

IMPASSES *Of* DIVORCE

THE DYNAMICS
AND RESOLUTION OF
FAMILY CONFLICT

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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

general dynamics of the family's conflictual enmeshment with one another. The custody dispute is another content area for the ongoing struggle of family members to differentiate themselves from one another and for their guilt and ambivalence about being separate.

- Mrs. G. married to get away from her family. However, when she argued with her husband, they encouraged her to come home to them. On his and her behalf, Mr. G. became involved in many arguments with them. When they separated, Mrs. G. wanted the father to take temporary custody of the child, but her parents threatened to throw her out of the home and cut off financial support. She took the child back and now she and her parents and sisters live together in a household filled with constant tension, screaming, and arguing. Her parents continually criticize her efforts with the child. Her mother, for example, has slapped her in front of the child, telling her she "can't do anything right, not even fix the child's lunch!" Her mother offers to baby-sit so that she can go out and then condemns her for 'leaving the child again'. Mrs. G. is highly ambivalent and guilty about taking a stand with them. She once again would like the father to help more, but her parents continue to interfere. Hence Mr. G. is essentially disputing custody with maternal grandparents over the mother and child's problems in being separate.
- Both Mr. and Mrs. F. were young parents. She was a twenty-year-old white American and he a twenty-two-year-old Chinese who was smothered by an overprotective and phobic mother. Mrs. F. couldn't tolerate living in an apartment next to her mother-in-law, who would knock on her door a dozen times a day. After the baby was born, the grandmother was always hovering, advising, and taking over his care. Continual fights and arguments over Mr. F.'s refusal to live separately from his mother resulted in Mrs. F. returning to her family, which became outraged on her behalf and tried to rescue the baby, aged eighteen months, from the clutches of the paternal grandmother. Both young parents abdicated their roles as parents, and both extended families waged the custody fight on their behalf. Though both families were upper middle class, invidious comparisons were made as to whose cultural tradition and child-rearing philosophy (Chinese or American) were superior.

cate for their clients when necessary, using traditional discovery processes and court trial.

Nevertheless, among some less experienced attorneys and among lawyers intractably wedded to an adversarial stance (usually drawn from other areas of legal practice), we observed a number of procedures and dynamics that invariably intensified parental conflict. First, some take their advocacy role seriously and literally as requiring sustained support of their client's rights and wishes, regardless of the impact on the child in the context of the family.

- Following a four-year custody fight and court trial that clearly found the mother wanting in terms of her parenting capacity compared to the father, Mrs. K.'s attorney insisted on pursuing a retrial, subjecting the ten-year-old child to a stressful interview with the judge. In response to the therapist's pleas on behalf of the child, he answered, "I hear your concerns, but my only responsibility is to my client." He then proceeded to argue the case on a technical point, subjecting the family to six more months of costly litigation. The child attempted to maintain tenuous loyalty to both parents, became very confused, and began to lie profusely to both parents, telling each what they wanted to hear. Given that mediation was unable to shift the parents and the attorneys from their position, the intervention of choice in this case was to have the court appoint a lawyer to represent the child.

More commonly it is the series of maneuvers by attorneys as they formulate their clients' positions, orchestrate their clients' claims, and engage in tactical warfare with the other attorneys that outrages both parents and serves to entrench their dispute. First, the attorneys instruct their clients not to communicate with the other spouse, hence cutting off corrective feedback. They further caution parents against making any temporary arrangements, lest they compromise their position, thereby increasing the parents' unwillingness to collaborate. Some advise their clients to take an extreme position in order to have more bargaining maneuverability. Third, they submit a series of motions to the court that attempt to characterize the other spouse in the most unfavorable light. Needing to show evidence of neglect, abuse, physical violence, or emotional or mental incompetence to win their client's case, these moving papers, which are a public record of charges and countercharges, cite unhappy incidents and separation-engendered desperate behaviors of the parties, often

out of context. The consequent public shaming, guilt, and fury at being so (mis)represented motivates the other parent's need to set the record straight. Few separating spouses in the midst of this devastating process stop to consider that all of this can emanate from the strange practices and procedures of our adversary system. They invariably see it as emanating from the other spouse.

A number of attorneys lose their professional objectivity and become too emotionally involved with their clients. While some try to rescue their clients and take on the fight as their own personal vendetta or crusade, others become covertly hostile and ambivalent about representing their clients. As will be shown in chapters 4 and 5, the problem is that many high-conflict divorcing parents have characterlike disorders. They have the propensity for forming complex hostile-dependent relations, losing their boundaries, projecting aspects of their own needs and wishes onto others, and playing out their intrapsychic conflicts in the interpersonal world. Untrained or inexperienced persons can easily be caught off guard, lose their distance, and become enmeshed. Overidentifying with their clients' sense of helplessness, they may rush into unnecessary actions or make unreasonable counterdemands (given the likelihood of success in court). Others may take the opposing party's requests as personal challenges to be controlled or fended off, as opposed to being worked with reasonably. These attorneys often appreciate and benefit from some frank, supportive discussion of their countertransference reactions in order to gain some perspective on their roles in the case. With other attorneys, who are more defensive about their role, a more tactful intervention is needed; for example, complimenting them on their struggles to deal with a difficult client and talking about strategies for case management and client control can be helpful.

Finally, the zeal with which some lawyers pursue the case at times has little to do with the client's needs or requests or even the merits of the case. We have seen ambitious attorneys, wishing to make a name for themselves in the legal community, seize on a case because it provided a means to challenge the constitutionality of a new law or the legality of a procedure. For example, one attorney insisted on a trial because he wanted to challenge the confidentiality of the mediation proceedings. Another attorney wanted a trial in order to challenge the court mediator's right to make recommendations without being subject to cross-examination. Several other attorneys insisted on pursuing litigation because of long-standing rivalries with the opposing counsel. In all these cases the motivation to continue the dispute drew its energy primarily from the attorneys themselves but was enmeshed with the client's motivations, embedding the impasse

on several levels. The intervention of choice is to help delineate these agendas clearly in the counseling-mediation sessions, directly with both parents and where possible also with the attorneys themselves.

The authority and judgment of the court have powerful symbolic meaning for most people but take on added psychological dimensions for many clients who are emotionally troubled and depend on others for their self-esteem. Not only is the court a public forum where the private marital fight is open to public scrutiny, but it is potentially invested with a divine moral authority and capacity to enforce sanctions if that moral authority is not upheld. In fact, many of the parents we saw had a fairly primitive conception of justice and the role of law. In entering court, they were seeking ultimate judgment of right and wrong, public vindication of the charges leveled at them, and retribution for the moral crimes perpetrated against them. They also had unrealistic hopes that the court could control their ex-spouses' errant behavior and force them to be more responsible and trustworthy in areas in which the court has no jurisdiction.

The modern-day family court, on the other hand, sees itself largely as a forum for principled dispute resolution under the shadow of the law (Mnookin and Kornhauser, 1979). No-fault divorce law and the very general mandate to attend to the "best interests of the child," means the court cannot and will not take a stand on many of the issues in a family dispute. For instance, the life-style and values of the father or the fact that the mother is sleeping with her boyfriend are usually not of concern to the court unless it is shown to be adversely affecting the child. Rather, the court refers these matters to mediation in which a counselor seeks pragmatic ways of resolving the conflict, searching for compromises and solutions that have little to do with legal or moral judgment. The implications of these vastly different conceptions of the role of law are that legal outcomes in court (via recommendation by the court evaluator or decision by the judge) are often not perceived as attempts to resolve disagreements. Instead, they become dramatizations of who is right and who is wrong, and the consequent decisions are seen as the meted punishment. For example, the court may intervene to stabilize a child's living situation immediately after the separation, granting temporary custody to the father until the parents are better able to handle their own affairs. This is interpreted by the father as proof the mother is "unfit." When a child is progressing well, the court may refuse to disrupt the status quo of custody with the mother. The parents interpret this as an indictment of the father's parenting. A substantial financial settlement awarded to the wife may be seen by the angry woman as retribution for the wrongs perpetrated by her "unfaithful and irrespon-

not attending to her financial needs. Reacting angrily to this breach of protocol, the judge gave custody to the father, an inadequate man prone to heavy drinking who had little interest in or capacity to relate to his two adolescent daughters. This action resulted in the mother withdrawing her petition to separate, and the family continued living together in emotional isolation and intermittent outbursts of conflict for two years.

Alternatively, the court's refusal to make a decision, in some cases rereferring the family for mediation even though it is clearly stalemated, can unnecessarily extend the family's period of turmoil and uncertainty. Decisive court action is sometimes a more rapid and effective way to end the fight.

Finally, the court and other public agencies are often not well equipped to deal with the special case of allegations of child abuse and molestation, which are rapidly increasing among high-conflict divorcing families. The involvement of multiple agencies (police, child protective services, hospitals), the lack of coordination between these agencies and between branches of the judicial system (for example, juvenile and family court), and the inadequate training of investigating officers can inflict serious damage on the children involved and on parent-child relationships. Most commonly, the actions of the accusing parents and the investigators so confuse the evaluation as to render the foundation for the charges unknowable. The conflict is hence perpetuated by the lack of clear resolution. Such children are subjected to physical examinations and assaultive interviews with a series of investigating officers trying to establish a case. If they were not molested by the parent in the first place, we consider that they were effectively abused by the system by the time the investigation is complete. Many of these children go for long periods of time without contact with a parent, or with severely limited contact at best. Moreover, their trust in and sense of safety with the accused parent is severely shaken if not destroyed.

The problem of differentiating actual molestation from fantasied abuse and from deliberate use of the accusation as a ploy in the custody dispute is an extremely complex one. Part of the difficulty lies in discriminating the potential for abuse from its actual occurrence, since the family dynamics of cases of proven abuse are similar to the kinds of disturbed parent-child relationships in families that are severely disorganized by divorce disputes. Furthermore, the psychological profiles of the children may appear similar. Our point here is not to state that abuse is more or less likely to have occurred in these families but rather, our purpose is to show that professional

management of the allegations, whether ultimately proven or unproven, can be iatrogenic.

Young children who had been kidnaped or secreted from the other parent could also be traumatized by the legal procedures used to recover them:

- Two-year-old Sherrie was impulsively taken by her mother, with whom she was closely bonded, to a mountain resort for five days, cutting off access to her father, the joint custodial parent. When found by the police, the bewildered child was removed from her distraught mother and placed in a children's shelter until her father could arrange to assume full custody (by court order). In play therapy later, it was clearly evident that this child had been severely traumatized not by her mother's secreting her from her father but by the police forcibly separating her from her mother.

How Mental Health Professionals Promote Disputes

Attorneys and the adversarial legal system have been much maligned for their role in fueling parental hostility and prolonging disputes. Education in the social, psychological, and child developmental issues involved has more recently revolutionized the practice of family law, so that fortunately many of the problems of the legal profession's mismanagement described in the previous section are now relatively rare. What has received relatively little attention, however, is the role of mental health professionals in generating or entrenching disputes.

Mental health professionals who undertake individual counseling and psychotherapy for a separating spouse are usually privy only to one view of the family problem. Moreover, they are primarily concerned about the intrapsychic adjustment or social functioning of their client, remaining somewhat ignorant of the family or couple dynamics. In support of a seemingly powerless, depressed, or abused spouse, they can encourage an uncompromising, aggressive stance that results in prolonged disputes over the postdivorce care of children. Or they can encourage avoidance and noncommunication with the ex-spouse in an effort to support their client's autonomy. They can also unwittingly endorse their client's distorted views of the divorce situation and consolidate their client's polarized negative image of the ex-spouse.

- Mrs. P. was often tearful and emotionally labile, alternately depressed and angry. At times she was highly self-critical and had extremely poor self-esteem, denigrating her capacity as a

mother for four-year-old Danny and her worth as a woman. At other times, she was highly critical of, and projected all blame onto, her husband, whom she described as an "aggressive, powerful businessman, a workaholic who was uncaring about her and neglectful of the child."

During their turbulent separation, she sought help from a psychiatrist who at first characterized her as "chronically depressed, suicidal, and rejecting of the child." In an attempt to stabilize her labile emotional states and shifting views of the world (defensive splitting), he quickly helped her consolidate a more positive sense of self-esteem by reinforcing her views that her husband was indeed "ruthless, manipulative, and possibly sociopathic." In actuality he had never met the father. Moreover, in an attempt to help her with her relationship with Danny, he evaluated the child and diagnosed him as "severely emotionally disturbed, needing long-term therapy and special schooling."

The father became extremely defensive and then irate about the psychiatrist's treatment of his child without his consent. He engaged an attorney to write belligerent letters to the psychiatrist, threatening malpractice suits and demanding that he stop treatment. In turn, the psychiatrist became threatened and extremely angry. Both parents reported he had several shouting matches with the father on the telephone and in person. As a result, he became even more entrenched in his position as protector of this "victimized little woman against the bullying, tyrannical husband." He effectively became a substitute mother-husband for Mrs. P. and a substitute father for the child. The costs of his biweekly conjoint therapy sessions with the mother and child were billed to the father!

Consequently Mr. and Mrs. P. disputed intensely over whether or not the child was emotionally disturbed and whether or not he needed special education. Mr. P. and his attorney entered court demanding cessation of the child's treatment. Mrs. P., together with her attorney and buttressed by the psychiatrist's testimony, contested this and demanded the father pay for the treatment and for special schooling.

Among the potentially iatrogenic influences of mental health professionals are verbal and especially written evaluations of the parents during the upheaval of the separation that explain the situation

solely in terms of the individual psychopathology of the separating spouses. Psychodiagnostic nosology—such as “paranoid, alcoholic, sociopathic, hysteric—reduces the explanation of the complex marital dynamics to the level of the mental (or moral) capacities of the individual parents, clearly placing all blame and responsibility on one or the other parent. If shared with the divorcing parties or legal counsel, these authoritative declarations of the characters of the divorcing spouses are highly influential in determining the subsequent form and process of the postdivorce family. The relationship between the divorcing spouses is made rigid by these stereotyped labels, and the children are influenced to perceive and act toward their respective parents in accord with these views.

What is most disturbing are the number of instances in which a mental health professional is willing to offer an opinion or even testify in court as to the disposition of issues under dispute (such as custody or visitation) without having seen the other spouse or sometimes even the child. Or a therapist attempts to see the whole family but only after extensive individual counseling with one member, making his or her neutrality questionable. Furthermore, the court in some cases is willing to give credence to such testimony. Other counselors continue to see one party after family counseling breaks down and participate in the polarization of positions and the escalation of the dispute.

- Mr. and Mrs. Z. were involved in marital counseling in an attempt to save their marriage. When Mr. Z. refused to participate further, the counselor continued to see Mrs. Z., helping arrange her escape from her potentially violent husband. Together they made plans gradually to remove possessions from the family home without him becoming aware and to leave secretly with the child. Mr. Z. was devastated by her sudden desertion. He felt justifiably furious and betrayed by the therapist.

Undoubtedly, the most entrenched disputes were those between therapists, who supported their clients' conflicting and opposing views.

- Mrs. G.'s therapist viewed the father as an inadequate man, unable to relate in any mutual fashion, who felt compelled to destroy all he loved, including his wife and child. His wife needed to understand why she had selected such a man. Mr. G.'s therapist, on the other hand, viewed the father as “capable

of warmth and affection" but married to a woman whose hatred for men barred any closeness. He felt, therefore, that the father would be, in the long run, a better parent for the Gs' eight-year-old male offspring.

In conclusion, there is a need to educate the legal and mental health community as to the role of professionals in maintaining the disputes of high-conflict divorcing families. More explicit guidelines are required for ethical conduct in case management with these families. Moreover, there is a need for more effective channels for communicating between the multiple agencies involved and thereby coordinating efforts in helping these vulnerable people.

Spread of Conflict and Coalition Formation

Besides the individual psychological and interactional dynamics of the involvement of new partners, extended kin, and helping professionals in postdivorce disputes over children, there is a larger drama of "tribal warfare" that often takes on a life of its own in entrenched custody disputes.

While there are no important sex differences in the likelihood of a new partner being involved, women are more often economically dependent on their kin than are men, and they are significantly more likely to have kin involved in the dispute. Although initially more people entered the fray on behalf of the wife, we observed a symmetrical escalation of others' involvement, with new partners, kin, friends, and even professionals lining up on behalf of each ex-spouse in a stepwise fashion as the conflict continued. Once the battle lines get drawn, others are likely to be precipitated into alliances that are fairly evenly matched. An appropriate analogy might be the international arms race, involving an escalatory series of moves in order to maintain the balance of power, which actually intensifies the dispute. This phenomenon may be explained by reference to basic sociological theories of social control (Berger, 1988). The marriage breakdown has involved a violation of the spouses' normative expectations of each other, and a great deal of ambiguity about who was at fault. Since each party sees him- or herself as the victim and the other as the violator, he or she tends to call on witnesses or a jury to establish the normative order, to act as a moral authority to decide who is right and who is wrong. Who is called on depends upon their availability, the particular network of previously supportive relations, and the established boundaries between the nuclear family and extended family system. New partners are most likely to be called on.

CHAPTER 4

Threats to Self-Esteem and Self-Integrity

While distorted perceptions and interactions between the former spouses, as well as alliances with others, play important roles in most divorce impasses, individual psychological disturbances may be a contributing factor. Thus, it is appropriate to ask to what extent there are psychological disturbances in this special population of divorcing parents, and if there are disturbances, what kinds? How does psychopathology contribute to entrenched postdivorce disputes? These are thorny questions, difficult to answer without considerably more theoretical development and research than presently exists in the literature.

At the outset of our counseling and mediation sessions, clinical assessments were made of the disputants, using DSM-III classifications. Each parent was rated by their counselor and by a second clinical psychologist who read the case record. The most notable finding was the high incidence of Axis II diagnoses: 64 percent were seen as having personality disorders and 27 percent as having personality disorder traits. Men were more often diagnosed as compulsive, paranoid, antisocial, avoidant, schizoid, and passive-aggressive. Women were more often diagnosed as dependent, histrionic, and borderline.¹

Diagnoses on Axis I of the DSM-III were fewer. Almost one-fourth of the spouses were found to be substance abusers, primarily with alcohol, marijuana and cocaine, although some claimed to have ceased using these drugs. Many more were accused by the ex-spouse of having drug and alcohol problems, without any corroborating evidence. Despite the high incidence of verbal and physical aggression in this sample, only 15 percent were diagnosed as having an intermittent explosive disorder or an impulse-control disorder. This supports our contention that much of the violence was interactionally triggered

and sustained and that, in general, it was a feature of the marriage relationship or separation experience, not of ongoing personal psychopathology. Depression and anxiety disorders occurred in one-fifth of the sample. Given the loss and change consequent upon divorce, these incidences appear low and support our clinical interpretations that the ongoing disputes helped ward off depression and provided meaning and structure so as to alleviate some of the anxiety experienced. Only 2 percent of the sample were diagnosed as psychotic. This small percentage reflects the fact that the courts referred most flagrantly psychotic individuals for psychiatric evaluations rather than to our counseling-mediation service.

We have reservations about these diagnostic findings and find it important to make some interpretive qualifications. First, DSM-III ratings of social stress level (on Axis IV) indicated that the majority of these spouses (68 percent) were subject to extreme or severe social stressors, including the divorce, the legal dispute, unemployment, and financial difficulties. On Axis V, 74 percent of the sample were rated as having had moderate to superior levels of adaptive functioning in the past. The critical question, then, is whether their manifestations of psychopathology represented ongoing personality disorder or evidenced a chronic or acute regression in response to severe stressors? Since the disturbed behavior was often observed in the context of extraordinary sociointeractional and system pathology, it was difficult to sort out what was internal and external to the person. For instance, it is difficult to determine the degree of paranoia of a parent who is being accused by an ex-mate or evaluated in a court process that is attempting to determine fault.

Second, spouses presented with puzzling new patterns of behavior that clearly evidence impaired functioning but that do not fall within the well-known personality disorder categories. In particular, their severe decompensation seemed to be situational and relational; that is, it was frequently limited to certain issues (especially symbolically significant ones) and times (pressure of court dates, anniversaries, and holidays) and was confined to the relationship with the ex-spouse and associated persons. Moreover, we observed that a number of seriously emotionally disturbed individuals could effect a separation and disentangle themselves from ongoing disputes in a fairly adept manner, while relatively less disturbed litigants became entrenched in disputes and were unable to put together or sustain a coparenting relationship.

Clearly, reducing the explanation of the discord to individual psychopathology is an oversimplification. A more adequate and useful orientation begins with the premise that high-conflict divorcing par-

ents are, to varying degrees and in special ways, psychologically vulnerable, and that the particular nature of the psychosocial stressor or crisis of divorce interacts with these vulnerabilities to provoke regression and to produce more rigid defensive styles and patterns of behavior that *look like personality disorders*. Our thesis is that separation-engendered conflicts (the humiliation inherent in rejection, the grief associated with loss, and the overall helplessness in response to assaultive life changes that are thrust upon both leaver and left) all resonate with long-standing vulnerabilities in the character structure of these parents, making it more difficult for them to extricate their reactions to the divorce experience from earlier unresolved problems and traumas. The central focus in *developing treatment strategies* becomes, then, to understand these special vulnerabilities and to design interventions that are maximally restitutive and supportive to divorcing spouses and that avoid unnecessarily disarming their precarious defenses or attacking their coping styles. Divorce involves both rejection and loss and hence provokes vulnerabilities in these two distinct but interrelated areas.

Narcissistic Vulnerability to Disputes

For many divorce involves a threat to their self-esteem and to core elements of their self-image as a spouse or parent. Consequently they need to *save face*. Whereas some experience the rejection inherent in divorce as a blow to their self-esteem, others experience it as a total humiliating assault on the self. The degree to which individuals feel assaulted depends on the degree of their narcissistic vulnerability—that is, on the strength, and the adequacy of integration of, their preseparation self-identity.

Narcissistically vulnerable divorcing individuals are characterized, to varying degrees, by problems in their capacity to maintain a positive self-image and a clear sense of self-identity, both of which can be easily threatened or injured. Moreover, they need and use others to regulate and enhance their low self-esteem, to confirm an inflated (though fragile) sense of self, and to provide a receptacle for the projected “bad” parts of themselves. In short, they depend on other people to confirm the view of self they wish to maintain.

For the more narcissistically vulnerable, the initiation and continuation of custody disputes may serve as a defense against the sense of failure, rejection, and humiliation engendered by the divorce. Since a successful custody dispute can compensate for, or even repair, an injured self-image, a legal dispute may be waged in the service of restoring threatened self-esteem and identity. The court is

an arena in which to master painful feelings of rejection, humiliation, and role loss; to construct redefinitions of the self as good (or the ex-spouse as bad); and to recover a more positive sense of self.

Divorcing spouses with narcissistic vulnerabilities have a spectrum of responses to the perceived threat to self-esteem and self-integrity and develop different strategies for dealing with the threat. These involve different symbolic and defensive uses of the ex-spouse, child, and the court, resulting in different kinds of disputes with varying degrees of resistance to resolution and amenability to mediation. Over time, as individuals respond to the pressures and supports from their environment, it is quite possible for their perceptions and coping strategies to change. In this sense, their narcissistic vulnerability can be seen as ranging on a continuum from mild to severe.

Overall, those who are mildly narcissistically disturbed (45 percent of our sample) suffer primarily from a blow to their low self-esteem or fragile self-image, which they attempt to restore by demanding confirmation of their worthiness from others: they argue and fight to achieve self-validation. Those who are moderately narcissistically disturbed (37 percent of our sample) suffer from a more extensive narcissistic insult. They attempt to repair the assault on self by actively blaming and projecting badness onto the ex-spouse. They not only seek affirmation of their own goodness but also require recognition of the other's faults. Severely narcissistically disturbed spouses (9 percent of our sample) suffer from a severe narcissistic injury. They develop paranoid delusions or fixed ideas about the ex-spouse, whom they perceive as intentionally hurtful, and in response, they counter-attack, aggressively attempting to undo the perceived assault by seeking revenge.

Narcissistic Vulnerability: Mildly Disturbed Spouses

On the less vulnerable end of our continuum are parents who have a fairly stable sense of self but who have a special vulnerability in maintaining positive self-esteem. Having difficulty sustaining their own sense of self-worth from internal sources, they turn to others to bolster good feelings about themselves. Most such individuals are characterized by one of two underlying dynamic constellations, basically involving neurotic conflicts.

The first subgroup has low self-esteem and hypersensitivity to feelings of inadequacy, failure, and rejection. They present as somewhat depressed and in pain, consciously experiencing their poor self-image. They make frequent self-deprecating remarks and have a concomitant expectation of and sensitivity to blame and criticism. Be-

cause of their already lowered self-esteem, in crisis they are unable to maintain a positive narcissistic balance; hence they turn to others for approval.

- Mrs. S. felt rejected by her husband's avoidance and withdrawal during their relationship and by his final departure from the marriage. During the separation, intense feelings of rejection were triggered each time her husband refused to talk with her or give her what she wanted: the return of her bath supplies, an old pillow, an extra diaper. She tearfully interpreted each incident as a put-down, became infuriated, and from time to time would erupt into an angry tirade at him. Her husband, she said, reminded her of her own father, whom she described as "tuned out" and never available. Needing masculine confirmation, she sought it from attorneys and judges in the courts, to prove that she was good and not deserving of rejection.

The second subgroup has exaggerated views of self and unrealistic expectations of how others "ought" to behave toward them. Their inflated standards make adequate acknowledgment difficult to obtain, especially during a crisis. Consequently, they are susceptible to feeling threatened in their self-regard. They present with a mixture of shock, mild indignation, disappointment, frustration, and anger toward the ex-spouse.

- Mr. R. felt angered by the obstacles his ex-wife put in the way of his seeing his child, and he was morally indignant when she would not let him visit. He felt he was "a wonderful father who had a lot to offer the child." He resented the mother's questioning his parental abilities and was affronted by her position that she was the superior parent. He felt slighted that she did not see what a swell fellow he was. His psychological agenda in court was to have his importance in the child publicly acknowledged.
- Mr. Y., who held to traditional Japanese values, felt that his wife never supported him or gave him the respect a man should have. After the separation, he felt his wife became even more "uncooperative," refusing any contact with him and not "honoring" any of his requests. "I don't exist for her. She refuses to talk; never says hello during exchanges; never answers any legal requests." His wife's failure to respect him, coupled with

her accusations that he was irresponsible, triggered in him feelings that he was being dishonored; his ego ideal and male self-esteem were offended. He fought for custody of his sons to prove he was a good father and an honorable man, seeking validation of his masculine ideal of himself.

Whether made vulnerable by a low or an inflated self-esteem, mildly narcissistically disturbed spouses feel dismissed, disrespected, and devalued, and they seek recognition and validation from others. Frequently they want specific acknowledgment of certain aspects of themselves that have been problematic for them in the past, such as being competent, attractive, independent, nurturing, strong, worthy, appropriately masculine (or feminine), or reliable. Hence, the dispute often focuses on these vulnerable areas within their own self-image.

- Mr. Y.'s narcissistic vulnerability lay in his sense of himself as a man. He had very much wanted children, and while his wife attended law school, he performed more of a maternal role in the family. Consequently, although he enjoyed parenting and was a good father, his masculinity was threatened; he needed acknowledgment as a man from his wife, which she refused to provide. His masculine ego was additionally made vulnerable because he needed to be seen as a particular kind of father—one who was properly responsible to his family (in ways his own father was not). His wife's accusations that he was irresponsible were therefore especially threatening. His preexisting vulnerability resulted in the need for a particular kind of acknowledgment from his wife that he could not provide for himself.

Many such spouses have reparative fantasies that if the spouse would "only do something" (only validate them), "all would be better"; they would "not be so angry."

- Mr. Y. kept waiting for his wife to act decently toward him, to "say hello." "If she'd only do that, things would go smoothly."
- Mrs. S.: "If he would just let me into the house and talk to me, we would not have any problems with the visits."
- Mr. R.: "All would be okay if she would just acknowledge why I am so angry. If she would appreciate what I can do for our child, I would do anything for her. I would cooperate if it were not for her attitude."

Indeed, many of these parents stubbornly refuse to cooperate until such time as the spouse will confirm them and "behave in the way he should." They will not budge until they are spoken to politely or "shown some understanding," until, in effect, the blow to their self-esteem is redressed. They engage in a series of seemingly petty furies over a few symbolic issues, such as who will get a Chinese teakettle, a rug, or a picture. They resist compromise in the hope of recouping self-worth, often holding out for the "correct" confirming response or action, one that fits with their views of how things should be. Settling their disagreements is often difficult until these underlying narcissistic needs are satisfied or replaced. Nonetheless, unlike those who are moderately or severely disturbed, once these mildly disturbed spouses are acknowledged (once a hello is given or a teakettle offered), they are able to shift into a more flexible stance. If the spouse refuses to respect or openly confirm them, mildly disturbed spouses sometimes turn to the public arena of the court for recognition of their feelings, validation of the rightness of their views, and proof that they are not failures as fathers or mothers, men or women, and do not deserve rejection or belittlement. The custody-visitation issue becomes the contest in which they seek acknowledgment.

Mildly disturbed individuals are not likely of their own accord to become entrenched in disputes. Although their vulnerable self-image provides fertile soil for conflict, it is often the interaction with the ex-spouse and the involvement of others that evokes and prolongs their disputes. Though initially, these people may have needed only minor confirmation—an old rug, a hello, a photo album—as the fight progresses they become more deeply injured, more defensive, and demand greater restitution. Many of them have been married to partners with matching narcissistic problems. Feeling unacknowledged and, in turn, refusing to grant acknowledgment to their ex-mate, they each struggle to maintain their respective self-esteem. Their regressive interactions, characterized by growing animosity and stubborn refusal to support or acknowledge each other, lead to more deeply entrenched disputes.

- Both Mr. and Mrs. J. Felt discarded by the other in the breakup of their marriage. A mutual defensive denigration and a stubborn refusal to communicate (until respected) characterized their relations. During the marriage, Mrs. J.'s stance toward him had involved accusations that he was irresponsible and unreliable, complementing Mr. J.'s accusations that she was a nag and did not appreciate his aspirations. With the divorce, she denied him not only as a man but also as a father. She felt

he showed no genuine interest in caring for their daughter and was not capable of doing so anyway. In court Mr. J. countered that mother was too bookish and too inhibited to play with, support emotionally, or care lovingly for a child.

Other mildly narcissistically disturbed individuals, especially the self-critical subgroup, have married very aggressively paranoid spouses with severe disturbance. Their already vulnerable self-images are further injured by their exmates' public insinuations and insults and legal accusations of wrongdoing. In fact, the underlying narcissistic vulnerability in these parents is often obscured by their spouses' demeaning attacks.

The need to have their good parenting acknowledged frequently diminishes mildly disturbed parents' ability to parent their children. Efforts to prove to themselves and to their former spouses that they are a good parent interfere with a more balanced, less self-conscious relationship with their child. Their parenting efforts often become exaggerated as, reacting to perceived or expected criticism, they overprotect their children or pressure them to perform, in an effort to highlight their own good caretaking.

- Mr. R. felt devalued by his wife's claim that he had nothing to offer his child. He sought to disprove her accusations by showing what a good time he could provide his son, often exhausting his three-year-old in strenuous all-day outings. He would claim of these jam-packed Saturdays that he did more in one day with his little boy than his wife did in the thirteen "dull and boring days" she had with their son.

Other parents transfer some of their need for validation and acknowledgment from their former mate to their child. Their children become significant in buoying their self-esteem. Children, especially the younger ones, have an extraordinary capacity to help parents feel good, to reassure the parent that they are lovable and valuable. These parents become dependent to an exaggerated extent on their children's responses to their efforts. The children are cast in the role of "witness" to their goodness. Signs of dissatisfaction or age-appropriate defiance are taken as a personal rejection and proof of parental inadequacy. As a consequence, these parents put heavy emotional burdens on their children, to constantly reassure them that they are doing enough. In addition to these demands and pressures, parents fail to set clear and reassuring limits. Overanxious for their child's positive validation, they find it difficult to discipline. Their indul-

gence of their children is seen as proof of their parental love and their status as beloved parent. However, unlike their moderately and severely disturbed counterparts, mildly disturbed parents have the capacity to view their children realistically and—when clarified—can recognize the consequences for their children of their actions, and change them.

Narcissistic Vulnerability: Moderately Disturbed Spouses

In the middle range of our vulnerability spectrum, individuals do not have a well established self-identity and have difficulty maintaining a positive, clear, cohesive, and realistic self-structure. Essentially, these parents function as if they had character disorders with a major vulnerability to loss of an integrated and positive sense of self. By and large, the central sense of self they attempt to maintain involves a grandiosity, a highly exaggerated sense of importance, personal superiority, entitlement, and an entrenched need to see only good in themselves.

Their major defensive and compensatory style is dominated by efforts to maintain this rigidly positive view of themselves. Experiences of self and other that fit in with their highly idealized self-images are claimed; those that do not are vigorously disavowed. To see the self as partly "bad" or the ex-spouse as partly "good" causes them great anxiety and confusion. Their fragile ego organization depends on keeping all sense of badness outside the self—in the other or in the situation.

If the moderately narcissistically disturbed spouse is the one who left the marriage, he or she rarely feels sadness or sorrow in relationship to the other. He or she feels entitled to leave and simply wants to get rid of the spouse, to have the other disappear.

- Mrs. C., a rather attractive but self-centered woman who was inordinately concerned with her appearance, raided the family home after the separation, stripping it of furniture, glassware, and pictures, which infuriated her husband and daughters. She insisted that she alone had made the house what it was by selecting the furnishings and that she therefore had a right to take whatever she wanted for her own new home. Later, when discussing her daughters' anger at her, she defensively forgot and avoided these events, blaming the father for filling the girls' heads with lies about her.

Many such parents view themselves in such a superior light that they do not feel they should have to develop plans or cooperate with

the other parent. Indifferent to the needs or desires of the other, they feel the ex-spouse should capitulate to their demands. They expect special favors and privileges, without assuming reciprocal responsibilities, and they become outraged if they do not get what they want. They look upon any attempts to coordinate the children's schedules as annoying interferences with their own lives. By and large, these parents manifest little overt anger. Rather than actively blame and denigrate, they coolly dismiss from their own minds the reality of their ex-mate's existence. They see only their own good, their own needs, and their own views, and believe that they are the best, the only parent. Clearly, many of these spouses would not be involved in disputes if it were not for their ex-mate, who becomes infuriated by their lack of regard, alienated by their demands, provoked by their self-aggrandizement and presumptuousness, and frequently apprehensive over their lack of care for the children.

- Mrs. D. perceived herself as a traditional Latin mother who was of central importance to her children. Being a mother, in her eyes, gave her the right to do whatever she wanted with her children. Her "mother's intuition" meant she knew what was best. If she was fulfilled, then the children were fulfilled. As she had no need for the father, she completely rejected his importance to the children, frequently denied him visits, and at times completely terminated his access to them by snatching the children across the state line.

When the narcissistic parents are the ones who are left, they usually have little or no understanding of their spouses' leave-taking. They experience the rejection inherent in the divorce as a narcissistic insult to their basic grandiose view of self. The divorce shatters their illusions of greatness and self-importance and triggers in them an exaggerated sense of shame and humiliation. It is not (as with the mildly disturbed spouse) just one aspect of themselves that has been hurt or disavowed ("I did something wrong"), but their basic sense of themselves feels completely condemned. Such feelings are intolerable.

The primary psychological defense is to rid themselves of these feelings and any vestige of badness. While they need and want affirmation of their idealized self, the primary thrust for many such spouses in the restitution of their demeaned self-image is to prove the other fundamentally at fault. In effect, they construct a negative image of the ex-spouse as a defense against viewing themselves in a negative light. The idealized view of self and the devalued view of the other are reciprocally and dynamically connected. They cling tena-

ciously to their view of the other as monstrous, destructive, and dangerous, unable to recognize the part they each play in their problems. Some need to be seen as responsible, nurturing, and morally superior, in contrast to an irresponsible, unavailable, and morally inferior ex-spouse.

- Mr. G., a high-ranking government official, presented in a supercilious manner. He refused to give his ex-wife any information about their child when with him or answer any of her questions, calls, or letters. In his words, he was not going to "report to her," since he viewed any compliance or even communication with her about their child as an insulting submission and loss of his sense of autonomy. He sought custody to prove he was the better parent, who could "provide a more wholesome home." He refused to follow the medical regime that his wife (a nurse) had helped set up for his son's epilepsy, seeing it as an insult to his competency. This refusal led to his son having a seizure, which resulted in a serious accident, while riding a bike.
- Mrs. A.'s wife left him (and returned to her own family) while he was recuperating from a back injury that left him unemployed, on disability, and unsure of his future. With great bravado, Mr. A. took a very condescending attitude toward his wife, who he said was "incompetent, unable to care for their child or live independently." He projected his own sense of weakness and inadequacy onto her, not recognizing any of these qualities in himself, and argued for no less than a fifty-fifty time share of his daughter.

Those with moderate narcissistic vulnerability become threatened when the other does not respond as represented in their views. Real differences or qualities in self and spouse, inconsistent with their projections, are disregarded, often creating more unrealistic images. Similarly, challenges to their views are met with great anxiety, increased resistance, and strong representations of their beliefs. When, for example, mediation or court proceedings do not go their way, or when other points of view are investigated, they become disruptive and panicked, insisting angrily, "You're not looking at what is best for my daughter. You're not getting at the real issue" (the real issue being the "badness" of their spouse).

Once the unwanted, incompatible affects are projected onto the spouse, or into the external situation, these spouses still cannot re-

solve the dispute and let the spouse go, because they would then have to reown the negative feelings and aspects they have worked so hard to project or externalize. Hence, they need to continue the fight to ensure the psychological presence of the spouse as a repository for their own devalued parts. To resolve the fight would in effect open them up to further injury, for they would be left without the external containers that keep their rejected "bad" qualities outside the self. Additionally, letting the other go means letting go of the good parts of the spouse they had claimed for themselves. They therefore remain tied to the other, and to the crisis and conflict.

Moreover, these parents often attempt to evoke qualities in the spouse that confirm their projective fantasies, or they try to create situations in the real world that will put pressure on the spouse to behave in a manner that conforms to their projective fantasies.

- Mr. S., who perceived himself as loving in contrast to his ungiven and unnurturing wife, would offer her, on Thursday evening, an opportunity for an extra visit with their child on Friday. When she was unable to accept his offer on such short notice, Mr. S. took this as proof of her lack of love and rejection of the boy.

Such parents almost always enter court with the conviction that they will "win"; their grandiosity and basic sense of entitlement interferes with a realistic appraisal of what is likely to occur. The court is viewed as an arena of vindication and the judge-mediator as an authority who will justify the parent's position (and perhaps provide approval and narcissistic sustenance). Moreover, the public nature of the court gratifies their exhibitionistic wishes. They often insist on an immediate judgment in their favor with respect to custody or changes in visitation, and are unable to work step by step toward achieving these aims.

- Mrs. Z., following her hospitalization for and recuperation from a suicide attempt, wanted an immediate resumption of her visits with her daughter. She felt insulted by the suggestion that she needed to rebuild the relationship with her daughter and found working with her ex-husband humiliating, a sign that she was inferior. She felt she should not have to "prove herself."

A "win" in court protects their positive sense of self and the "vindicating" judge is often idealized. A judge who does not rule in their favor is negatively construed; seen as incompetent, biased, or misled;

and treated with contempt. The losing parent often seeks another judge, blames or fires the attorney for the lack of success in court, and accuses the court worker—mediator of favoritism.

Since these moderately disturbed persons' disputes with their ex-mates are often primarily intrapsychically motivated, their spouses can do little to offset their need for conflict. As it is their mates come with their own set of psychological problems. In the cases in which both spouses are moderately narcissistically disturbed, the interactional impasses, involving a mixture of reality and fantasy about each other, and result in very enmeshed bitter narcissistic struggles. Their perceptions of each other contain components of projection that—given their mutual provocation—are difficult to disentangle from their real-life experience of one another. Each spouse, sensitive to insult, has an intense need actively to place the other in the wrong. They externalize and project blame and create fights and situations to prove each other inadequate.

- Mr. and Mrs. H. had a mutually demeaning relationship, characterized by escalating, vituperative personal assaults. He would call her names; she would call him names. He would make allegations; she countered with allegations against him. He verbally sniped at her; she retaliated with castrating barbs. She had a need to keep him in the role of a "sadistic brute" who could not control himself, and would provoke him to behave as such (by failing to have their daughter where he expected the girl to be). He, in turn, needed to see her as a "conniving bitch" and tried to avoid her control (by failing to return her calls or tell her where and when he was going to visit). He refused to talk to her because she was a "liar who couldn't be trusted." She refused to talk with him because "he gets me so upset."

In other cases, where such spouses are married to mildly narcissistically disturbed individuals, disputes are entrenched by the latter's failure to correct the former's projections. Faced with condemnation from the more disturbed spouse, the mildly disturbed parent withdraws into a protective shell, passively resists (becoming ever more devious and manipulative), or resigns from the battle feeling an overwhelming futility.

Children, for such parents, are narcissistic extensions of themselves, appendages similar to their body parts. They have limited ability to recognize and respond to their children beyond their own wishes and needs. They discuss their children with little empathy or sense of the child's separateness. Indeed, they gauge their child's

feelings by their own: "My child is Okay because I am Okay." In the custody dispute, they are outraged if someone suggests the child not be with them; they feel they are fighting to prevent the extreme injustice of being separated from a part of their own being.

In accord with their own overvalued sense of self, these parents hold an idealized, often stereotyped, view of their children and their relationship with their children. All the problems in the child (as in the parent) are often denied or seen as the fault of the other parent.

- Mr. J. saw Bobby as "the most wonderful, the most sensitive child—there's nothing wrong with him. I have no problems with my son, in fact, we have a fantastically close relationship; the boy feels my feelings. It is beautiful. I talk with my son, but I don't show him any of my negative feelings. I show him only love. I don't have to tell my son about his mother; he knows about her. He knows she's a bad mother. He knows who cares about him. The only problem Bobby has is with his mother, who deserted him."

Hence, such parents have difficulty engaging or making real contact with their children because the children's feelings and needs, like those of the ex-spouse, are distorted along the particular lines the parent needs to draw to confirm their entrenched views. In effect, the children became what Kohut (1977) has termed "self-objects." Consequently these parents are unobservant and frequently impervious to the children's needs or worries. They are often so focused on proving a point that they ignore their children.

- Following a dispute with his ex-wife over Debby's attendance at a private school and her involvement in afternoon activities, Mr. G., with little regard for his ten-year-old's interests and without considering her feelings, refused to watch her play soccer and rarely visited her school.

In their need to reject their former spouse, these parents do not recognize the child's attachment to the other parent. From their perspective, they and the child are one: "I want him out of our lives"; "She left us." By placing value only on their own relationship with the child, they fail to acknowledge the total life of the child. They pursue their own interests with the child, more or less disregarding the other parent, thereby fragmenting the child's world.

Many such parents perceive the child as a judge who has the power to undo the narcissistic wound. The child is thus courted and wooed

away from the other parent. A few parents do not feel loved unless the child actively disfavors the ex-mate. Any display of warmth toward such a parent, or expression of negativity toward the other parent, is triumphantly seized upon as evidence of the child's preference and total agreement with this parent's point of view. The child is thereby given implicit permission to reject or mistreat the other parent. In general, they perceive the child as existing for their benefit.

- Mrs. D., whose daughters refused to see her, stipulated, "I want to see the children, but only on my terms." She was angry at the girls for "their lack of understanding" and emphasized to them how much they were hurting her. She did not see their own intense needs, or their sadness and anger in response to her leaving them.

Finally, as a consequence of these parents' inability to see their children as separate entities, and because of their need for their children's approval, they often fail to protect their children from spousal acrimony. They air their grievances and denigrate their ex-mate to the children. The children, in turn, respond to these tensions and parental pressures with symptomatic behaviors or with behaviors they feel their parents need (such as telling stories), all of which further entrench the dispute.

Narcissistic Vulnerability: Seriously Disturbed Spouses

In the most vulnerable range of our spectrum are parents with either serious paranoid disturbances, or those who have fairly well circumscribed paranoid delusions or fixed ideas about their ex-mates. What these spouses have in common with moderately disturbed ones is a grandiose sense of self and a paramount need to keep the bad external to themselves and to maintain good internal representations. The two types are differentiated by the higher degree of distrust and animosity these parents feel towards their ex-mates, by their belief that their former spouses intend to and could harm or exploit them and their children, and by their more urgent need actively to counter the hostility, danger, and victimization they perceive and anticipate from their ex-mates. Hence, these spouses generally have more actively aggressive, suspicious, accusatory stances vis-à-vis their ex-mates. With often frightening intensity, they collect evidence and build their cases, intending to prove that their ex-mates are "drug addicts," "neglectful or abusive," "predators," or "sociopaths." They write bullying letters; make frantic, ominous phone calls; leave death threats; and pressure their attorneys to act more aggressively, often

with little or no concern for the consequences to others. Under conditions of a very traumatic separation or a sustained challenge to their narcissism (for example, the rejection inherent in ongoing conflict), moderately disturbed spouses can decompensate into the more paranoid disorders of this group.

Severely disturbed spouses experience their separation and divorce as a deeply humiliating attack and injury. Feeling vulnerable and intentionally weakened by assault, they respond defensively with an immediate desire to counterattack and seek revenge, a desire that often becomes a central obsession in their lives. In these cases, the revenge motif is the overriding motivation rather than a desire to increase a good sense of self or the desire to prove the other spouse bad. They seek retribution, not simply a righting of the wrong that has been done to them. More than a container for their bad traits the other spouse becomes a dangerous, aggressive, persecutory figure.

By and large, these spouses are socially isolated and often secretive. Retreating into fantasy, they develop florid delusions or ideas about their ex-mates. As they piece together, in their memory, the rubble of their marriage, they begin to rewrite history. This reconstruction justifies the feeling that they have been wronged, duped, and betrayed, probably intentionally.

- *Mr. J.*: "Her loving femininity was all a sham. She's absolutely evil and . . . untrustworthy. When I first met her, she played a sweet, innocent, feminine, dependent child, but when no one was looking, she turned diabolical. It was all an act."
- *Mrs. S.*: "[He] is an unsavory, unscrupulous, opportunistic, amoral cad whose appearances are deceiving. He makes a great appearance. He has a lot of education. But appearances are deceiving. He's a swine. He can't distinguish right from wrong. He has no morality or values."

Almost all focus on the exploitation they believe they have experienced. In their version of the breakup, they are blameless. While many are unable to acknowledge how devastated they feel, some remarks suggest their sense of degradation.

- *Mrs. F.*: "There was nothing wrong with the marriage. It was fine. He decided he didn't want to be married, another woman came along, and so off he went."
- *Mr. L.*: "I gave her everything . . . backed her up with every penny, and she took everything until there was nothing left and then spit me out like a piece of dead weight."

Seeing themselves as having finally caught on to the grand malevolent schemes against them, these spouses feel they must now make the right moves to protect themselves against further exploitation. Expecting trickery and deceit, they are watchful and guarded toward their ex-spouse and all his or her allies. Everyone is perceived as taking sides either with or against them. Frequently they refuse to meet with the ex-spouse lest they reexpose themselves to the dangers of being exploited or injured. Mrs. H. said: "It's not worth talking to him directly. He never delivers. If you give him half a chance he would take again." Consequently, she rejected all her ex-husband's ideas, proposals, and offers—suspicious of their meaning—and refused to talk with him without the protection of her attorney. Her extreme sense of moral injustice and her feelings of being cheated made her keep a constant vigil of self-defense.

Because they feel wronged, they feel justified in seeking revenge and retaliation. Simply, they maintain a policy of preemptive attack—that is, attack before being attacked. Many feel little conscious shame for their assaultive behaviors; they can kidnap their children or violently attack their ex-spouse while simultaneously maintaining their sense of justification, righteousness, and superiority. Their counterattacks are perceived as self- or child protections. In their views, they are forced to protect themselves from the other's malevolence. Moreover, they derive a good deal of relief from this aggressive activity, which is at once a source of protection and of comfort, as it restores their sense of self-determination, control, and power. Revenge is a powerful antidote to intolerably painful feelings of rejection and helplessness.

In court, such parents seek revenge by depriving the other parent of access or by interfering with the other parent's relationship with their children. They can be ruthless in their attempts to "get custody no matter what" and to "nail to the wall" their ex-spouse and his or her allies. Custody litigation frequently occurs in the context of vengeful behaviors, as angry parents act out their rage by ramming their ex-spouses' cars, wrecking their furniture, and destroying irreplaceable personal treasures.

Other such parents may deny or mask their desire for revenge and counterattack. They enter court ostensibly to protect or rescue their child from the demonic influence of the other parent. They label the other parent as not merely unnecessary (as moderately disturbed parents did), but as actively dangerous to the child. They truly perceive their child to be in grave danger and view themselves as the child's "savior" and "great protector." As one father proclaimed to the counselor, "You and I are the only ones in the world to save my

son." The grandiosity that salvages their sense of self is apparent in these reconstructions. Focused on the "welfare of the children," they enter court requesting custody and accusing the other parent of child abuse, neglect, improper conduct, often with little to substantiate their allegations. Dynamically, ego-dystonic parts of themselves are projected onto the spouse and the child. Typically, they project their anger and fury onto the spouse and identify their own helplessness in their children. Their internal conflicts are then dealt with externally.

- Mr. X., a persistent and intensely aggressive man whose wife left following one of his violent attacks on her, went to court seeking custody because he believed she was abusing his child. He had a tremendous need to control his wife's "aggression," this being his aggression projected onto her, and at the same time to project his own feelings of vulnerability onto the child.

Some parents need to protect their children from what they perceive the spouse as having done to them during the separation. They believe the spouse will abandon, reject, be unreliable, or exploit their children. One mother who had kidnapped her sons refused to allow the father any access to the boys, for fear he might in turn steal them from her. Another mother, who had subjected her children to a barrage of angry denunciations of their father, wanted visitations discontinued because she did not want the children to be confused by the father's tirades against her. Given their view of themselves as "great protectors," many such parents feel a need to make a strong stand against their ex-mates.

Litigation can become a way of life for these parents, as it fuels their fixed ideas or paranoid delusions and offers them "legitimized vindication." They can get even and at the same time redress their narcissistic injury. Winning the custody battle proves them "right." If the judge decides in their favor, it justifies their negative view of the ex-spouse and their conspiracy theories. If the judge does not decide in their favor, he or she is seen as another conspirator or persecutor. They dismiss this judgment and continue the fight in another court. The latter is most often the result, since these parents' disturbance is usually evident, and their ability to parent adequately is therefore clearly suspect.

Finally, there is a small group of these parents whose need to counterattack (or seek revenge and protection) stems less from feeling humiliated and rejected than from a perceived attack on their parental role. The narcissistic injury they feel is not to their spousal but to their parental role. These parents, by and large, define themselves

almost totally in terms of being a parent and need the children to complete an image of themselves. Parenting is the only area in which they feel they function as an adult, and it is the role around which they have organized a positive sense of self. The potential loss of the child feels like an attack on this central sense of self and leaves them with tremendous fears of being a nonparent without identity.

- Permanently disabled and unable to work, Mr. Y. defined himself almost entirely as a "good parent." He came to the initial counseling session armed with three books full of photos of himself and his daughter as well as declarations and documents from friends attesting to his parenting skills. This man was totally absorbed in demonstrating to the court that he was open, loving, sensitive, and nurturing. He felt he was on trial. When the court evaluator recommended that sole custody be granted to his wife and limited visits awarded to him, feeling utterly rejected and totally disaffirmed, he committed suicide. The court evaluation destroyed his only claim to adulthood and hence a positive view of himself.
- Mrs. Z., a mother, of dull-normal intelligence and on welfare, had channeled all her limited energies and ability into providing therapy and schooling for her two children, both of whom had learning disabilities. The girls were clearly the center of her life; she organized not only her days but her identity around their care. Being a parent conferred on her an adult status and sense of confidence. When threatened with a temporary loss of the children during visits with their father, she was threatened with the dissolution of her adulthood. Feeling attacked, she defended and retaliated by kidnapping the children.

The spouses of such parents commonly share the psychological makeup and behavior of the mildly narcissistically disturbed: They are dependent, acquiescent, insecure, passive individuals. Frightened by the wrath of, and exasperated by and tired of the suspiciousness and jealousies of the narcissistic-paranoid mate, the dependent spouse during the breakup often begins to sneak around, hiding outside contacts. Finding it more and more difficult to circumvent the paranoia, they become more secretive and terrified of being discovered and punished—in many cases a legitimate fear. This has the effect, however, of fueling the fire, as the paranoid spouse fantasies of betrayal find some evidence in the spouse's behavior. Further, during the separation process, the ex-mates withdraw and avoid confrontations, thereby failing to correct the narcissistic distortions and accu-

sations of the severely disturbed spouse. While more capable than their spouse of considering their children's feelings, these less disturbed parents, bewildered and overwhelmed by the fury and aggression of their former partners, find it very difficult to negotiate with their mates on the children's behalf.

The parents who actively seek revenge usually involve their children directly in their attempts to punish the ex-spouse and redress perceived injustices and attacks. They enlist their children as allies and coconspirators, press them into espionage activities, and in other ways use them as weapons or instruments of their anger, with little understanding or concern for the impact on the children. Mr. F. threatened never to see his children again if his wife left him. Mr. P. refused to visit his son, to spite his ex-wife: "I'm not going to be used as her baby-sitter." While for some, parenting remained intact (usually individuals with more focused delusions about their ex-spouses), most are barely cognisant of the children's feelings or emotional needs.

- Mrs. E., whose husband left her for a "younger model," sought to ally her two sons against their father. She continually gave the children the message that their father had failed them (in contrast to her support). She freely provided them with her view of their father (he was an "irresponsible cad"), and her perspective on the breakup (he "didn't want to be responsible"). She kept the children well informed of what their father was not doing financially (he is "trying to cheat us"), and adamantly refused to allow the father any holiday family visits. She expected and demanded the children's loyalty and had little understanding of how depressed, confused, and forlorn they were.

These parents customarily view their children as being either totally on their side or as having been turned against them by the other parent. To ward off the latter possibility, many such parents do not allow contact with the other parent, certain that their ex-spouse will "contaminate," "infiltrate," or "brainwash" the child's mind. They keep the children away from the other parent sometimes out of a conscious fear that the children will be malevolently seduced from them, or out of a less conscious concern that the children will see and prefer the other.

- Mr. W. refused to allow his girls any access to their mother outside of their agreement and would not allow any contact with anyone associated with their mother. Hence, he withdrew

his daughters from their school and volleyball team . . . on learning that his ex-wife's new stepson would be attending the same school and league.

Such parents are often unable to tolerate any of their children's feelings (loyalty, love, concern, guilt) for the other parent. Sensing these, they feel endangered and become suspicious that the child has "gone over to the other side." Now seeing the child as a persecutor, they can become vindictive and precipitously reject the child. Even the child's entry into an alliance is not always sufficient to assuage the parent's suspicions and assure caretaking.

Severely disturbed parents who are intensely focused on rescuing their children from the pernicious influence of the other parent tend to deny the children's problems. What difficulties they do acknowledge they attribute to the ex-spouse's pathology and thus make an added reason to decrease access. All too often, they try to involve their children in their delusions about their ex-mate, often utterly undermining the child's sense of reality.

- During most visits, Mr. O.—who believed his ex-wife was abusing their daughter—undressed her and checked her body for bruises. He continually questioned the child about the mother's abuse and demanded that the child's gymnastic teacher do the same. Again and again he tried to make his daughter admit to things that had never happened, which was greatly confusing to her.

What is most significant is that although these parents request custody, their focus is on being a rescuer, not on being a parent. Generally they maintained little involvement with their children, rarely ask for extra time, and are often erratic and capricious in their visitation.

Differential Interventions with Narcissistic Issues

In intervening with narcissistically vulnerable disputants, it is important to remember that, although the dispute is often precipitated by the parents' vulnerable self-esteem, it is frequently perpetuated in interactional cycles by the reactions of others, such as the ex-spouse, court workers, or relatives. In fact, the role of others may be pivotal in determining whether and what kind of ongoing dispute occurs. When, for example, a parent's angry, blaming stance is met with retaliatory strategies by the ex-mate, a battle of pride may ensue.

Alternatively, when the angry blaming is met by the ex-mate's dependent acquiescence or inflexible withdrawal, the parent's narcissistic view of the situation—and the blame—may remain unchallenged.

As parents enter the legal arena, it is relatively easy for court workers and lawyers either to ameliorate or further entrench the dispute. The parent's self-esteem, already temporarily lowered, may become even more threatened as the court suit, with its evaluative processes and adversarial orientation, gets under way. On the other hand, family, friends, therapists, children, and court workers may become potential enhancers of self-esteem and alleviators of insult. Clients obtain a great deal of narcissistic gratification from attorneys who "fight for" them, and from relatives and friends who "believe in" them. While the wishes of significant others may be experienced as supportive, they may also serve to escalate the conflict. As the adversarial climate inside and outside the court increases, the parent's need to defend may rigidify his or her position. **Fighting over custody may then come to serve both the external purpose of pleasing significant others who are new or renewed sources of narcissistic gratification, and the internal purpose of restoring or protecting self-esteem and self-image.**

The point of departure for intervening with all narcissistically vulnerable parents is to help them save face. This involves repairing their wounded self-esteem and preventing further attacks on their sense of self-worth and self-integrity, lessening their need to be acknowledged and proved right in court. Sensitivity to parents' continuing narcissistic vulnerability and the adoption of a neutral, respectful, nonjudgmental stance is essential. Generally, restoration of self-esteem requires the counselor's active, positive, genuinely supportive orientation toward the vulnerable parent. The counselor demonstrates respect for the parents by mirroring their real capacities, highlighting their specific strengths, reminding them of their accomplishments, crediting their good intentions, and actively focusing on and reinforcing positive behavior (while tactfully avoiding labeling, blaming, or invidious comparisons). This stance often assuages the narcissistic hurt and, in addition, helps parents discover the skills and capacities within themselves. Indeed, successful mediation, especially for deeply mortified severely disturbed parents, often hinges on the respect shown them. Carefully and seriously considering and even investigating the parents' allegations is often pivotal in gaining their trust. It is only in a context of respect and a careful appraisal of their claims that the counselor-mediator is able to provide (and these parents to accept) a reality check on their projections.

Another overall strategy is to redirect spouses away from the need

for their spouses' approval—an unlikely source of confirmation—to new sources of appreciation. (Mr. Y., for example, was able to redress the blow to his self-esteem engendered by his wife's disparagements by becoming involved with other women, who appreciated and admired him.) Looking within spouses' social networks for other sources of support, we encourage them to seek out family, friends, and other adults, and help them develop an expanded support system. We find the supportive milieu of a group to be especially useful in providing positive feedback, understanding, and acceptance to spouses who feel devalued and mortified by the divorce. Similarly, we encourage them to focus again on their hobbies and special interests and attempt to provide them with new arenas and channels, such as their work, for building self-esteem. In particular, we encourage spouses to pursue their talents (in art, music, writing, and so on), for both the pleasures and narcissistic gratification to be gained. We also facilitate their completion of some of the practical tasks of the divorce (finding child care, housing, employment) and highlight their sense of mastery and self-sufficiency. These efforts help to undo the narcissistic injury, dilute the intensity of the conflict, and divert their focus from the ex-spouse and from their attempts to enhance self-esteem through a custody dispute.

Without careful diagnoses, however, disputes easily become entrenched. Differential diagnoses of the spouses, narcissistic vulnerabilities are essential for intervention. Each diagnosis determines the degree and kind of support offered, the utility of dynamic explorations, the possibility of leveraging concern for children, the kind of interventions to make with their significant others, and the need for reality confrontation.

Support and acknowledgment are vitally important in the restoration of mildly disturbed parents' vulnerable self-image. Unlike the other two types, these parents are able to turn to others for support, thereby finding new sources to repair self-esteem. They are also able to utilize counseling wherein each parent's motivation and role in the destructive interaction and impasses are explored. Such parents are able to tolerate such exploration and hence are amenable to clarifications and interpretations of their defenses and their ways of using the ex-spouse and the dispute to recoup self-esteem; therefore it is possible for them to achieve insight.

- Hence, with Mrs. S., we clarified that her ex-husband's withdrawal was not a put-down and rejection of her. She felt easily injured by perceived criticism because her ex-husband's behavior recapitulated her own father's unresponsiveness, which

made her feel insignificant. We then reviewed the patterns of her communication with her ex-spouse, action by action, clarifying and redefining his behavior: "He tunes you out partially in response to or in anticipation of your angry explosions, which remind him of his own mother's hysterical outbursts. Seeing his mother in you, he retreats, refusing to be a victim of a woman's rantings. His withdrawal is a disacknowledgement only in terms of his need to protect himself, once again, from feeling flooded and helpless." With this intervention, Mrs. S. was able more calmly to approach and respond to her ex-husband.

With help, these parents are able to develop a balanced picture of the divorce as the failure of a relationship resulting from problems in the marriage, not in themselves. This more rational reassessment helps to dissipate their feelings of rejection. Finally, their capacity to view their children realistically and their wish to view themselves as good parents means that their concern for their children can be appealed to and used as leverage for change. Highlighting the children's experiences and perspectives, therefore, usually suffices to bring about the change in their outlook.

- We explained to Mr. R. that his action-packed weekends were too tiring for his three-year-old. While he had the potential of becoming a "wonderful" father, he needed first to learn about the developmental needs and capabilities of his child.

The use of these same techniques with moderately and severely disturbed spouses can bring about an escalation of the dispute and is hence contraindicated. Moderately disturbed people tend to over-generalize support, seeing acknowledgment as confirmation of their world views. Such "legitimization" often hardens their positions. Counselors need to be specific and concrete in their acknowledgment, clearly and tactfully detailing what they are and are not saying. Emphasizing that their role is that of helpers and not of judges is necessary ("Do I look like a judge?").

It is important to remember here that the counseling service is not long-term therapy aimed at resolving the parents' narcissistic problems but is rather a short-term intervention aimed at moving spouses through a crisis situation or impasse and developing a mediated agreement. Moderately disturbed spouses are seldom able to utilize dynamic counseling or insight-oriented clarifications. Such interventions frequently foster major ego regressions and panic. For most

such spouses, any suggestion that they are contributing to a problem, or any examination of their dynamics, only increases their anxieties and rigidities and results in indignation, categorical denial, projection, splitting ("I'm good, she's bad"), with a concomitant polarization of their position that brings about their devaluation of and possible flight from mediation.

- One father who maintained a rigid, condescending attitude toward his ex-wife was unable to tolerate anything but the counselor mirroring his own position. When asked about a recent altercation with his ex-spouse in which he was extremely provocative, he furiously declared with much agitation, "I don't want any more excuses. She has to be reliable! My son needs better mothering! She has to start being responsible!"

If therapeutically mishandled, moderately disturbed spouses can become severely disturbed. Although a deeper understanding of their narcissistic needs and problems is not always possible, some of them are able to utilize an intellectual formulation of their own dynamics, especially when blame is placed outside themselves (onto their past, an external other, or onto the normalcy of their feelings). An understanding of the interactional nature of the dispute and the complementarity of the spouses' behaviors places the blame on the relationship itself, reduces self-other blaming, and relieves the individuals' sense of shame, thereby partially mitigating their need to prove the other guilty.

By and large, however, alternative strategies of intervention are aimed not at shifting the spouses' underlying narcissistic conflicts but at directly changing the spouses' motivations, attitudes, and behaviors. To foster cooperation, parents are asked whether their strategies are working to produce the results they desire. Encouraging them to define their goals and, with some, directly suggesting how to achieve their goals by demonstrating the benefits of taking certain actions (deemed by the counselor as important in protecting the children) support and guide their behavior. Interventions take into account and utilize the spouses' defensive narcissistic structure to reach counseling-mediation goals.

- We taught one mother, who viewed herself as a lioness protecting her cubs against a predator, to fight cleverly and teach her children how to cope with their father, rather than to pursue her unsuccessful strategy of proving to the court that her ex-husband was totally unfit to visit.

Finally, these parents have little capacity to understand their children's perspectives; therefore, clarification of the children's needs and problems (as was done with mildly disturbed parents) does not suffice. The counselors demonstrate more clearly and concretely to moderately disturbed parents the hurtful effects of the parental fights on the children. For some, however, such interpretations result not in improved parenting but in a blaming the other parent for the problems. Here, interventions that realistically link the children's suffering with the parent's own suffering allow the counselor to use the parents' own needs more strategically as leverage for change.

- Mr. Q. frequently left in a huff without his son on Friday nights following a dispute with his ex-spouse. The counselor focused on his son's intense disappointment and feelings of rejection and talked about the child's burden of caring for his distraught mother following his departure. Additionally, we reminded Mr. Q. of his stated goal of wanting a "healthy boy and a close father-son relationship." If he wanted to achieve this goal, he needed to take control of the situation and make the interchanges smoother and conflict-free. In this way he could demonstrate to the boy his caring, despite his antipathy toward the boy's mother.

With severely disturbed parents, the counselor has to take great care in giving support and acknowledgment, as both tend to be perceived as either seductive (increasing parents' suspicions and fears of entrapment and deception) or as siding with their world view and supporting their private wishes. If the counselor evidences any acceptance of the other parent's views or later does not behave as an ally, these parents feel completely betrayed and are furious. An attitude of detachment in the counselor, on the other hand, is interpreted as a preference for the ex-spouse. **For these parents, one is either for them or against them**; hence the counselor has a very small window of trust within which to operate. Paradoxical interventions, which begin with the counselor not expecting trust or the possibility of change, often successfully generate a "working alliance." Clarification and insight are virtually impossible with this group, except for certain well-integrated paranoid parents whose delusions about their ex-spouses are fairly circumscribed. Psychodynamic explorations of their underlying dynamics are threatening to these parents, who feel accused, belittled, morally outraged, and exposed; such maneuvers precipitate in them defensiveness, devaluation of the counseling-mediation, increased suspiciousness, delusional projections, or even uncontrollable

CHAPTER 5

Loss, Attachment, and Separation

Divorce always involves loss. It is normal to feel sad and pained at the loss of a loved one. In fact, descriptions of divorce in terms of loss and the recovery process as one akin to mourning permeate the literature on divorce (Bohannon, 1970; Kaslow, 1979–81; Kessler, 1975; Rice and Rice, 1986; Weiss, 1976; Wisemann, 1975). While everyone experiences loss, some are unable to tolerate its pain. Many spouses we saw had specific underlying vulnerabilities to loss and conflicts around attachment and separation. In general, two types of dynamics derived from these vulnerabilities are implicated in prolonged or entrenched divorce disputes.

In the first type of dynamic, the spouse experiences a reactivated trauma associated with a specific loss in the past. This includes loss of a child (through kidnapping, death, abortion, or adoption) or separation from one's own parents, sibling, or family (as a consequence of divorce, death, war, and forced migration). The separation from the spouse reawakens these as-yet-unmastered losses and the intense emotions that surround them. In this way the earlier loss becomes psychologically interwoven with the divorce, making the present loss more difficult to resolve. The second type derives from long-standing personality problems in separation and individuation of the spouse from his or her own primary caregivers. Because of early, oft-repeated experiences of severe deprivation, abandonment, neglect, and abuse, or by contrast, extreme indulgence and overprotectiveness, these people are excessively dependent or prone to fuse their identity with others. The present divorce, therefore, is experienced as another abandonment, a severe threat to their survival, and frequently as a loss of a sense of themselves. The ongoing disputes with the ex-spouse represent their often-conflicted struggle to separate and exist as a separate individual.

Common to both types, reactivated loss and separation-individual-

tion conflicts, is the defensive use of disputes over custody and visitation to ward off the painful sense of loss, sadness, and loneliness experienced in the divorce. To varying extents, these parents are unable to tolerate and accept the pain of the loss of separation from the spouse or child. Hence they are unable to mourn, grieve, and let go of the child, the spouse, or the marriage itself. This is manifested in different kinds of disputes.

Some try to prevent the actual loss from occurring by prolonging or clinging to the marriage. They do anything to set up roadblocks to the end of the marriage, refusing to settle anything, including plans for their children. Others, feeling helpless, try to control the speed of the divorce and use mediation and counseling to put off the impending inevitable loss.

Some try to deny the loss by refusing to acknowledge the full reality of the separation.

- Mr. I. continued as usual, painting the family home, fixing the car, and gardening, despite the fact that he had been evicted from the house. He expected his wife to continue to provide him meals and plan the children's activities during his visits. He pretended there was no loss, that he could go on as before, walk into the house when he liked, and even have intercourse with his wife from time to time.

Rather than deny the reality of the loss or resist its occurrence, other parents try to ward off and defend against the feelings of loss by denigrating the spouse and rationalizing that the marriage was not worth it. For example, Mrs. M. defended against the sadness of her spouse's abandonment when she became pregnant by claiming that she and her baby son did not need him. "He was all fun and games, incapable of taking care of or being responsible for a child." To have acknowledged his importance, she would have had to face her own hurt.

Simultaneously, many cover their sadness over the loss with anger. We will not belabor how anger is an antidote to loss, as the divorce literature is replete with how individuals ward off pain and grief in varied ways, including embroiling their spouses in legal disputes. Fighting is also a means of maintaining contact and fending off loneliness. The custody dispute allows parents to live out the fantasy that they are still together in some way. Many parents we saw despite volcanic eruptions in the mediator's office, waited for one another at the elevator or in the parking lot. Reconciliation fantasies, also in the

service of avoiding loss, often persist side by side with the disputants' continued hostilities.

In an attempt to ward off loss, parents often turn to their children as replacements for the spouse. They became emotionally dependent and lean on their children to soften the loss, using the children as companions or confidantes. The intensity of their need for the child as surrogate parent or spouse increases with the stress of the divorce and with the severity of parent's own vulnerabilities. Some parents use their children as a bridge to the ex-spouse, for example, by insisting on increased visits or being present at the child's exchange to ensure their own (not the child's) contact with their ex-mate. Other parents, over-identify to varying degrees with their children and project their intolerance of sadness and fears of being alone onto the children. They then seek to protect their children from these distressful emotions and consciously view the custody suit as a means of doing so. In the end, the child's distress and their own loneliness is ameliorated in this flurry of protective activity.

However, though there are common dynamics, there are also important distinctions between the two main types of intrapsychic conflict—reactivated loss and separation-individuation problems. It is useful to describe the different ways in which each is manifested in post-divorce discord and in the defensive use of the child in order to derive differential prognosis for treatment and intervention strategies.

Reactivated Trauma of Loss

There are parents who are basically intact, with less severe intrapsychic difficulties, who have a specific difficulty in mourning the loss of a real, psychologically separate loved one. Consequently they cannot let go of the spouse, the marriage, or the family and also have great difficulty in allowing their child to leave, even for visits. Their vulnerability derives from a specific (circumscribed) trauma around loss that is reactivated and confused with the present divorce situation.

- Mrs. C. lost her mother during her early adolescence. She described her as "warm and wonderful," and she choked back tears to preserve a severe, controlled, angry expression whenever she spoke of her mother's death. Now she was divorcing a husband whom she described bitterly as having once been "outgoing, warm, and loving" toward her but who proved "undependable." They had been trying to separate for the past two years and were locked in a fight-to-the-death struggle over custody of their daughter. Mrs. C. showed no grief or sorrow at the

separation, only intense bitterness and cold anger toward her "irresponsible" husband. She insisted that he would, likewise, be unreliable for her daughter. It was clear that her unresolved grief at her mother's death, experienced as abandonment, had been reawakened and she heavily defended against these intense feelings.

Parents who have previously lost a child are often enormously fearful of losing another in a custody battle. For example, some mothers especially feared the loss because they had been forced as unwed teenagers to give up a baby for adoption.

- Mrs. M. explained tearfully, "The reason I wanted this baby so bad is because I had one at sixteen and my parents persuaded me to give her up. I've spent twelve years crying over it and haven't stopped yet." The thought of losing her daughter to her ex-husband who might want to return to his homeland overseas was now unbearable.
- Mrs. S. had lost her first baby through a sudden, inexplicable crib death. She now wanted to be in total control of her new baby's physical environment. Any slight fever or illness in the child activated overwhelming concerns for the child's survival, and she would cancel the father's visits. She also spent an inordinate proportion of her small salary for a trained nurse's aide who would care for the child in her home, and then wanted the father to help with this expense.
- Mrs. N.'s firstborn, a daughter, had been kidnapped by her first husband and she had not seen her since. Terrified that she would lose her second child, she allowed her second husband to bully and harass her because of his threats not to return her son after visits. Neither could she take action to protect her son from this sadistic man.
- During her adolescence Mrs. K. had lost three siblings on three separate occasions, two in car accidents. She was now very fearful of letting her husband, who was a truck driver, take her two sons on visits. She held on to the boys as if they were her brothers and found it very hard to believe that he would take good care of them.

Past grieving associated with past miscarriages, abortions, or difficulties in becoming pregnant is often reactivated in the present cus-

tody suit. Two-thirds of the children of our sample were only children, and many parents had lost the opportunity for more children through sterilization, physical illness, or age. For others who were immigrants, especially those who were in this country as refugees from war and political oppression, the child represented their only accessible blood relative, their only real family. In all of these situations, the previous loss had not been worked through and the mourning was not complete. These parents made specific demands based on fears associated with the past trauma, and they held on to their children tightly so as to ward off potential further loss. Despite the often dramatic nature of their past trauma, most were not aware of their sadness over the previous loss and the fact that they were experiencing this again with the second child.

Other parents seek to protect their children from specific loss experiences—such as painful parental divorce, desertion, or deprivation in their own childhood. This frequently leads them to demand particular kinds of custody arrangements.

- Mr. G., a rather passive man, painfully recalled, "I watched my mother go through three husbands. I never wanted to marry or have children for fear they would end up like me . . . and not know who their father was." He was reluctant to divorce and be unavailable to his daughter. He persisted with surprising intensity, given his passive style, in his demands for extensive access to his daughter, and despite no support from his working-class peers.
- After his father's death, Mr. B. was raised by a series of relatives who gave him little time and attention. His mother was always busy working and involved in her own concerns. The divorce from his wife recapitulated his early sense of abandonment by his mother and intense feelings of not being wanted anywhere. He projected these onto his child and insisted on sole custody to protect his daughter from being neglected by his spouse. Mrs. B. was actually very warm and available to her daughter and wanted the father very much involved in the child's life. She offered joint custody. Mr. B. rejected this outright, stating that he would not allow his child to be "shuffled back and forth and not belong anywhere like I [did] as a child."
- As a child Mr. K. was the victim of a long-term visitation dispute following his parents' divorce. His mother actively kept him from visits with his father, punished him for expressing

preference for his dad, and finally rejected him when, as a teenager he went to live with his father. Only several months later, his father died of a heart attack, dashing his hopes for a long-term reconciliation with his idealized father. In his own divorce, Mr. K. was convinced that his wife, as his mother had, was keeping his sons from seeing him. When he arrived at irregular times to pick up the boys, he believed her refusal to cooperate was evidence of her attempts to prevent the visits. He was convinced that she was trying to turn the boys against him.

Interventions with Reactivated Traumas

In general, there is a reasonably good prognosis for resolution of custody and visitation disputes motivated by specific traumatic losses in the past, using counseling and therapy techniques. This subgroup is experiencing the loss of an objective other, not a projected part of themselves or an idealized other. They also have the capacity to view their children more objectively and to make distinctions as to where their own anxieties end and where their children's begin. Basically, their psychological development is sufficient to be able to simultaneously examine both their own feelings and different views without major regression. Hence, with help they can work through repressed or displaced conflicts.

The overall goal is to help these parents mourn and work through loss and accompanying feelings. This is done by providing insight into the dynamics of the conflict, helping them to distinguish earlier loss from the present one, and by supporting their expression of grief. This latter process involves confronting denial and helping them move through sadness, depression, and anger to acceptance, detachment, and on to forming new relationships. These interventions with reactivated trauma warrant further explication and illustration.

- With Mrs. C., who lost her mother during early adolescence, the counselor spent one session having her recall this earlier time in detail, and having her explore her overwhelming feelings of abandonment and her angry adolescent resentment, as well as the pressure her European father put on her to "keep a stiff upper lip" and not to demonstrate unseemly emotion in public. As she teared in response to these memories, the counselor gently connected the early experience with her current bitter feelings that her husband had failed to support her when she needed him most, and showed her how her cold anger and bit-

feelings and tasks of the mourning process, and we emphasize the importance of going through this without skipping a phase. With those stuck in the denial phase, we gently and firmly point out the reality of the divorce and their wish not to give up the ghost of the marriage. However, the present losses consequent upon the divorce are framed as relative, and different from the more devastating experiences of total loss in the death or desertion they had previously experienced. For instance, it is pointed out that they will continue to parent their children after divorce and will have a different kind of family, perhaps an extended or binuclear family. Even for those who are parenting long distance, we demonstrate ways of staying close to their children and being important to them.

Those stuck in the phase of protest and anger are given ample permission to express their disappointment and frustration. We frame their anger as having a function in allowing them to separate. However, we clearly give a time frame as well as appropriate places for the expression of these feelings and help them move on to active mourning—for their dashed hopes and dreams, for their ideal, traditional family, for the lost time and opportunity with their children as well as for their ex-spouse. Considerable support and empathy is necessary to help them sustain the sadness that ensues. Finally, we help them detach and restructure their lives, giving them permission and support in their exploration of new relationships and renewal of old friendships.

Separation-Individuation Conflicts

Among those involved in long-term, entrenched divorce disputes, we found a much larger group of parents for whom dependency and separation-individuation conflicts are the key underlying issues. To varying degrees, these parents have not mastered the developmental task of psychological separation from primary caretakers and have, in their marriages, replicated these disturbed primary relationships with their spouses. Object-relations theorists (for example Mahler, 1971; Kernberg, 1967; Masterson, 1981) have described these people in times of disturbances in their "self-object relationships." For them, others do not fully exist and have never existed as separate persons, but to varying extents, are perceived as projected fragments or reconstitutions of their inner psychological needs.

The actual histories of these people are sometimes difficult to piece together because they are replete with fantasied reconstructions of the past, in which others—especially their parents—have been idealized or devalued. However, from their own and their spouses' re-

ports we find, not only specific losses to which they are now responding, but more ongoing failures in their relationships with primary caretakers, who by and large were ungratifying, unsupportive, and frequently abandoning. Many are the children of severe alcoholics or mentally ill parents. They have been subject to a variety of caretakers, repeated foster home placement, a succession of fathers, or recurring incidences of neglect and abuse.

- Mrs. T. was abused by father as a preschooler. Her parents were estranged from one another. After her mother died when she was five years old, she was kidnaped from maternal relatives by her father, who subsequently abandoned her in an orphanage two years later. When she was nine years old, she was adopted by parents who "didn't get along." For most of her childhood she had no one on whom to rely. Fending off a major abandonment depression, she clung to her spouse. When he was not available she depended completely on her boyfriend. When he left, she turned to her three-year-old child.

Interestingly, some are the children of extremely overprotective, indulgent, and controlling parents on whom they continue to depend.

- Mr. L., an only child of elderly parents, was often ill as a youngster and confined to bed. He was overprotected and pampered by a domineering mother, and never developed a relationship with his father. He married a woman who became the primary caretaker not only for the children but for him. He was passive, ineffectual, and often absent as a father. When his wife had a serious accident, requiring his help, he could not respond. She left the marriage and he became severely depressed. He clung to both his wife and his elderly mother.

With the divorce, these persons do not experience sadness over the loss of a psychologically separate other, as do those with a reactivated trauma, but in varying degrees and levels of conscious awareness, they experience panic or intense feelings of being abandoned, deserted, and cut off, never to be reconnected. They feel insignificant, overwhelmingly helpless, and unable to survive on their own. In extreme cases, they feel empty, hollow, without form and substance. Strong, disturbing images of fading into nothingness, withering away, or dying abound.

The custody disputes, therefore, serve the function of defending against the severing of a crucial or symbiotic attachment, or the psychological death of themselves. In general there are three differ-

ent ways in which they respond to their inner desperation and extreme separation anxiety. First, some remain diffusely dependent or actively cling to the spouse or child and will not allow the divorce or the visits. Second, some defend against the threat of abandonment and emptiness by a pseudo-autonomous, counterdependent stance, aggressively protecting themselves and their children, refusing to capitulate to anything lest they lose part of themselves. Thirdly others are markedly conflicted about attachment and separation and oscillate from dependency to counterdependency. This is manifested in abrupt, contradictory shifts. At times they are compliant, at other times, over the same issues, they are resistant and negative. It is useful to elaborate on each of these dependent, counterdependent, and oscillating states.

Dependency

The parents in this group basically maintain a dependent attachment to the spouse or child. Some diffusely dependent individuals refuse to acknowledge the separation as permanent. They continue to wear their wedding rings, introduce themselves as a spouse, send flowers and presents on anniversaries, enter the home without permission, and try to engage their ex-partner in long personal discussions. Despite ample evidence that there is no chance of reconciliation, they continue to fantasize getting back together. One man maintained a patient vigil, awaiting reconciliation, despite the message from his wife that she would "prefer a slow, painful, laborious torture."

In general, these people are characterized by emotional and social isolation. Though some appear outwardly friendly, they have little capacity to initiate or maintain mutually gratifying intimate relations with other adults. They are also socially isolated and, out of loneliness, stay involved with their spouse. During the actual marriage, these persons shared few real pleasures or emotional interchanges with their spouse. Often they had separate interests (spectator sports, repairing cars, attending business meetings, maintaining the house and garden). They hold a kind of fantasy about their marriage and spouse, and despite much expressed dissatisfaction by their partners and a clear absence of intimacy in the marriage, they nevertheless continue to believe that their partner feels the same attachment and commitment to them. In this respect their psychological profile is likely to correspond to that of people who cherish idealized images of the other, as discussed in chapter 3.

- Mr. A. talked about his fourteen-year marriage as though it were an extended honeymoon, and he was shocked by his wife's

announcement that it was over. He had no idea that there was "trouble in paradise," as he felt their relationship was "idyllic."

As the marriage and family dissolve, they continue their attachment to their spouse in the same way, experiencing intimacy at a distance. They stay involved with the spouse on a fantasy level and continue the same emotionally distant, vague, pseudo-mutual pattern of relating, assuming they are very much a part of the family, to the chagrin and fury of the separating spouse. These spouses do not express much anger directly, rather they are passively aggressive:

- Mr. A. took a morally superior view, seeing his wife as pathetic. "Frankly, my daughter and I feel sorrow and pity for my wife, who is underweight and seems to be floundering. I hope she can get it together." His anger was submerged in patronizing and condescending concern.
- Mr. K. was ingratiating and obsequious. Despite his wife's intense, clearly expressed wish to get him out of her life, he phoned her frequently. He asked her advice on numerous trivial matters—for example, what present to buy his daughter—and expressed humble gratitude for her help and hurt puzzlement at her frustrated anger.

Others infuriate their spouses by forgetting to do things when and as they promised. They bring the children home late or forget to pick them up on time. They lose toys, clothes, or schoolbooks on the visits, or take their children on the kind of outings that drive the spouse into a frenzy of anxiety. At choice moments (for example, when the other is ready to leave), they provoke a fight to keep the attachment, albeit negative.

These passive-aggressive maneuvers keep the dispute, the relationship with the spouse, and hence themselves emotionally alive. If the spouse does not return or remain involved with them, these dependent persons sometimes try far more active strategies to sustain the relationship. They lavish gifts, beg to resume the marriage, or become withholding—bargaining their resources (money and children)—or when really desperate, blackmail by threatening harm.

- Mr. L. lost thirty-two pounds and could not sleep. He was totally obsessed with his wife's leaving and fantasied reconciliation. He threw himself at her feet, clinging to her. He sent flowers,

left love notes, and chased her van when she came to see the children in order to talk to her, hoping she "might come round." He entered mediation planning to use this forum to reconcile. When his efforts failed, he became extremely angry and vindictive, using threats of legal measures to restrain her, vowing to leave her financially destitute. He felt that if he punished her for abandoning him and their daughters, she might come back.

By and large, these parents have little understanding of the children's needs separate from their own and use the children in a number of ways to gratify their own needs. Depending on the sex and age of the child, this may lead to incipient pathologies in the parent-child relationship. For example, some men substitute their early-adolescent daughters for their spouses so that the child becomes the new fantasy object. This leads to disturbing, diffusely sexualized relationships between father and daughter.

- Rather than maintain a fantasy attachment to his wife, Mr. A. turned to his twelve-year-old daughter and developed a mutually affectionate, adoring, seductive romantic relationship with her. The daughter would cook the meals, and nightly the father and daughter would eat dinner by candlelight and then cuddle in bed watching TV. His relationship with his daughter undid his feelings of abandonment and provided a feeling of connection and emotional support. His only complaint was that he felt helpless in disciplining his daughter, a feeling that came from his unwillingness to exert any authority lest she withdraw. His only form of discipline was to cajole or sweet-talk her into doing special favors for him. Additionally, he protected himself from feeling abandoned by projecting his feelings onto her. He saw the abandonment as happening to her, not to himself. He saw her as having lived in a world of bliss and being unprepared for the separation. "Just a few weeks ago her life was serene and now it is in shambles. My wife left the house bare, and it was a trauma for Jane to find things gone." To add some stability for the child, he went out and bought her as much as he could. His daughter did not experience the father's actions as supportive but as pressures to hold paradise together.

Typically, grade-school children are used for emotional support: These children essentially become peers and parents to their mothers and fathers, monitoring and guarding the vital signs of their parents'

well-being. Their constant presence is required to stave off loneliness and emptiness.¹

- "My husband left and Peter is all I have left, and now he's trying to take him too!" Mrs. R. cried. Claiming that she was "slowly dying inside, a plant without roots and water," Mrs. R. depended on eight-year-old Peter for her survival. She became depressed and extremely panicky when he was not in the house and often asked him to sleep with her. She could not permit him to spend more than one night away from her, so that visits to his father were constrained by her needs.

Mothers of very young children may transfer their symbiotic needs from the spouse to the child in an effort to create the illusion of a union that will never be broken. Hence they cannot allow the child to separate and individuate from them.

- Mrs. W. had a very deprived early history. Her mother was an alcoholic, and she spent extensive time in an orphanage and foster home. She married her boss, a father figure, and became very dependent on him. When her husband lost his job, she became enraged about his inability to support her and the marriage ended. She became completely centered around her preschool son. His toys were placed in every room of the house including hers and the bathroom. She enmeshed him in her own conflicts and felt his every need and anxiety. She was as afraid for his physical safety and survival as she was for her own. Both of them experienced severe separation anxieties from one another when he left for school and when he visited his father.

In all of the cases described above, the children felt highly valued and necessary to the parent's survival. They also felt burdened by the emotional demands and worried about failing to sustain the parent. However, not all parents transfer their emotional dependency onto their children. Many children of parents with dependent personalities are used merely as bridges to reach the ex-spouse, as instruments to effect reconciliation, weapons to punish an errant mate, or simply as a toy to be played with for a while, for diversion and amusement. These children are important mainly in terms of the parents' relationship with the spouse. At other times, preoccupied with their own needs, they give little attention to the children, who are consequently forgotten, ignored, or abruptly left. Despite the dispute over the child, these parents can leave the children unattended

for long hours. The children feel inconsequential, unwanted, rejected, and that they do not exist by any right of their own.

Counterdependency

In contrast to parents who are diffusely or actively dependent, others fend off underlying dependency needs and intense fears of merging with another by developing a pseudo-autonomous stance. They attempt to present themselves as being extremely independent, actively in control of their lives, and totally self-sufficient. They are rigid and dictatorial in their thinking and refuse to compromise, comply, or cooperate. They reject their ex-spouse's proposals or suggestions outright. "I won't let him influence me one iota." They become furious at any implication that their ex-spouse or anyone else "is going to tell [them] what to do." In fact, they often want nothing to do with the ex-spouse; they are reluctant to talk or to meet. In short, they want their spouse out of their own and the children's lives. This tough, angry stance frames the dispute. Their dependency and lack of clear boundaries of self are belied by their intense oppositionalism. Their sense of self is so brittle that they are compelled to remain coldly rigid and distant and to react to any request with a categorical no. They hold on to their position tightly lest they waver, collapse, and lose their own separateness. On those few occasions when their defenses partially or temporarily collapse, these parents experience overwhelming confusion and panic.

Most of these counterdependent parents are women, who historically report intense dependent relationships with early caretakers from whom it was difficult to separate. The marriage was often conceived as a way of breaking these ties and leaving home but quickly became a reenactment of earlier unresolved individuation conflicts—that is, they replaced their dependency on their mothers with dependency on their spouses. During the marriage they felt they had been too passive, molding themselves submissively to their partner's wishes and expectations. The divorce represents to the parent, and indeed often is, a positive step forward in the individuation process. However, they pursue their separateness with a rigidity and aggressiveness that is provocative and frustrating. They are not able to accomplish the final major step in the individuation process: They cannot say yes, cooperate, or compromise without feeling submergence of self. They have not yet learned how to work with others.

- Mrs. H. grew up "loving my mother but hating how she raised us. She made all of us children very dependent on her. She loved our dependency and fed on it." Mrs. H. left home to marry

her childhood sweetheart when she was twenty-three years old. She became extremely dependent on her husband. "I looked up him. I was pleased by his telling me what to do. In the early years I was a doormat. I allowed myself to be swallowed up by him. Originally I liked being a slave. I let him sap every bit of my energy for twenty-five years." However, when she began to grow, her husband did not like the change and put pressure on her to comply with his needs and expectations. She felt oppressed and depressed. As the relationship deteriorated, she cried out for help but he turned away from her, saying, "In life you have to walk the valley alone." At this point she began to defend against her feelings of dependency on him, "though it took me a long time to believe that I had the possibility of getting out." Their relationship ended in legal divorce but extended into a six-year child custody dispute.

In attempting to counter her dependent wishes and perceived fear of being engulfed by him, she claimed she did not want "him running my life nor my life revolving around his." Hence she would make unilateral decisions with respect to her son. For instance, she changed schools and moved thirty miles away without even informing him. She dictated his access arrangements and constantly interfered with his plans when it suited her needs. She misperceived his requests and concerns as evidence that he was trying to undercut her authority (her independence). When he wished to discuss where his son would go to school and his concern for the child's hygiene and clothes, she felt he was trying to "impose his values" on her and the child. When he made reasonable requests, for example, to increase a visit by one hour in order to return from a weekend camping trip in nonpeak traffic, she imagined he was trying to control her and categorically refused. Despite her protestations that she wanted to "get him off [her] back," this woman remained overly focused on her ex-husband's opinions. For example, when he told her he liked her new boyfriend, her response was, "How dare you say this to me!" She was defending against her feelings that she depended on him for evaluation or cared what he thought. Her underlying dependency could hence be seen in her counterdependent actions and her complaints about him. (If truly separate, she could have ignored her spouse and moved on). In mediation, when her ex-husband became conciliatory, she became more oppositional. When an attempt was made to establish a shared custody agreement that would involve them talking regularly and making mutual decisions, she

first agreed and then experienced overwhelming panic and fear of being submerged in the old relationship again. She withdrew her agreement and reinstated her stubborn, oppositional stance. Similarly, when a plan involving very minor changes in the current schedule was proposed, Mrs. H. rejected it, becoming progressively more vehement that her ex-husband was a "psychopath" to whom she would never submit. Each time her concerns were addressed and a new plan that logically eliminated her previous objections was presented, she found another reason why the plan would not work. Despite her continued rejection of proposals, she blamed her ex-spouse for the lack of settlement and insisted on returning to court.

Unfortunately, these counterdependent or pseudo-autonomous parents tend to repeat the separation-individuation conflicts with their children. Consequently, the parents' relationship with their children is often characterized by a harsh belligerence and cool distancing, especially as the child enters adolescence. Generally, they need to have their child merged with them. In part, this means having their child physically near. Though demanding closeness, when with the child they often have considerable difficulty being available and providing warmth and nurturance. In part, they need to have their child's views and feelings merged with their own and have difficulty tolerating their child's separate individual needs or personal strivings, as well as concern, love for, and loyalty to the other parent. Because of their wish to be rid of their spouse, they are often rigid in their belief that the spouse is not important to the child. Indeed, they want to get the ex-spouse out of their life and the child also. To this end they attempt to elicit the child's support of their views and at times force the child's expression of preference. Dynamically, they tend to see the child either as themselves (especially their vulnerable, dependent aspects) or as their ex-spouse. Their perceptions of the child as their ex-mate often result in their fighting with the child as a substitute spouse. When, for example, the child rebels against the parent's demands, he or she is perceived not as having legitimate requests but as being manipulated, controlled by, or aligned with the other parent.

- Mrs. H. was very distrustful of her eleven-year-old son's motives and felt the child was trying to manipulate and walk all over her (much like her husband). She often saw the child as "sneaky and a liar," much again like her "manipulating ex-husband." Father and son were fused in her mind, and she

would not submit to either. When the child talked back she saw this as a reflection of her husband. The son reported, "My mother gets mad when she thinks she hear dad's voice." Mrs. H. acknowledged this. "he's voicing his father, his father is pushing me through him."

On the other hand, when they overidentify with their child, they see their vulnerable aspects in the child and act as if the child indeed has these same vulnerabilities. Children are, by and large, good receptacles for these parents' split-off dependency needs because they are, in fact, dependent.

- Mrs. H. imagined that her husband was dominating and "trapping" her son, much as he had once oppressed her in marriage. She was alarmed when she saw her son "do what I have done" and became furious at her child for "not standing up to him." Her own submissiveness was deposited onto the son. She was intent on protecting her child-self from the husband's domination and resisted her ex-spouse by pressuring her son not to submit to his father.

Oscillating Dependency

Some disputants reveal elements of both the dependent and counterdependent types. They demonstrate marked instability in behavior, feelings, and attitudes towards themselves and others in abrupt, radical shifts in preferences regarding custody arrangements and corresponding feelings about their ex-spouse and child, which make resolution frustratingly difficult.

- Mrs. O. clung to various contradictory demands. She wanted the father always to be available by telephone. Then she decided this was unrealistic but later insisted on it again. She would sometimes call and ask him to help her out with household chores or pick up their son at school. At other times, she would call to forbid him to go near the school, scream at him to get out of her house, and threaten to call the police.

Like Mrs. O., over time or even within a session, these parents switch between an expressed wish for closeness and dependency and an angry pseudo-independence. Rather than an unrelenting negativity, a categorical no of the counterdependent type, these parents flip between yes and no and appear markedly unstable in their attitudes and behavior. The basic issue is a marked separation-individuation conflict that is externalized, acted out, and manifested in

these mutually contradictory stances. This involves not merely an obsessive or indecisive rumination, a going back and forth in one's mind, recognizing alternatives but remaining indecisive. In these cases, the contradictory states are segregated so that when one is operating, the other is split off and dissociated. The person is unaware and therefore unable to integrate their opposing views or contradictory feelings into a total realistic picture. These segregated views and accompanying emotions contribute to their psychological impasse to accepting the divorce and resolving the access disputes. They are unable to examine their disparate views. As they begin to contemplate one side of their ambivalence, intolerable feelings are evoked (either fear of abandonment or merging), they despair and retreat to the opposite side of their conflicted wishes, evoking once-again untenable feelings. Typically, parents manifesting these patterns of behavior have borderline personality disorders. Often they split off and project unacceptable feelings onto others in their social world and then struggled in conflictual relations with those others. At times this is the psychological basis of the splits and tremendous conflicts engendered in their surrounding social environments.

These parents cannot tolerate closeness or being alone. They cannot allow intimacy lest they merge; they cannot allow distance lest they feel abandoned. During their marriage they cling and distance, moving back and forth, in and out of the relationship. They can neither engage nor let go and are at an impasse in their own intrapsychic growth, which has resulted in the impasse with their spouse. The process is repeated in the marital dissolution in which they cannot tolerate settling or not settling. In mediation they are willing to negotiate one day and feel furious and betrayed the next. Settling their custody dispute is tantamount to giving up part of themselves. As they move toward an agreement, they begin to feel anxious, incomplete, empty and stranded. As they move away from settlement, their equilibrium is re-established, but they are left with unresolved real life tasks.

- Mrs. O. had great difficulty coming to closure on her final agreement. She would first agree on a plan but then kept asking for sundry addenda and limitations to the contract, which made the agreement increasingly vague, punitive, and unworkable. This plan would be scratched, a new, opposite one developed, and the process would begin again.

These borderline parents usually become intensely involved with one of the counselors-mediators in a rapid transference that illustrates their underlying disorder. They are friendly, talkative, gra-

to get away, he is not you. He can distance himself from his father and is not trapped and at his mercy. He knows his father responds to reasoned arguments and so he offers him explanations, thereby avoiding conflict." Mrs. H. was also encouraged to allow her son "to stake out his own territory, to be a little boy and make a few mistakes. He experiences your protection as you hanging on and wishing him not to grow up." We also advised Mrs. H. to talk with her ex-husband because "John needs a model of someone who can be appropriately assertive. When you refuse to talk with Mr. H., it places John in the middle of the conflict, and the child feels he needs to defend his father. This in turn leads you to believe that your son is speaking for his father and assuming his views."

With those who are intensely ambivalent about dependency and markedly erratic in their demands, counseling and mediation need to be more strategic. These individuals, who are typically borderline personalities, cannot tolerate insight or clarification of their intrapsychic dynamics, nor can they easily be supported by a warm, empathic counselor. Often they perceive the mediator to be depriving them of what they need and want. Alternatively, they fear engulfment and are likely to distance themselves by rejecting the counselor and refusing to reach a settlement. Paradoxical interventions, where the counselor takes on and argues for one side of their ambivalent views and feelings, can sometimes provoke the other side, allowing them to be maneuvered toward a settlement. Reality-testing, by continually juxtaposing the different strengths and weaknesses of a particular action or agreement, mitigates their tendency to split and only perceive one aspect at one time. Finally, it is often wise to break the agreement into small parts, and develop the final settlement one piece at a time. In this way they are not overwhelmed and can hold out by refusing to settle on other issues. It is to be expected that such parents will agree on all but one small issue, which they may need to have resolved by the court. In this situation, it is especially important that they return to their attorneys and the court with all the issues they have agreed on in place and those they still need to resolve clearly delineated. This latter strategy prevents their disrupting and rescinding all progress made.

Last, it is important to be alert to the tendency of these parents to project their various contradictory states onto others, and hence play out their ambivalences externally by having their attorneys, therapists, family members, and others take on various disputing roles. In