

TEARING THE CHILD APART

The Contribution of Narcissism, Envy, and Perverse Modes of Thought to Child Custody Wars

Michael B. Donner, PhD
Oakland, California

This article takes a psychoanalytic approach to questions usually considered to be matters of the family court system. The psychological effects of high-conflict divorce on children are well known, but what motivates their parents is less understood. Pathological narcissism, pathological envy, disavowal, and a perverse attitude toward reality can produce unending conflicts over visitation and custody. Fighting over seemingly insignificant matters can manage aggression and ward off psychic collapse. These families are frequently referred to coparenting counseling or psychoeducational groups; however, the author proposes that psychoanalytically oriented treatment can best address these parents' unconscious wishes to damage or destroy their own children and the perverse character structure that enables parents to negate their roles in tearing their children apart.

Keywords: child custody, divorce, envy, perversion, narcissism

In my own practice as a therapist and a special master, a court-appointed mediator, I have seen a father who had had joint custody for 7 years who wanted his ex-wife arrested for theft because his son returned home without the blue jeans he was wearing when he went for an overnight with the mother. The same child's mother took photographs of the boy in the bath to document the bug bites the child received while on a camping trip with his father. The mother called Children's Protective Services. I have also treated a mother who moved to another county because she believed that the court would give her primary custody, thus depriving the father of regular contact with the child. She didn't want to share custody and spend less time with her son. The ex-husband of another client returned to court, insisting on his right of first refusal because his ex-wife attended Bible study for an hour each week and left their child with his stepfather. The same father's telephone call

Michael B. Donner, PhD, independent practice, Oakland, California.

I would like to thank Dianne Elise, PhD, Eileen Keller, PhD, Elise Miller, PhD, and Judith Wallerstein, PhD, for their generous and thoughtful comments.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Michael B. Donner, PhD, 6355 Telegraph Avenue, #202, Oakland, CA. E-mail: mbds@sbcglobal.net

to his son on his birthday was considered harassment by the mother, who sought a restraining order to prevent future calls.

As many as half of all marriages end in divorce, and 90% of parents make their own custody arrangements. Fewer than 4% of custody disputes result in litigation (American Psychological Association, 1994; Melton, Petrila, Poythress, & Slobogin, 1987). Nevertheless, according to Johnston (1994), citing Maccoby and Mnookin (1992), conflicted parenting was identified in 24% of families 3 to 4 years after the parents' separation. These conflicts take an enormous toll on the legal system, and on the parents and children caught up in them (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2002).

The impact of divorce on adults is profound. According to Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989), half of the women and a third of the men in her study were still experiencing intense anger 10 years after they divorced. Anyone who has worked with clients embroiled in high-conflict divorces has examples of how intensely angry these parents really are. The psychological effects of high-conflict divorce on children are well known, but there is much less discussion about the psychological characteristics of the adults responsible for the conflict, and even less discussion of how the psychological problems of the parents both precede and influence the ongoing conflicts following the divorce (Silverman, 1992).

In this article, I take a psychoanalytic approach to questions usually considered to be matters of the family court system. The parents I discuss here are narcissistically vulnerable and overwhelmed by pathological amounts of envy. In addition to serious issues such as religious training or geographical dislocation, they fight over minimal differences in visitation, overreact to real or imagined slights, and seem to ignore their children's need for stable and secure relationships with both parents. They too wage intense battles over what might seem like insignificant issues. The parents who are the focus of this article seem blind to the effects their behavior has on their children and unable to think beyond their own emotional needs. I believe that parents who tear their children apart with interminable custody battles ward off psychic collapse by fighting for custody. Perverse modes of thought permit them to indulge their rage and aggression against the other parent and against the children who cause them so much despair. The perpetual turmoil of the child custody process permits these parents to hold out for the possibility of a perfect solution. They act as though there is a custody schedule that will be "just right" for them and their children. However, I believe that these perpetual struggles serve to hold off hateful and murderous wishes directed against the other parent and against their own children. If hatred is a reversal of suffering, as Kernberg (1992) has suggested, then these parents remain both victim and victimizers in their own internal struggle.

The psychoanalytic literature is surprisingly quiet on the subject of these kinds of conflicts. A search of the 34,000 references in the databases of the American Psychoanalytic Association for the words *custody* or *high conflict* in book or journal article titles yielded no results. Books and articles about divorce and custody that include psychoanalytic concepts mostly concern the effects of divorce on children. Most if not all of the literature on divorce has been written for lawyers, judges, parents, and nonpsychoanalytic therapists; it focuses primarily on how high-conflict divorce affects children and only describes the parents in broad strokes. Although narcissism, separation-individuation, dependent attachment, counter- and oscillating dependency, and unresolved attachment issues have been labeled as major factors in high-conflict divorces (Cohen, 1998; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Kruk, 1992; Rand, 1997; Wallerstein, 1991), these characteristics are rarely examined in any detail. Considering the pervasiveness of divorce in our society, the

literature is quite limited in its scope. Where the literature has considered psychoanalytic concepts, narcissism and narcissistic vulnerabilities are referred to as the most common psychological struggle of parents engaged in high-conflict divorce. Narcissism has been used to explain how some parents

deny and dismiss the value of the other parent to the child . . . believe that they, more than anyone else, know what is best for their child . . . cannot see how, or even why, they should share parenting of their child with their ex-partner. (Johnston & Girdner, 1998, Common Characteristics of Abducting Parents section, ¶1)

Parents who are humiliated and ashamed by the divorce may try to blame the other parent for their marital problems in order to divest themselves of responsibility for the marriage's failure. For these individuals, failure is intolerable and can precipitate severe anxiety and depression. In more extreme cases, these feelings can result in frankly paranoid and delusional beliefs about the other parent, like one mother who always stood ready to call the police at custody exchanges, believing her ex-husband might try to kill or assault her, although he had never been violent. She reported that she feared for her life at every exchange.

But as I hope to suggest, narcissism alone cannot always explain the intractable battles, financial devastation, self-destructive behaviors, or some parents' willingness to psychologically harm and sometimes kill their own children. Although there are a number of dynamic variables that may contribute to high-conflict divorces, in this article I describe only those situations in which narcissism, pathological envy, disavowal, and perverse thinking all combine to create a mode of thinking and living that sustains some of these never-ending battles. The term *high-conflict divorce*, used to describe dramatic and chronic divorces, is too all inclusive. Within this category is a subgroup of parents whose behavior seems so obviously self-defeating and destructive to their children, yet they ignore this apparent reality. These parents are the subject of this article.

Narcissism

To understand the contribution of narcissism to custody wars, it is necessary to examine the relationship between narcissism and parenting. In normal development, the mother is initially experienced as an extension of the infant's self. As awareness of actual separateness sets in, anxiety, pain, and frustration become part of the infant's experience. This awareness of others also comes with a realization of dependency, which stimulates additional anxiety.

Winnicott's (1960) "good-enough" mother protects the infant from being overwhelmed by helplessness through attentiveness and by satisfying the infant's needs (and reinforcing infant omnipotence). Gradual introduction of reality allows the infant to tolerate reality without despair. These experiences lead to the development of healthy narcissism, which allows for spontaneity, creativity, and, ultimately, the ability to love (Freud, 1914/1957; Kohut, 1971). The good-enough mother allows the next generation of parents the experience of born-again narcissism (Freud, 1914/1957) in a new role of parenting. In "On Narcissism" Freud (1914/1957) discussed two forms of love: love for oneself (ego-libido), and love for the other, attachment love (object-libido). According to Freud, giving up one's own personality to attach to another, the state of being in love, is the "highest phase of development of which object-libido is capable" (p. 76). Attach-

ment—the love one feels for the other as opposed to the love one feels coming from the other—is the opposite of narcissism and narcissistic love (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983).

The love and adoration parents feel for their children, however, does not always reflect attachment. Parents who love their child only because the child is a part of them, or because the child loves and needs them, are experiencing a narcissistic type of love, a form of love for oneself. The “attitude of affectionate parents toward their children . . . is a revival and reproduction of their own narcissism” (Freud, 1914/1957, pp. 90–91). In other words, having children stirs up narcissism in all parents. As Freud noted, some aspects of parental love are fundamentally childish and magical in nature. He described certain aspects of parenting as “narcissism born again” (p. 91). This return of narcissism allows for the suspension of certain of the achievements of development that allow for attachment. Reality testing gives way to a certain extent in most parents. For example, most parents see their newborn baby as beautiful, not as red and wrinkled. Other parents go to great lengths to exert complete control over the child’s environment, as if doing so can enhance the child’s intellect and future ability or magically protect the child from illness or disease. These fantasies of a perfect life for their child are on a continuum, ranging from dressing the child in natural fabrics or breast feeding only to attempting to control every aspect of the child’s life, including choice of music, colors, light, sounds, and so on. The underlying fantasy is to create the perfect child and the perfect life, “His Majesty the Baby as we once fancied ourselves” (p. 91). It isn’t at all clear that this is done for the child’s benefit; rather, it appears to be for the parents’ gratification, to make up for all their own hurt and disappointment experienced in their own childhoods. The narcissism of the parent who only clothes his or her infant in natural fabrics, or who anxiously worries about the “best” preschool, is gratifying the parent’s own needs, but not at the child’s expense.

There is a great deal of inconsistency in the literature regarding the use of the terms *narcissistic*, *narcissism*, *narcissistic personality disorder*, and *pathological narcissism* (Auerbach, 1990). However, the parents who engage in the kind of bitter custody disputes I address in this article no longer have the capacity to consider their children’s needs and are acting not just to gratify their own needs, but are now doing so at the child’s expense. The child in such a situation is treated primarily as an extension of the parent, not as a person with needs and feelings that may be different than the parent’s, at least in regard to the child’s needs and feelings about the other parent. This sort of narcissism has been described as pathological narcissism (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983, p. 361).

When self-love does not lead to love of others, when it is love for “what he himself is, what he himself was, what he himself would like to be, someone who was once part of himself” (Freud, 1914/1957, p. 90), narcissism is pathological. Pathological narcissism is characterized by a self-centered view, in which others are not viewed as individuals in their own right but rather as extensions of the self. Differences are ignored or, worse, experienced as attacks. Parents with pathological narcissism look to their own children to have their needs for love and approval met. When their children cannot respond, these parents experience the same rage, anxiety, and depression that they felt as infants when their own caretaker was not available to meet their needs.

When a parent with this sort of narcissism loses his or her relationship with a child because of divorce, the consequences of such a response can be quite profound. To ward off the despair and helplessness they feel, such parents will engage in behaviors intended to provide them with omnipotent control over their world. When a parent with this sort of narcissism (for the sake of brevity, I use the term *narcissistic parent* to describe these individuals) loses someone that she or he professes to love, she or he doesn’t just mourn the loss of a loved one; rather, she or he has the experience that something that should be

available to them is not. It is not the lost person who is grieved, but rather what that person provided. The loss is recognized in the same way as an infant recognizes hunger. The feeling is painful, but there is no “longing, mourning or guilt” (Kernberg, 1974, p. 495). There is a risk of “falling apart” (Kernberg, 1974, p. 495), especially when the loss is of someone who is a part of his or her self-concept, someone like a child or spouse who holds the narcissistic parent together and creates that parent’s sense of having an identity. These parents experience a kind of psychic disintegration, and, among other things, they lose their capacity to relate to and think about the feelings of others. These are some of the “primitive agonies” that Winnicott (1974, p. 104) so eloquently described. For these parents, having children or a spouse provides them with more than love and family; their relationships hold them together psychologically.

A parent with pathological narcissism who engages in a custody dispute may wind up fighting for total control over how to parent the child. Others become entangled in never-ending battles for custody. When a spouse leaves and takes away the children, the narcissistic parent, under the threat of an impending breakdown, responds in a profoundly defensive manner in order to remain whole. These parents experience something akin to Winnicott’s (1974, p. 103) “fear of breakdown.” The narcissistic parent, on the verge of breaking down, strives for complete control over the child and the ex-spouse. Grandiosity manifesting as a certainty about what is best for the child, omnipotent control over where the ex-spouse lives or what the child eats, and magical thinking that takes the form of a belief that only that parent knows what is best for the child all serve to provide a container, and a means of holding off the breakdown.

Religious training, choices of schools, babysitters, clothing, and more may all become the focal point of a high-conflict divorce. Some parents completely abandon their children.

It may seem ludicrous to spend tens of thousands of dollars on legal fees to win the right to provide a few hours of childcare, or any of the myriad issues these parents fight over. However, these parents are fighting not for time with their children but instead to remain psychically whole.

Envy

Thus far, I have demonstrated how some of the behaviors of parents locked into custody wars are characteristic of pathological narcissism that serves to ward off breaking down. Pathological narcissism and omnipotent defenses account for many of the issues these parents fight about.

As much as pathological narcissism may be an ingredient in high-conflict divorces, it does not explain the rage and anger these parents feel, or the aggressive, destructive elements of many high-conflict custody battles. The narcissistic struggle to remain psychically whole by winning a few hours of time each week or gaining control over which medical practitioner a child can see may avert an even more problematic breakdown and loss of control. However, it is not pathological narcissism that allows a few parents to kill their child before the eyes of the other parent, but an upsurge of primitive envy. Primitive envy is aroused when what is envied is beyond the hope of acquisition (Boris, 1991).

It often seems that the purpose of some custody battles is not simply to possess—or even gain half of—the child. Victory and gratification in these battles may involve more than just having more time. Instead, it is taking the child away from the other parent, what I think of as the psychological equivalent of cutting the baby in half, that provides relief

and gratification, not the possession of the child. The other parent must be damaged and destroyed for the envious parent to reestablish his or her psychic equilibrium.

The battles between parents in high-conflict divorces may appear to be the result of jealousy. Because the distinction between jealousy and envy is frequently blurred, for the purpose of this discussion I define jealousy as the anger that comes when something has been taken away, and the anger is directed at the person who has taken it; in contrast, envy is “a spoiling hostility” (Segal, 1983, p. 270). The more the child is desired and valued, paradoxically, the more the envious parent has to spoil, damage, or devalue the child. For these parents, the real or threatened loss of a child to the other parent is more overwhelming in part because the child is valuable to that other parent. Kernberg noted that in certain narcissistic personalities “a person considered attractive or valuable by other people . . . stirs up unconscious envy and greed . . . the need to take possession of and an unconscious tendency to devalue and spoil that which is envied” (Kernberg, 1974, p. 487).

Envy was beautifully illustrated in a paper by Adrienne Harris (2001). She presented this tale from a poem by William Langland:

An envious man and a covetous man, walking in a wood, are met by an elf. The elf promises to grant one man a wish on the condition that the second man will receive twice as much. The covetous man decides to let the other man make the wish so that he will reap double. The envious man thinks carefully and says, “Make me blind in one eye.” (Harris, 2001, p. 1)

This story graphically conveys the feelings of the envious parent, the wish to damage and torment, and the unspoken and unacknowledged pleasure in the suffering of the other parent. It is dangerous to be the object of another’s envious feelings, and envy helps us to understand why some parents are willing to harm themselves so long as the other parent is harmed.

It is painfully clear that devastating the other parent is far more important than having more time and a better relationship with the child. Envy, unlike jealousy, is an angry desire to take something away and spoil it. In these parents whose narcissistic defenses have broken down, the loss of their desired relationship with their children to the other parent is experienced as a violent persecutory attack. The feeling that the other parent has something good leads to behavior to “take back” what is felt to be stolen. The desire is to retaliate against the other parent’s theft, regardless of the impact on the child, the other parent, or even one’s self.

Recently, a parent I evaluated years ago in a custody evaluation called to tell me how wrong I had been about the other parent. I had recommended joint custody. She told me with evident satisfaction that the older children had refused visitation with their father and that their angry father had not spoken to them in a year. She also informed me, with obvious regret, that she was still unable to wrest the younger children away from him, but informed me of her belief that in time they would leave him as well. Her relish at having taken the older children away from their father was tempered by the fact that he still had a relationship with the younger children. She seemed to be under the impression that when they too had abandoned their father, she would feel happy and satisfied. Of course, this is an unlikely outcome. Even in victory, she has spent a dozen years, and tens of thousands of dollars, fighting for something that has left her empty and her children alienated from their ineffective but by no means evil father. She cannot think about the devastating effects on those children whose father she has manipulated into rejecting them.

Even her call to me represented part of the interminable cycle she was in. Whether or not I had erred when I recommended that the father share custody, the mother now had

what she said she had wanted, full-time custody of the older children. But being right was clearly no satisfaction at all. Unsatisfied, she sought to gain some relief by attacking, and therefore diminishing, me. Convinced that I was satisfied with my recommendations, she called in an attempt to destroy some pleasure that she thought I felt regarding her case. The idea that years later, I am feeling good about myself at her expense provides a context for her envious attack on me, trying to rob me of my pleasure and destroy what she must feel is my control and dominance over her. She does not feel good because she has her children, so she seeks to feel good by taking something good away from me, my presumed satisfaction with a job well done.

Envy is an endless trap, because the mechanism of envy does not allow for satisfaction or gratification. Regardless of the outcome of a custody battle, the parent consumed by envy never receives satisfaction. The pain these parents feel is always attributed to the loss of something. They act as if quantity is the governing principle, not quality. Yet nothing ever seems to be enough. Thus, a parent who has 40% custody is not satisfied, believing that only 50% will do. Of course, often these parents are not successful in their custody battles, but even if they are, 50%, 60%, nothing is enough, because nothing ever seems to satisfy their need. Newspaper accounts tell of parents who kill their children rather than accept the status quo of a court order. Yet it seems that these cases so often end in suicide, an action that suggests that nothing, including the destruction of the child, relieves the pain.

Those of us who treat parents in the process of divorce, or their children, know that these titanic battles are pointless. It is difficult to understand why our clients cannot see things in the same way. The reason for this seems to be that, regardless of what the parent gains, he or she can only see what it is that they don't have. Such parents often claim to take great satisfaction and pleasure in their relationship with their children, yet there is rarely evidence of this. Whatever pleasure is experienced in parenting gives way to envy and constant attempts to damage and destroy the source of the pain.

The destruction of children is not merely the result of high-conflict divorces, but may sometimes actually be the goal. It seems painfully clear to the observer that custody battles can do nothing else but harm the children involved. Therefore, I suggest that the purpose of some of these struggles is to harm and destroy the children. Klein (1956/1986) believed that envy results in attacks on what is perceived as good, because what brings satisfaction is also the source of pain and frustration. Because it is the child who is the source of pleasure, it is also the child who is the reason for the pain and frustration a parent feels following separation. As Kernberg (1974) suggested, persons considered desirable by others stir up envy, and this results in the desire to spoil that which is desirable. Because they are not completely available, the children of a marriage, once the source of goodness and pleasure, are now the source of pain and frustration. Unconsciously, and sometimes consciously, the children must be destroyed. Although the envious, destructive parent seems to want nothing more than the child, the true motives seem to be the infliction of pain that loss of possession causes the other parent and the infliction of pain on the children, who are experienced as the true source of frustration.

Disavowal and Perverse Thinking

Pathological narcissism in embattled parents creates intense vulnerability to loss. Envy explains the aggression toward the children that is part of the basis for the battle. It doesn't appear to be the conscious intent of these parents to harm their children. To the contrary,

these battles are felt to be righteously waged in the name of the children. Yet if these parents only wanted to protect their children, they would not be subjecting them to the ongoing torment custody battles produce. In turn, if they only wanted to harm them, they could do so in much more direct ways, for example, by disappearing from their children's lives or even by killing them. As terrible as the conflict is for children, the ongoing struggles I've outlined above may be a compromise that prevents the parent from doing something much worse—a compromise that occurs outside of a parent's consciousness.

There are two distinct, contradictory thought processes that operate simultaneously for these parents at war. The first thought, typically the conscious belief, is expressed as love for the children and a seeming willingness to do anything to possess them. The second thought is invariably unconscious and has to do with an actual wish to damage and destroy the children who are the source of pleasure to the other parent and the source of pain to the adversarial parent. For example, although one mother would probably agree that her children are struggling and suffering, she would attribute any difficulties they have to their father. She would recognize that the children are harmed but would ignore her own contribution to their suffering.

Freud described a form of splitting that might be used to explain these parents' harmful actions. In *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (Freud, 1949), he defined two attitudes, one that takes account of reality and one that detaches from reality. This capacity to experience two versions of reality enables a parent to pursue a custody dispute that is harming the child, feel self-righteous about it, see the harm that it does, but then blame the other parent for not giving up the fight. Awareness of the aggressive, destructive feelings toward their children is intolerable, so these parents disavow their knowledge of the harm they are causing. These parents see themselves as committed to the needs of the children and thus irreproachable in their actions.

A father participating in a custody evaluation was refusing to allow his daughter to move to another state with her mother, the child's primary custodian. As the evaluation progressed, the father repeatedly expressed his concerns about the impact of the evaluation on the child, who was having regular nightmares. The father blamed the mother for putting the child in the middle of this dispute and expressed doubts about her love for her child in having done so. He could not acknowledge his own role in instigating and perpetuating the conflict. This parent could see that his daughter was becoming more depressed and anxious as the evaluation went on, but was able to continue the evaluation by telling himself that it was helpful for her. The father was able to indulge his wish to possess his daughter, but had to be able not to think about the effect it was having on her.

Grossman's (1993) construct of "the perverse attitude toward reality" (p. 422) may be used to describe such a parent. Grossman described a probation officer who "turned down the volume on reality" (p. 422), which allowed him to fondle a teenage probationer, knowing it was wrong but paying attention only to that thought that allowed for the gratification of the wish. Here, Grossman used the word *perverse* in the same fashion as Steiner (1982), who defined *perverse* as a "twisting of truth" (p. 243). Steiner noted that in this particular form of perversion, the patient acts as if he or she has no insight, but in fact "seems to have considerable insight which is ignored" (p. 243). A perverse attitude toward reality, in other words, allows a parent to believe that half a baby is better than none while simultaneously knowing that this cannot possibly be so.

The confusion inherent in this perversion of reality can be profound. A mother I was treating complained about court-ordered telephone contact between the father and her daughter during her custodial time. The father was insisting on his right to speak to his daughter during the week the girl was with her mother. My client pointed out that when

the girl was with her father, the mother never felt the need to call. Yet she wanted the father's calls to stop because she couldn't "get him out of [her] head." The patient had a conviction that the father did not exist during her custodial weeks. His telephone calls painfully intruded on this version of her reality. If he didn't call, he didn't exist, for her or her child. The mother did not pay attention to her own thoughts or to my comments about how the lack of contact with the father would feel to her child. If the girl wanted to talk to her father, it was because of some corrupting influence on the part of the father. If the daughter was upset when she was with her mother, it was a result of the time spent with the father. My patient tried and at times could actually "forget" that the father existed. There is a delusional quality to such thinking in a person who is otherwise in touch with reality (Caper, 1998; Shengold, 1995).

In some divorce cases, "the perverse attitude toward reality" (Grossman, 1993, p.) doesn't just allow for the gratification of an unconscious wish, as Grossman described, but is inextricably entwined with aggression and provides support for a sadistic attack on all those who are responsible for the pain of the loss. A father, for example, who wants the mother arrested in front of the children to "protect them" knows the children will wind up in foster care and will be terrified by the experience. Nevertheless, he is consciously gratifying a wish to attack and destroy the mother; he is also, however, gratifying an unconscious wish to damage and destroy the children. The father envies the wife, and thus the children are the object of envy. This stirs up the desire in the envious parent to destroy as much as to possess. As Harris (2001) has noted, it is dangerous to be the object of envy. The child in the middle of parental conflict is endangered because she or he can become the target of the aggressive parent.

Chasseguet-Smirgel (1985) observed the angry, hateful, and destructive elements that underlie perverse beliefs and wrote that "the pervert's hatred" (p. 530) is aimed at reality in general. What is hated is the reality that the infant cannot have what it wants. Reality is not just set aside; Chasseguet-Smirgel believed that it is destroyed. Hurt, anger, and rage act as the engine that drives the behavior, but the concerned, loving, and rational part describes and justifies it (Fonagy, 1999, p. 13). Thus thoughts, feelings, actions, and consequences can be kept separate.

It is not only sadistic, aggressive qualities in these parents that are kept separated, but also masochistic behaviors. Betty Joseph (1982) described "a malignant self-destructiveness" in those who became "more and more absorbed into hopelessness and involved in activities that seem destined to destroy them physically as well as mentally" (p. 1). Many of the parents in these cases devastate not only their children's lives, but also their own. Some parents have sold their homes, cashed in their pensions, and emptied their children's college funds while striving to gain an additional few hours with them. As self-destructive as these battles may be, however, the parents are protected from a more devastating experience of loss and separateness.

Summary

Although many divorces are considered high conflict, only a small percentage of parents behave like the ones I have described. These parents respond to divorce and separation in a particular manner. Narcissistically vulnerable, they are overwhelmed by pathological amounts of envy. The question as to whether these parents have an excess of narcissism or have suffered some breakdown of defenses is beyond the scope of this article; however, the result is a desire to damage and destroy the source of pain, much as a wounded animal,

blinded by pain, will savagely bite and chew its own injuries or attack those around it. Such parents may appear in some situations to be cool, calm, and functioning rationally, but their motives are wholly irrational. Although similar to the splitting of the borderline or dehumanizing behavior of the sadomasochistic psychopath, what we are observing is the surrender of the rational to the irrational in a way that preserves the desire to destroy without having to feel or think about the consequences. These parents are locked in a grim continuum.

There is no simple intervention for these parents, and a description of a typical treatment may well be beyond the scope of this article. Family therapy, coparenting counseling, and parent education groups have their place; however, these psychoeducational programs that emphasize parenting and communication skills have been shown to be insufficient in resolving the kind of high-conflict divorces I have addressed here (Neff & Cooper, 2004). Although cognitive-behavioral interventions, family therapy, and coparenting counseling can be helpful for many, I have observed that the clinicians who could most effectively treat the parents described in this article are those least likely to be working with them. Many of the parents going through a divorce will experience intense emotions, including rage, anxiety, fear, and helplessness. Most can benefit from interventions that help them manage these feelings and that use the supportive and educational aspects of a wide range of treatment interventions. However, these interventions are not intended to address the deep psychological structures detailed here, whereas perverse thinking, unconscious rage, envy, and aggression are characteristics of persons met with every day in psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Programs such as these are not able to address the complex problems of parents overwhelmed by their unconscious desire to hurt or damage their own child.

This makes psychoanalytically informed treatment particularly well suited for parents who tear their children apart. A court order that tells parents not to disparage each other in front of the children will have no impact on a parent whose internal world is dominated by anxiety, fear, rage, and helplessness, because parents who tear their children apart have developed a mode of thought that permits them to recognize that it is wrong for the other parent to disparage them while they continue to disparage the other parent. A long-term treatment that recognizes these modes of thinking, and a therapist trained to assist the patient in modifying them, will ultimately permit these parents to modify their behavior.

Grossman (1996) emphasized the analyst's important role as a spokesman for reality when working with patients who hold a "perverse attitude toward reality" (p. 422). An essential element of successful treatment with these parents must address the perverse modes of thought that allow for the most damaging aspects of these high-conflict divorces. A successful therapeutic intervention must carefully track, identify, and confront the perverse process because perverse modes of thought permit ignoring insight. Therapists treating these patients must not be misled by apparent insight or frustrated by how irrational the patient's behaviors appear. It is for this reason that recognizing and addressing perverse modes of thought is such a crucial component of an effective treatment.

This can only take place in a safe and contained environment. To let go of the battle, these parents must learn of their willingness to hurt their own children, at once the source of a parent's greatest joy and greatest pain. As Kohut observed, the first work of analysis is to address the reality ego to heal the split and integrate the ego (Goldberg, 1975, p. 341). For these parents, divorce means accepting reality and letting go of the illusion of a perfect relationship with their children. This means living with sadness and loss and accepting the painful knowledge that half a baby is not better than none.

In the well-known tale of Solomon, two women appeared before the ancient king in a dispute about a baby. Each claimed the child as her own, so King Solomon offered to cut the baby in half. One woman agreed; the other refused, and offered the child to the first woman. Solomon knew which was the real mother because he believed that a real mother would rather sacrifice her relationship with her child than see it cut in half. Unfortunately, not all parents are willing to make such a sacrifice for their children.

References

- American Psychological Association. (1994). Guidelines for child custody evaluations in divorce proceedings. *American Psychologist*, 49, 677–680.
- Auerbach, J. S. (1990). Narcissism. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 7, 545–564.
- Boris, H. (1991). Black milk—Unconscious envy. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 27, 110–147.
- Caper, R. (1998). Psychopathology and primitive mental states. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 79. Retrieved July 29, 1998, from <http://www.ijpa.org/>
- Chasseguet-Smirgel, J. (1985). *The ego ideal: A psychoanalytic essay on the malady of the ideal*. New York: Norton & Company.
- Cohen, O. (1998). Parental narcissism and the disengagement of the non-custodial father after divorce. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 26(2), 192–215.
- Fonagy, P. (1999). Male perpetrators of violence against women: An attachment theory perspective. *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, 1, 7–27.
- Freud, S. (1949). *An outline of psychoanalysis* (Rev. ed.). New York: Norton.
- Freud, S. (1957). On narcissism: An introduction. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 22, pp. 69–102). London: Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1914)
- Goldberg, A. (1975). A fresh look at perverse behaviour. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 56, 335–342.
- Greenberg, J. R., & Mitchell, S. A. (1983). *Object relations in psychoanalytic theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Grossman, L. (1993). The perverse attitude towards reality. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 62, 422–435.
- Harris, A. (2001, October). *Women's envy: Disowned excitements*. Paper presented at the Scientific Meeting of the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute, San Francisco.
- Hetherington, E. M., Bridges, M., & Insabella, G. M. (1998). What matters? What does not? Five perspectives on the association between marital transitions and children's adjustment. *American Psychologist*, 53, 167–184.
- Johnston, J. R. (1994). High-conflict divorce. *The Future of Children and Divorce*, 4, 166–182.
- Johnston, J. R., & Campbell, L. E. (1988). *Impasses of divorce: The dynamics and resolution of family conflict*. New York: Free Press.
- Johnston, J. R., & Girdner, L. K. (1998). Early identification of parents at risk for custody violations and prevention of child abductions. *Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, 36(3), 392–409. Retrieved September 29, 2004, from <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?TS=992205819=309=1=1=000000030864767=1=3>
- Johnston, J. R., & Roseby, V. (1997). *In the name of the child*. New York: Free Press.
- Joseph, B. (1982). Addiction to near death. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 63, 449–456.
- Kernberg, O. (1974). Barriers to falling and remaining in love. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 22, 486–510.
- Kernberg, O. (1992). *Aggression in personality disorders and perversions*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Klein, M. (1986). A study of envy and gratitude. In J. Mitchell (Ed.), *The selected Melanie Klein* (pp. 211–229). New York: Free Press. (Original work published 1956)
- Kohut, H. (1971). *The analysis of the self*. New York: International Universities Press.

- Kruk, E. (1992). Psychological and structural factors contributing to the disengagement of noncustodial fathers after divorce. *Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, 30, 81–101.
- Maccoby, E. E., & Mnookin, R. H. (1992). *Dividing the child: Social and legal dilemmas of custody*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Melton, G. B., Petrila, J., Poythress, N. G., & Slobogin, C. (1987). *Psychological evaluations for the courts: A handbook for mental health professionals and lawyers*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Neff, R., & Cooper, K. (2004). Parental conflict resolution: Six-, twelve-, and fifteen-month follow-ups of a high-conflict program. *Family Court Review*, 99, 99–114.
- Rand, D. (1997). The spectrum of parental alienation syndrome (Pt. 1). *American Journal of Forensic Psychology*, 15(3), 23–52.
- Segal, H. (1983). Some clinical implications of Melanie Klein's work—Emergence from narcissism. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 64, 269–275.
- Shengold, L. (1995). *Delusions of everyday life*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Silverman, M. (1992). Second chances: Men, women and children a decade after divorce [Book review]. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 61, 648–653.
- Steiner, J. (1982). Perverse relationships between parts of the self: A clinical illustration. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 63, 241–250.
- Wallerstein, J. S. (1991). The long term effects of divorce on children: A review. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 30, 349–360.
- Wallerstein, J. S., & Blakeslee, S. (1989). *Second chances: Men, women and children a decade after divorce*. New York: Ticknor & Fields.
- Wallerstein, J., Lewis, J., & Blakeslee, S. (2002). The unexpected legacy of divorce: A 25 year landmark study. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 41, 359–360.
- Winnicott, D. (1960). The theory of the parent-infant relationship. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 41, 585–595.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1974). Fear of breakdown. *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 1, 103–107.