

IMPASSES *Of* DIVORCE

THE DYNAMICS
AND RESOLUTION OF
FAMILY CONFLICT

JANET R. JOHNSTON *and*
LINDA E. G. CAMPBELL

vate disputes and resistances to making divorce settlements, no one element is usually sufficient to maintain chronic conflict. Typically, a family is locked at more than one level. The greater the number of layers or components of the impasse, the more complex and entrenched the dispute. While there are numerous ways in which impasses can be generated and maintained, it is useful to identify some prototypical examples illustrating the three levels of impasse in mutual interaction.

For individuals with vulnerable self-images, traumatic separations are particularly humiliating (intrapsychic level). Their defensive need to recoup self-esteem and see the other parent as defective (for example, morally reprehensible or mentally disturbed) coincides with desperate and outrageous separation behaviors, providing behavioral confirmation of their emerging negative views (interactional level). These parents also tend to gather an army of supportive others who will espouse their cause and testify to their victimization. These affirmations consensually validate the negative reconstruction of the ex-spouse and reconstitute a more positive sense of self. Entering the public arena of the court, the presence of a formal audience, while offering possible vindication, is also potentially threatening to these narcissistically vulnerable parents, because any questioning of their views further attacks self-esteem and redoubles their need to fight (external level).

Separating spouses with paranoid tendencies who jealously guard, harass one another, and threaten violence, often induce their partners to leave the home suddenly and unexpectedly and to conceal their own and the children's whereabouts. These ex-mates are likely secretly to engage the assistance of friends and professionals for protection and to petition authorities for restraining orders. This series of escalating secret maneuvers and withholding of information then becomes reality-based evidence of their ideas of conspiracy and is likely to dramatically increase the paranoid panic and precipitate a catastrophe. Moreover, since most paranoid personalities are also vulnerable to feelings of humiliation and helplessness, an enormous need to take action, to set the record straight, and receive total public vindication is engendered.

A child's stress reaction (to the divorce and parental discord) and symptomatic behavior maintains many long-term disputes between parents with vulnerable self-esteem. While one parent tries to protect the child, proving the other is to blame for the child's problems, in defense the other attempts to prove him- or herself capable of good or better parenting, frequently making flagrant unilateral decisions. In a vicious cycle, the fight that ensues increases the child's disturbed

CHAPTER 2

Unholy Alliances and Tribal Warfare

The social world of the divorcing couple is often split in two at the time of the separation, as common friends either withdraw in discomfort or take sides with one partner or the other in an attempt to support and help. As the details of this once private and intimate relationship are shared with potentially supportive and sympathetic others, the norms of privacy and exclusivity that surround and protect the marital relationship break down and dissipate. Through long hours of conversation, the history of the marriage is reinterpreted and rationalizations for the separation are sought, formulated, and confirmed. This is essentially a process of making meaning from the unhappy sequence of precipitating events, coming to terms with what went wrong, and trying to establish who is to blame for the failure of the marriage.

Unfortunately, significant others, family, and friends usually hear only one version of the breakup. With information garnered from only one spouse, these others can be drawn into parental disputes, become outraged, and seek to right a wrong and protect the parent from being further “victimized” by the divorcing spouse. Even if others hear two sides of the story, they usually feel that to give support means to reflect and confirm those understandings that are most acceptable and soothing to the spouse’s wounded self-esteem. Hence they are likely to participate in constructing negative views of the ex-spouse, blaming him or her for most of the problems. In the absence of corrective feedback, these negative views are amplified and reified, setting the stage for long-term conflict.

A second social dynamic also usually operates. The support of others often comes at a price—criticisms, interference, and obligations to and counter-demands by these others that tend to provoke stress and fuel the dispute. Because divorcing individuals are often required to respond to the needs and conflicts of these others, post-

separation conflicts can actually be initiated and maintained by the demands of others. Alternatively, as others become involved, agendas of dispute from the larger social network that have nothing to do with the child can easily become inextricably entwined with custody issues.

The total effect is that, in the absence of socially-agreed-upon customs and etiquette for organizing postdivorce relationships and dealing with conflicts of interest, there is considerable ambiguity. Consequently, the social networks of the spouses are incorporated into the dispute and the dispute is solidified, maintained, and stabilized by the support of others. **New partners, extended family and kin, mental health professionals, and lawyers fuel the fight and in some instances take on the dispute as their own.** As the conflict escalates and spreads, the primary players may not be the two divorcing partners but all these others who are not party to the stipulations, court order, or legal sanctions.

In identifying the significant others involved in the daily lives of spouses, the first candidates are the people with whom they resided. Approximately one-fourth of both husbands and wives were living with a new partner. Almost another one-third of the women and one-fifth of the men were living with extended kin. These significant others not only shared accommodation but helped with preparing meals, marketing and household chores, babysat and took children to school or medical appointments etc. They were often present at pick-up and drop-off times when the child visited the other parent. In addition to the above, 9 percent of mothers and 5 percent of fathers who did not live with kin relied on grandparents or aunts for daily child care. In sum, more than two-thirds of mothers and almost one-half of fathers had a new partner or kin involved in their daily lives.¹ On one end of the continuum, significant others supported the parent while at the same time nurturing reality testing and moderating tension and anger about the divorce situation. At the other extreme, significant others agitated and provoked stress, fueled the divorce-engendered dispute, and were critical and interfering.²

Involvement of New Partners in Disputes

Approximately 40 percent of both spouses were involved with a new partner. These relationships ranged in degree of commitment from casual-dating arrangements (14 percent of total sample) to live-in arrangements (20 percent) and remarriage (6 percent). Overall, relatively few of the new partners played no role in the dispute. While

some did not provoke, their presence alone was sufficient to enrage the ex-spouse and activate disputes over the child. Another more substantial group was drawn into the ongoing conflict and did battle on behalf of one parent. The remainder were actually the prime initiators and maintainers of the dispute with the ex-spouse.

It is remarkable that so few—less than one-fifth of the parents' new partners—were uninvolved, neutral, or positively supportive in the parental conflict. We found that those that were uninvolved often had little commitment to the new relationship with the parent or regarded the matter as none of their business. They sought to avoid the situation. A few of these new partners were actively conciliatory and friendly to the ex-spouse, and their overtures were usually accepted. Several mothers felt gratified at the stable presence of a new woman in the ex-husband's life, especially when that person showed warmth and concern for their child.

Among a large majority of families, however, the entry of the new partner had precipitated or escalated the dispute over the child. In one-third of the cases, the mere presence of the mother's new lover, and in two-fifths of the cases the presence (real or imagined) of the father's new lover, provoked the conflict. In almost all of these, this new lover was the person for whom the partner had left the marriage. Interestingly, in this group of cases the new partner understood that he or she presented a threat and tried to avoid the ex-spouse. In fact, several were quite guilty about their role in the breakup. They withdrew, seemed immobilized, or at times were frankly unsupportive in the face of their mates' distress over the custody and access arrangements.

But for the ex-spouses who had been left, the new partner engendered intense feelings of anger, threat, betrayal, and humiliation, and this partially motivated the fight over the child. Some "left" parents attempted to exclude not the other parent but the new partner from the child's life. The new partner was viewed as the devil who had seduced, and the other parent as the unknowing innocent and naive victim of that malevolent influence. By the strategic maneuver of blaming the new partner and preventing his or her access to the child (preferably through court orders), a sense of power could be restored or a sense of helplessness diminished, the blow to self-esteem undone, a somewhat idealized view of the spouse and the marriage preserved, and the reality of the divorce denied. Other parents who had been left tried to repair injured self-esteem by going to court to prove that both the new partner and the other parent were bad influences on the child, and to prove themselves the good one. They sought the court's help in restricting the child's access to the new partner and parent

