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"I CAN'T GO BACK": DIVORCE AS ADAPTIVE RESISTANCE

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Divorce has been blamed for everything from juvenile delinquency to social disintegration. Yet divorce, like any marker event or change, has the potential for development as well as regression; there can be tremendous growth and gain as well as intense pain and loss. Therapists working with women who have left oppressive and abusive marriages bear witness to the significant transformations that divorce can engender (Rice & Rice, 1986). In this chapter I outline several issues and strategies for the therapist working with women who are separated or divorced or in the process of divorce within a feminist and systemic therapeutic framework.

THE FICTIONAL FAMILY

Today nuclear families with employed fathers and stay-home mothers only represent about 3% of American households (Stacey, 1996). Traditional definitions of a "family," that is, White, intact, middle class, heterosexual with a male head of household and homemaker wife, have been critiqued by feminist family therapists as biased and inadequate. As feminist theory and practice has evolved, we have recognized that ethnic, cultural, racial, and sexual identity and historical time profoundly affect how we define our families and experience our place with our family. We have also observed that there are significant within-group differences among the families in any culture or society, and that people in the modern Western world continue to redefine family and kinship networks (Stacey, 1996). "Families" can be defined today as changing collectives in which close associates bond, come together, come apart, and reorganize across lifetimes (Baber & Allen, 1992).

Changes in family forms are directly related to the changes in marriage and divorce. Marriage is rapidly becoming "deinstitutionalized" because its primary elements—economic necessity, extended family bonds, and religious prohibitions—are being weakened by women's greater independence, fewer kin ties, and a generally more secular society. Marriage as a rite of passage to adulthood or as a predictable adult stage in the life cycle is losing importance as increasing numbers of young people never marry or choose to cohabitate indefinitely.

Nor is marriage today necessarily the prerequisite for parenthood. The increase in single-parent families headed by women has risen exponentially. Studies document portraits of unmarried, financially independent, adult women who are single mothers by choice, a social phenomenon that dramatically illustrates women's agency (Mannis, 1999). Marriage and parenthood are no longer a universal part of individual and family life cycle. Roughly 50% of marriages can be projected to end in divorce or permanent separation. Thus, divorce is becoming a more predictable part of the individual and family life cycle. Because women are twice as likely as men to initiate divorce, to experience more disillusionment with marriage, to parent alone, and to choose to live alone, divorce can be also seen as a feminist issue for the marriage and family therapist (Rice, 1994).

DIVORCE AS ADAPTIVE RESISTANCE

Divorce can be considered a form of resistance to women's oppression and inequality in the patriarchal family and a marker of societal and historical change and transformation (Rice, 1994). The traditional definition of patriarchy refers to the dominance of men and men's interests over women's interests, and the power of fathers over mothers and children in families. The contemporary phenomena of women choosing to live alone, to divorce, and to parent without a husband challenge the foundations of patriarchy—namely, the presence and authority of the father in the household. As women increasingly do not accept conditions of inequality, oppression, and abuse in their relationships and marriages, they are more likely to initiate divorce. It is easy to see how the phenomenon of divorce and women making it on their own threatens the established order, especially patriarchal marriage. With women no longer there to take care of the infrastructure, men, too, are forced to fend for themselves and to do more of "women's work."

A therapist can consider divorce in terms of ego and role loss, a catastrophic disruption in individual and family life cycle, and a societal disaster. Reframing divorce as a mode of adaptive resistance for women as well as a difficult and challenging opportunity for growth, differentiation, and development, however, changes our image of a female client from a

passive victim to an active decision maker of her fate and life (Rice & Rice, 1986). An individual woman becomes an agent of personal change. Collectively, women become active agents of tremendous change within the culture who do have power to transform themselves and the society. The feminist therapist helps women experience this power.

DIVORCE IN SYSTEMS THEORY

A feminist view of divorce and its impact for women also has significant implications for how we consider and apply principles of psychotherapeutic practice. Some of the core elements of a family systems approach to therapy are the ideas of reciprocity, equilibrium, balance, and boundaries within families.

In systems theory, the central idea of *reciprocity* means that each person plays a part in the ongoing marital conflict by reinforcing the behavior of the other. Reciprocity has been used to explain the dynamics of a couple conflict, of the abusing husband and the victim wife who nags or hits him (Walters, 1988). Playing a part, however, does not mean that the part is equal. Nor is the power equal. The male abuser is likely to be stronger physically, and the husband more powerful economically. In a patriarchal society, a woman's power is largely covert and acquired through her relationship to a man, usually a husband. A feminist view of reciprocity recognizes the inequality of the situation, and how women may have to leave or divorce if they do not have the resources to fight back within the marriage or cannot equalize the power in the relationship.

In systems theory, all behaviors have an equalizing function designed to restore *equilibrium* in the self-contained family unit. However, this conceptualization of family organization is not value-free or necessarily egalitarian. A woman may have to completely disrupt the system, throwing it into disequilibrium with a separation and divorce, seeking to create a new life that is more independent, healthier, and freer. The feminist therapist recognizes, supports, and maximizes the possibilities for a woman who chooses to divorce and parent alone, but is also quite sensitive to the circumstances of other women who do not leave because they feel trapped by economic dependency and maternal responsibilities. Unequal access to economic resources and social support and unequal responsibility for children may lead a woman to stay in an oppressive marriage and even to engage in unhealthy behaviors to maintain the fragile equilibrium in the marriage. Destabilization of the system may be necessary and potentially very helpful long term, but problematic for such a woman.

The idea of a *balance* of forces is central to family systems theory. Bowen's (1971) study of families led him to define two counterbalancing life forces within relationships: a force toward individuality and a force

toward togetherness. *Togetherness* is the need in everyone for approval from others, whereas *individuality* is the need in everyone to define a distinct self regardless of the approval of others. A balance between togetherness and individuality leads to positive self-differentiation as a person. Systems theory predicts that the higher the level of individual self-differentiation, the better a person will function in the midst of conflict, stress, and anxiety (Kerr, 1981). What is not explicated here is how gender roles and cultural norms permeate and influence these forces. Gender power relations in our society make it more difficult for women to act independently, and feminine role socialization emphasizes pleasing others at the expense of pleasing oneself. Furthermore, systems theory came out of Western culture, which strongly values the maintenance of appropriate boundaries and separation between family members and family generations. Individualism is touted in our American culture, but it is individualism for one gender, and it is often independence without attachment—hardly a choice most women would embrace.

A woman who divorces and becomes independent often finds herself feeling happy and liberated, yet worried about the effects of her decision on the people she loves, especially her children and parents. A therapeutic approach that is simultaneously systemic, feminist, and developmental helps her to carefully sort out her needs and rights without cutting off from her family. She becomes free to live her own life yet able to meet her children's needs and, if possible, to stay connected to her own family and to work with her ex-husband as a responsible coparent. An implicit, important goal of such an approach is to also help the woman understand her decision to marry and divorce in developmental terms, that is, in terms of delayed differentiation and delayed identity. The following two cases illustrate aspects of all these issues. Therapy involved both individual and family sessions with both biological and nonbiological members of newly created nontraditional "families" postdivorce, and the therapeutic paradigm presented does not depend on how many people are actually present in the session.

TWO CASE STUDIES

Elizabeth

Elizabeth was known as "Ellie" to her friends. A 52-year-old separated woman, she had grown up in the East and was a Midwest transplant, following her husband Gary as he got better jobs in academia and finally achieved tenure. A very bright woman herself, she married her husband because he was "brilliant and challenging." He was also subtly controlling and quite narcissistic, as she found out in the many years she spent supporting his career advances, raising their son and twin girls alone, and generally ignoring

her own aspirations. Ellie initially came into therapy with me for symptoms of depression and anxiety. She was separated and had decided to divorce after 27 years of marriage.

Her husband was shocked by this decision because he felt he had been a good, stable husband and provider, albeit mostly absent. He wanted no part of couple therapy and refused treatment. Ellie strongly felt that even if he would make some superficial changes to increase the parity in the marriage, it would not matter, for she had slowly but irrevocably lost any feelings of intimacy for him. Furthermore, she was beginning to enjoy being alone and felt pleasure in her new independence and freedom. Ellie's parents were deceased, and she was on good terms with her only younger brother. Her father was killed in military action when she was very young, and her mother and grandfather raised her. As therapy progressed, she decided that in her marriage she had tried to reclaim a paternal love she never knew, and the love of a critical maternal grandfather she could never please.

Ellie: This is . . . really the first time in my life that I feel independent. I can't go back. And I feel like I'm finding out who I am. There was never any time for that, not that I would have made the time either. I just never questioned that they (husband and children) came first. It was just so easy not to question. Just to go along. He was doing so well, and I really admired him. Yet at the same time I grew to dislike him, and also I think myself. There was just no respect from him, no understanding of what it was like to hold the whole show together. Like the time I told you about going to the hospital with the twins and he didn't make it. I truly believe he loves Carrie and Cassie, but to this day he couldn't see what he did wrong, that he always ultimately puts his needs above theirs and mine. It's not that he ever physically abused me, but now I'd say what I lived through was emotional abuse.

Joy: And it was a slow process of unraveling your feelings about that neglect, abuse, because on the surface it looked good?

Ellie: Exactly. My friends, my brother, they think I'm nuts for leaving him, because our life, the trappings of it, it just looked so good. And for years I thought I was crazy, too. I'd question why I couldn't make him happy, what was the matter with me? It wasn't until my depression got so bad, you know at one point, like a zombie, going through the motions, so bad that I could finally face how much I had lost. How stifled I felt. But I can't just blame Gary. I was looking for a man like Gary, a man who would be all the things I couldn't be, like in that dream about my Grandpa Carl and wanting him to tell me I was good.

Joy: That's something it took some time to realize too, the deeper reasons why you got married and how you put your own identity on hold.

Ellie: Yes, I wasn't very mature. I probably wanted a real father, but (laughs) instead I got another child. A very controlling child—do you know for years, he never told me what he made or that the genetic company was only in his name? Of course, I paid in spades for that ignorance. It's been hard financially, but I'm making it now. Even without any maintenance. The promotion will help. And did I tell you I have decided to go back to school?

Joy: No, that's wonderful! You've really made some important changes in your life, on your own: by yourself.

Ellie: I feel so much better, I hardly recognize who I was just two years ago. That spunky little person, you know the one who left the track? She's back and running!

Joy: Ellie, she's not just back, she's transformed.

Ellie: (silence) There was a lot of pain, but yes, I'm different. It's my turn.

Cases like Elizabeth illustrate how the exploding divorce rate is not only about exposing battering and abuse. Ellie spent years trying to maintain the fragile equilibrium in her marriage based on an inequitable division of power and a hierarchical system in which Gary's best interests and desires dominated while hers were subordinated. The subtle denigration, lack of praise and support, disrespect, and assumptions of one-sided accommodation and denial of these attitudes when confronted were her daily bread. She initially blamed herself, and the blame became internalized into self-denigration and depression. Getting a job and getting into therapy helped her recognize how she had married before she knew who she was, how she sought an emotional intimacy she had not experienced in her family of origin, and how her husband developmentally could not give that to her.

Divorce is frequently about women being tired of being the emotional caretakers of relationships, the managers of intimacy, single parents who are married. Women are seeking equality not only in the division of labor, money, and power but also in the responsibility for the emotional labor and management in the relationship. Indeed the divorce rate mirrors women's disillusionment with this quest. In therapy many women, like Ellie, come to realize how they must find their own voice and path, and how the painful and developmental process of divorce propels them into working out a much better balance between intimacy and identity (Rice & Rice, 1986).

Society's stereotype of the older divorced woman is a picture of loneliness and bitterness. Yet the great majority of older women who divorce report that they have grown stronger emotionally; are more adaptable, self-reliant, and happier; and have forged new identities. After an adjustment period that is often difficult, the divorce experience becomes a developmental spur to change in ways they had not thought possible (Hayes, Anderson, & Blau, 1993; Patterson, 2001).

One year after our initial course of therapy, Ellie returned to therapy to discuss her new situation and, in particular, her brother's rejection of her new partner, a woman. Ellie had also been helped by a divorce support group of women in which she learned from the life experiences of other women. In the process she became increasingly close to a long-time friend, Liz, who had never married. Ellie's new household and "family" consisted of herself, her oldest child, Jason (age 23, a college student), Liz, and Liz's elderly aunt. Ellie was not only reparenting herself and discovering herself, but she was also breaking new ground in forming a family of "creation" (Weston, 1992).

Another way in which women resist the patriarchy of marriage and dependency on a man is to choose to partner with a woman. In one study about 5% of older divorced women partnered with a woman for the first time after the demise of their marriage (Hayes et al., 1993). This, too, was Ellie's choice. After some family sessions that included her new partner, her children were fairly accepting of the divorce and her involvement with Liz. Liz was not a new person in their lives, but what was new was the open intimacy between the two women and the creation of a new household.

After an initial period of adjustment and conflict, her twin girls (age 25) expressed to Ellie that it was great to finally have an "aunt" and "grandma," but that they would never tolerate three mothers! Ellie maintained a distant friendship with Gary. She had worked through her anger and blame, had a much more realistic appreciation of their individual contributions to the demise of the marriage, and was ultimately more compassionate about her brother's difficulty in accepting her new situation.

After their divorce, Gary threw himself even more into his work. He rationalized that the divorce had more to do with Ellie's feelings for women than with his behavior. He was content to be a distant part of the family, and as is common, saw his grown children more than he ever had before the divorce. Not surprisingly, a large body of research has found that women make greater psychological gains after divorce than men in terms of happiness, self-esteem, and adjustment. Such effects have been found up to 10 years post-divorce (Diedrick, 1991). Divorce is about change and transformation, crisis and conflict, all precursors and motivators for development. Because the majority of women get on with their lives, or more aptly, reclaim their lives, there is no regret, little anger, and a fair amount of forgiveness and compassion for themselves, their ex-spouses, and their families (Hayes et al., 1993).

Deborah

Deb, age 32, was a divorced single mother with a 12-year-old daughter, Sarah. Deb was an adult survivor of incest. Her mother was deceased, and her father was a former alcoholic, elderly, and now retired. With the help

of therapy, her family, and Al-Anon, Deb had confronted and made peace with her father. She no longer was afraid of and angry with him but saw him now as old and pathetic.

Deb had just gotten on her feet after the divorce. She conscientiously had maintained her job and household, worked through the prior sexual abuse, and had a cordial coparenting relationship with her ex-husband, when a bomb dropped. She discovered she was pregnant by an old boyfriend whom she actively disliked. All her old guilt over her situation came to the fore again with a vengeance. Her sister told her she should have an abortion. Her best friend encouraged her to give up the baby for adoption, saying she could never provide for it financially especially because the father was a "deadbeat." Deb agonized over being a single parent again, yet strongly resisted the pressure to marry a man she did not love or respect.

No wonder she felt such intense guilt, for with either alternative she failed as a "good mother." Moms who give up children or who have abortions are castigated, but so are women who have children outside of marriage, especially if they happen to be poor. Only the media romanticizes the fictional, exciting lives of young, beautiful, affluent single parents. In White, American, middle-class culture, motherhood is glorified most often in the context of a male–female relationship.

Nontraditional mothers are not as valued as traditional mothers. All mothers in our culture are penalized by the lack of institutional supports for child care and child welfare, but penalties are especially punitive for women who reproduce and parent apart from male control (DiLapi, 1989). With the help and support of therapy, Deb ultimately did decide to have the child, a healthy boy, Daniel. Her household changed dramatically when the baby arrived, and even more so when a new boyfriend, Ted, moved in with her. Her cooperative family mix of kin and nonkin now included her ex-husband, her daughter, her infant son, the son's father, her new partner, and her teenage niece, Sharon, who baby-sat Daniel in exchange for room and board.

The themes in working with Deb and her family in therapy revolved around her consuming feelings of guilt and inadequacy, particularly with regard to her children after the divorce. She often felt like she could not provide enough for them emotionally and financially, and she questioned her judgments as a single parent on issues of discipline, boundaries, and engagement. I saw a different picture. The family was inventive; the mother resilient, creative, and devoted.

Deb: Sometimes I feel like I'm a bad parent.
Joy: Why, Deb?
Deb: I always worry about whether they have enough, there's just not enough of me to go around. Sometimes I think I never should have divorced, then we could make it.

Joy: But you are "making it."

Deb: I had to tell Sarah today she couldn't have money for the video she wants, and she won't be able to go with her friend on vacation over break unless her father finds the money. I'm still in debt from Christmas. You know how I want them to have everything. I'd give them anything (cries).

Joy: Deb, do you really think that Sarah will think you're a bad mom if you tell her there's only so much money, that she may have to baby-sit or earn some dollars to pay for her extras?

Deb: Sometimes I think she's ashamed of me, like when I couldn't pay the rent. This morning she was really mad at me. We had a fight over the video money. But maybe I can talk to her tonight again, maybe explain that . . . (pause)

Joy: That your love for her isn't going to be measured by how much money or things you can give her?

Deb: Yeah. I know that's true, but it's so hard to explain it to a kid sometimes.

Joy: You so much want them not to feel your pain, not to experience any fallout from the divorce or from your situation. You want to be a perfect mother. Do you think some of that has to do with feeling guilty, irrationally guilty over the divorce?

Deb: I do feel guilty. I know I can't completely protect them or give them everything even though I try. And maybe that's not good either. Sometimes I worry that I'm "too much" mother for the kids.

Joy: Deb, do you remember what you told me about how your parenting had changed after you divorced? How you thought it was better?

Deb: It was better; it felt good to be able to make decisions independently. I felt like I had more control and Sarah and I were on the same beam. But there have been so many changes, Daniel, Daniel's father, Ted.

Joy: And Sharon's living with you now, too. So maybe this isn't just about Sarah's trips or videos, it's about you and her and both of you negotiating a new relationship with a lot of new other people involved that significantly change things.

Deb: It is complicated. And she probably is confused about where we stand now. But I know she knows I love her.

Joy: So maybe you can have that talk with her tonight not just about the money, but about how the family has changed and where your relationship fits in, and how your bond with her is still strong.

The anxiety and guilt that single moms go through can be at times overwhelming. My goals in therapy with Deb were to help her understand that lack of material possessions was not a character defect or family failing, to remind her that she is a good and creative parent, and that since the

divorce she has been able to feel more competent and independent. In a session with Sarah and Ted, I continued to reframe the conflict with her daughter as one related to her struggle to form a new family. This helped everyone understand that they were in the process of transforming their relationships in the midst of many other new relationships, and that was not bad. In fact, there was the potential for creating a healthier, more independent bond as Sarah approached adolescence. No matter how rebellious, angry, manipulative, or guilt-provoking her daughter might become, Deb's stronger sense of identity and competence could inoculate her against taking her children's feelings personally.

Therapists working from an individual therapy paradigm are more apt to look for intrapsychic causes and individual behavioral solutions to life problems. Thus single parents may be advised to analyze their own dysfunctional contributions to the conflicts, to grieve, and ultimately to adjust to the multiple losses entailed in divorce. All of the work of therapy would occur with the individual client. In family therapy with one person, in contrast, behavior is conceptualized as embedded in both the individual client, and also in a web of multiple reciprocal relationships. Thus the therapy might include multigenerational work with family-of-origin members, children, as well as current partners and ex-spouses. Even if other family members never enter the therapy office, the multigenerational emotional process is always the context of therapy. Family therapy is defined by a theoretical paradigm rather than by the number of people in the room.

Feminist family therapy applies a cultural interpretation to the conflicts and struggles that individuals face. This social constructivist stance helps divorced single mothers appreciate how the patriarchal family structure and social policy make it hard for mothers to succeed without a man in the picture. This understanding of how larger systems impact on their behavior also ameliorates irrational self-blame. For example, in Deb's case, Daniel's father refused to get a job. Yet, the courts awarded Deb a very small child support payment that he infrequently paid and stopped paying altogether when Daniel was 5 months. She was very angry with him. However, to her credit, she realized that depriving Daniel of contact with his father who, despite his job failures, was responsible in terms of visitation and child care, would not help her son.

Today we have many more joint custody arrangements, but mothers still bear the primary responsibility for child rearing. Yet these efforts fail to be compensated for, as only about half of child support payments are paid in full, another 25% of payments are not fully paid, and 25% are not paid at all (U.S. House of Representatives, 1996). The widespread failure of fathers to pay child support, even among those who can do so, can be also seen as backlash, a reaction against the mothers and wives who leave them.

Thus, my other goal was to help Deb see the child support problem as structural and systemic. She appreciated this new perspective and was able to complain that the system was more compassionate toward her baby's "deadbeat" father than toward herself. She pointed out how she had survived bankruptcy; struggled with two jobs; employed a live-in niece as babysitter; got clothes at Goodwill; sought out food stamps, coupons, and free household items whenever she could; and, despite everything, prudently banked a part of her ex-husband's child support in a savings account for Sarah's college education. Thus, with encouragement, Deb proactively researched her options and went to court. The court appointed a public defender for the father because he said he was under stress.

Deb: Stress! Can you believe it? I can't afford a lawyer, but they give him a public defender because he's under stress. Stress, sitting at the clubhouse all day watching TV! Stress, living at his mom's and getting a handout from her and having her buy diapers and formula. I can't believe it! But they do this to mothers, you know. We're supposed to have it together no matter what, to come up with the time, the money. It doesn't count that I'm under mega stress, and that I have another kid and two jobs.

Joy: You're absolutely right, Deb. Moms, even if they parent alone with no help or support, are unfairly expected to take the brunt of responsibility. And it is unjust. What are you going to do about it?

Deb was able to see that it was the system, not just her. That knowledge empowered her. She made up a special file in which she put all the papers and the notes from the calls to the court personnel and to Daniel's father. This relieved her guilt, blame, and frustration. Therapy "expanded the context," illustrated that her dilemma was not just her own, but the result of an inequitable system. And after doing all she could, Deb did come to peace, realizing that Daniel's father might go to jail if he continued in arrears. Unlike the old days, she did not blame herself.

Working with Deb and her ever-changing "family" reinforced my belief that the life-cycle narrative at times may be progressive, stable, or regressive but is never one-dimensional. An alternative to the traditional linear, one-dimensional biological portrayal of a woman's life course might instead view the family life cycle in terms of multiple and shifting attachments, separations and reattachments with family, children, friends, spouses, ex-spouses, and significant others. It becomes the therapist's task to appreciate the many meanings and layers of these attachments and separations for the client's development within and apart from kinship bonds.

The family life cycle as it has been traditionally defined in family therapy literature is largely mythological (Rice, 1994). It is more helpful to look at the family life cycle as a constructed narrative with the potential

for new narratives to emerge in each culture, society, and historical era. Even our static ideas and "truth" about marker events based on biology and the ability to bear children have changed over time and continue to change. In some cultures now and throughout history, the child becomes an adult with a pregnancy at age 14 or earlier. In 21st-century Western culture, a woman is not defined as an adult by a pregnancy and may never have a child. More and more women never marry, and many more cohabitate like Deb rather than marry, even when they have a child. The "normal" developmental pathway for a woman has perhaps not so much changed as never existed except as a social construct for three decades of the 20th century (Coontz, 1992).

CONCLUSION

Divorce is generally considered a disruption in the family life cycle. However, I would suggest that therapists need to reframe it instead as a fairly predicable life stage with potential for positive growth and gain as well as disequilibrium and loss (Rice & Rice, 1986). When half of all marriages end in divorce, it cannot be considered a "paranormative" event in the family life cycle. For the feminist therapist, divorce can be seen as an opportunity for a woman's healthy identity redefinition and ego differentiation that has been delayed. Many women use separation and divorce, as well as the choice to live alone, as a way to resist the oppression, neglect, and abuse they may have experienced in former relationships. Other women fear reenacting the same scenario with another man or that they will replicate their parents' marriages and the abuse of their mothers. Women living and parenting alone today are also implicitly creating new family forms of kin and nonkin relationships.

The systemic concepts of reciprocity, equilibrium, balance, and boundaries come into question for the therapist who applies a gender and cultural context to the situation of the woman client choosing to divorce. The task of the therapist is to avoid pathologizing separation and singleness, to support the client's path in developing new arrangements and family forms, and to help each woman understand how the society and culture impose a deficit model on her efforts.

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