AGAIN AS FEMALE VIRTUE

In a century of deepened understanding for the needs of children, where was a modified discussion to take its start?

We would like to outline one response in particular here because it is directed primarily at women who would either like to or are compelled to assume custody of their children after a divorce. We observe that under the difficult circumstances following a divorce, many mothers dedicate themselves to their children in an unceasing, more or less frantic spiral. From a socio-political perspective, this meets with thorough approval and goes hand-in-hand with the

¹² See the exemplary work of Hagemann-White, C. (2001). European Research on the Prevalence of Violence Against Women. *Violence Against Women*, 7(7), 732–759. This text quietly overturns much that was previously passed off as scientifically established and played a prominent role in family policy discussions within the German government.

¹³ The structural concepts that underlay work in women's shelters and self-help groups were generally characterized by an absence of the relational aspect of violence. For critical commentary see: Hamel, J. (2007). Gender-Inclusive Family Intervention in Domestic Violence: An Overview. In J. Hamel & T. L. Nicholls (Eds.), *Family Intervention in Domestic Violence* (pp. 247–273). New York: Springer.

mothers' demands that society extend pity to them, demands that almost seem guaranteed by law. It stands to reason that the spiralling dedication of these women is kept on a steady upward trajectory through the media. Society is only too happy when it can point to a person who is pursuing a path that is beneficial to children and appears to help them escape from a field of conflict that is kept in semi-darkness. As a result, when a peculiar mixture of admiration, pity and compulsion drives mothers into a vortex of self-sacrifice, no one interferes with the spiral. Most people are genuinely pleased about it. Ultimately, this is one of the reasons why divorced mothers who are parenting alone are virtually romanced with pity, and many of them have apparently decided to compete on the basis of providing moving accounts of their tribulations.

Yet there are entirely undiscovered aspects to this pity. One of them relates to the sadism that is directed toward mothers who are parenting alone. The sadism consists of expecting that the women demonstrate how motherly devotion can almost miraculously heal the suffering of children, thereby ridding society of the problem entirely as if divorce could be transformed into an episode that ends on a refreshing note for children. This is sadistic because the pious desire that women will be able to fix matters is unattainable, and yet there is an injunction against even recognizing the fact. The fundamental change in a child's world cannot be remedied through a mother's miracle. It can only be addressed by sensitizing society to the suffering of children after common parenthood comes to an end. This perspective destroys the illusion held by many people who recoil in fear of making a depressing discovery, and therefore have not yet grasped the world of children.

CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO BE ANGRY AT DIVORCING PARENTS

From a socio-political standpoint the two-edged sympathy directed toward mothers who are parenting alone is the simplest way to remove the suffering of children from public awareness. Mothers are idealized and thereby overwhelmed. Thus, the simultaneity of sympathy and unmercifully excessive demands observed here contributes to keeping the responsibility for the children of divorce out of the public eye to begin with.

But how could we describe at least one of the many approaches that would enable society to embrace in sensitive manner the fundamental change in children's lives, so that the loss of common parenthood associated with divorce is not additionally aggravated through anxious avoidance of children's experiences?

Let's assume that parents will always strive to conduct their separation in a way that their children will not be adversely affected. This activates many different kinds of efforts. Numerous parents believe that the proper approach is to exclude their children from the impending decisions, thereby creating a safe haven for them during the labor pains of divorce.

Yet a decision of such gravity cannot be kept secret. It is an illusion to believe that children remain completely clueless. We will leave aside the question of whether the parents are truly motivated by consideration alone, or whether their own insecurity is involved, that is, their fear of everything that might ensue from such disconcerting news. For their children will not react with enthusiasm. As spontaneous reactions, dejection, anger and even sheer horror appear much more likely. It is extremely difficult for parents to expose themselves to the emotions that their divorce has unleashed. They are under sufficient stress from other factors. While candour toward one's children requires great courage, the children urgently rely on such courage, and they ought to have the certainty that their parents will also tell them the truth when it is horrible. This entails not so much the question of forthrightness, but rather of allowing children to react to the fundamental change in their world with emotions that are appropriate for the impending upheavals: feelings of desolation and abandonment; anger; disappointment; and an objective sense of having lost their footing. But which father or mother would want to subject him- or herself to such emotions during a period that is already depressing enough? While their fear is understandable, people who want to divorce have to muster this well-nigh heroic ability. For those who are unable to do so, there is no alternative other than allowing their own failure to act to force their children to step protectively in front of their parents so that the parents themselves don't have to experience the horror they have just inflicted on their children. This has far-reaching consequences for the children. For if the parents reveal themselves as the cause of the children's horrible experiences, the children have good reason to experience their suffering as injuries inflicted from without. This enables the children to experience their sense of being rejected, overlooked and neglected, in a manner appropriate to their injuries and the forfeiture of their happiness, that is, they can direct their negative feelings toward their parents. The other, more customary route is simple and offers almost no alternatives. It consists of the children directing the consequences of their horror against themselves. They develop a wide array of physical, psychological, or behavioral symptoms, some to a lesser and others to a greater degree, some immediately and others only after a delay.

THE CLICHÉ OF MALEVOLENT DIVORCED FATHERS: A HELPLESS WAY TO DEAL WITH SOCIETAL GUILT

Children expect courage and openness from their parents. This allows them to express their anger and disappointment over the impending change in their world without exposing themselves to the danger of invoking their parents' displeasure or, even worse, experiencing them as powerless. As a rule, we discuss other catastrophes and fateful phenomena with our children, such as world hunger, global warming, the effects of Katrina and the extinction of certain species. Children absorb these catastrophes with careful attention, even though they only half understand the consequences. We must also talk with them when they are losing their common parenthood. Providing information about something horrible empowers them more than keeping them ignorant, although our intentions are to protect them. Children tend to experience this more as a sign of untruthfulness and a lack of courage.

A particularly pronounced indication that the horror children experience is being denied can be seen in the myth of the malevolent, divorced father. Although both father *and* mother bear equal responsibility as individuals, this myth shifts the blame solely onto the father.¹⁴

In dealing with the widespread denial of conflict and trauma in divorced families, the American psychotherapist Anne C. Bernstein¹⁵ goes even one step further. She argues that children's symptoms and acting out are neither the result of unconscious psychological conflicts, nor the unavoidable result of their parents' divorce. The suffering of children is based on motives of hatred and intentional revenge that they harbour against their parents. In Bernstein's view, these children are simply refusing to adapt to the new situation and should have nothing to complain about or suffer from.

Such argumentation is a striking indication of the guilt that society senses as a whole. This line of argumentation attests to hostility against children.

¹⁴ Cf. Amendt, G. (1998). Men's Reactions to Some Assumptions of the Modern Women's Movement. A lecture presented at American Men's Studies Association, Youngstown, Ohio.

¹⁵ Bernstein, A. C. (2007). Restructuring, and Reconciliation: Clinical Practice With Complex Postdivorce Families. *Family Process*, 46(1), 67–78.

AUTHOR PROFILE



Gerhard Amendt, Ph.D., is an emeritus professor of the University of Bremen (Germany) and founder of the Institute for Gender & Generation Research. He has published numerous books and essays on the dialectic of gender relations and their conflict dynamics. Amendt is critical of any notion of gender with an inherent polarisation and instead proposes a dynamic model for reorientation within the gender arrangement. Amendt has worked in the past as a documentary filmmaker and had been for many years the chairman of the German Pro Familia, first clinic for abortions. Amendt is currently preparing

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¹⁶ *Handling Conflicts without violence. Effective Means of Prevention* at Goethe Universität in Frankfurt, Germany, from 13- 15 April 2018 <https://familyconflict.eu/en/>