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THE REMARRIAGE PHASE

After the postdivorce phase—that is, when the psychic divorce is achieved, when divorce-related feelings have disappeared, and when nearly no more time is spent thinking about the former marriage or the ex-spouse—many divorcees continue to live as singles. Some have not yet found an adequate partner; others want to stay single for the rest of their lives because of their disappointment and disillusionment with marriage. For example, in a study of 210 individuals separated for two years (Spanier and Thompson 1984), 13 percent of the men and eight percent of the women felt that they will probably never remarry. Many divorcees who live alone are also comfortable with their new life-style; they are independent and autonomous, have faith in their capacity to cope, are back in the mainstream of society, and have gained self-confidence and feelings of self-worth. They take responsibility for their own growth, actions, feelings, and difficulties. Their pattern of life is stable due to effective daily living, steady employment, a large network of friends, and a broad range of satisfying leisure activities. Other divorcees struggle with common problems of singlehood, such as loneliness. Many divorced individuals continue a pattern of short dates, while others enter long-lasting and more serious relationships that may lead to cohabitation and remarriage.

Single mothers (and divorced women in general) have to face financial problems, unemployment, or unsatisfying jobs due to their lack of qualifications. They are also limited in terms of job mobility, work hours, and promotions. Many households are dependent on alimony, child support, or welfare (see pp. 11, 12). Single parents also have less time for personal development, dating, and social relationships; therefore, they often feel trapped by their children. Many single parents feel burdened by all their responsibilities. They experience less and less support in child-rearing by noncustodial parents as the latter reduce their involvement with time (especially after remarriage—men remarry sooner than women).

Some single parents focus only on their children's needs and neglect their own. They may also be overindulgent because of guilt feelings. Many fear that children are disadvantaged by growing up in a single-parent family. However, such families also offer positive con-

ditions for a child's development, if they are seen positively and if they are well organized. Moreover, children's responses to their status as members of a single-parent family usually reflect their parents' attitudes. Even if they cannot relate to an adult of the other sex than that of the residential parent and thus lack a role model, negative effects can be minimized by frequent contact with other adults of that sex (or regular access to the noncustodial parent). Their development, however, may be harmed if they are parentified, if they have to fill the role of an "ersatz" partner, or if they fuse with their parents in a symbiotic relationship. Sometimes problems also result from grandparents' taking over child rearing as well as the family's guidance, thereby usurping the natural parents' authority.

Life as a single or in a single-parent family can no longer be considered as part of the divorce cycle as soon as the postdivorce phase is over. This is not the case with remarriage and the formation of stepfamilies, since these events can take place directly after divorce or at some time during the postdivorce phase (or after it). Most separated and divorced individuals want to remarry, and many of them would like to have more children—in fact one-fourth of them remarry within the first year after divorce and one-half within three years. Altogether 80 percent of all divorcees remarry eventually, with lower rates for (older) women and single mothers as well as blacks (Furstenberg and Spanier 1987, Rosenthal and Keshet 1981, Spanier and Thompson 1984). Furstenberg and colleagues (1983) write with respect to children from divorced families: "Within five years, four out of seven white children have entered stepfamilies, compared to only one out of eight black children" (p. 661).

Courtship

Courtship is the first substage of the remarriage phase (cp. Moss 1984, Papernow 1984, Whiteside 1983). In general, remarriage soon after divorce is problematic because many individuals have not adequately mourned the failure of the prior marriage, have not had enough time to work through the feelings caused by separation, and often are still emotionally attached to their former spouses (no psychic divorce). But even if the divorce happened a long time ago, there may be a resurgence of feelings about the prior marriage and the separation when a person plans to remarry. In these cases it may also be hard to give up the advantages of life as a single or of single-parent families, such as independence, freedom, or strong ties with children.

Many divorced individuals use different criteria in evaluating prospective second spouses. For example, single parents, but also joint-custody parents, may be more concerned with the compatibility between their children and the contemplated partners and less with the compatibility between the latter and themselves (Rosenthal and Keshet 1981). Many divorcees have less inflated expectations than before the first marriage or minimize expectations in order to protect themselves from disillusionment. Other individuals may still harbor unrealistic expectations or negate shortcomings of the prospective spouse (perhaps out of fear of not finding another partner). If both are divorced, they often share rescue fantasies: They want to save each other from the unhappiness of the former marriage and the post-separation period. Moreover, they tend to displace all blame onto the ex-spouses. Even though the risk of a second mistake is a focal concern for most divorcees, they usually believe that they have now found the right partner and describe him or her as a more understanding, sympathetic, and trustworthy companion. They claim to enjoy better communication, to be able to solve conflicts, to arrive at important decisions together, and to allocate domestic chores more equally (Furstenberg and Spanier 1987). "The perception that things are better this time can be self-reinforcing, helping to sustain the marital dialogue. As individuals gain a sense of trust that their partner is in fact different, they can take personal risks and experiment with new conjugal styles" (see above, p. 84).

If one or both prospective spouses have children, they may have the following expectations and myths: "Adult members of step-families ruefully describe shared fantasies: rescuing children from the excesses or inadequacies of the ex-spouse, healing a broken family, stepparents adoring their stepchildren and being welcomed by them; for stepparents, marrying a nurturing parent, and for biological parents, having someone with whom to share the load" (Papernow 1984, p. 357). It is evident that many of these fantasies and expectations will cause problems, for chances are low that they will be fulfilled.

Prospective spouses with children often experience conflicts between their wish to spend time with their partners and their wish to be together with their offspring. This is especially the case if they work full time and consequently have little time for their children during the week. Moreover, they may also feel a sense of disloyalty to their children because of their emotional investment in the prospective spouses. If they let their child-care obligations take priority over their relationships with their lovers, the latter may be jealous, disap-

pointed, or dissatisfied. If they put greater emphasis on their partnership, however, their children may feel left out. Moss (1984) emphasizes: "The time that the couple spends together before their marriage is a crucial time for them to establish the primacy of their relationship in the soon-to-be-established stepfamily. They are often under great pressure from their jealous children, possessive friends, and emotionally attached former spouses" (p. 244). Therefore, not all of them arrive at a strong partnership during courtship. The prospective spouses gradually begin to share responsibilities and household chores, especially if they cohabit before remarriage. Future stepparents also increase their participation in child care slowly. If both partners have children, they usually establish relations between them during pleasurable activities, such as outings.

Children's Reactions

If children are not reassured that the new relationships will not usurp all their parent's time and attention, they experience the courtship and the prospective remarriage as threats. Messinger and Walker (1981) write: "The children may feel threatened with losing their parent to the new adult, or that the newcomer will attempt to displace the nonresident parent in their lives. Children frequently attempt to sabotage the relationship through aggressive or defiant behavior" (p. 436). They may act out to attract their parent's attention or react with symptomatic behaviors, withdrawal, angry tantrums, and the like. Their reactions are usually stronger if they still hope for their parents' reunion or if they were parentified or treated as surrogate spouses; they may now fear loss of status and power. If they do not succeed in their fight against the new partner of their parent, they often "feel twice defeated—first for not preventing the divorce and second for not preventing the remarriage" (Skeen et al. 1985, p. 122). It has to be added that grandparents who played an important role in supporting the divorced spouse and in raising their grandchildren may also try to disrupt the new relationship because they want to keep their position. They may instill fears in their grandchildren (for example, fears based on the myth of the wicked stepparent), undermine the authority of the prospective spouse, or engage in a power struggle with him or her.

Early Marriage

There are many forms of reconstituted families as none (or both) spouses may bring children to the marriage and/or may have chil-

dren living with the former spouse—children who may visit frequently (nearly being members of the household), rarely, or not at all. There may also be mutual children. Additionally, one or both partners may be divorced. Just by using these criteria one arrives at a huge number of possible combinations that do not exist in first marriages or first families of procreation. Moreover, in contrast to them there is an overlapping of individual life cycles, divorce cycles, and family cycles in reconstituted families. Therefore it is nearly impossible to recreate a biological family after remarriage, especially if children are present; and each stepfamily trying to do so will face great problems and will feel frustrated and disappointed. Thus they have to develop their own model of family life. There are nearly no role prescriptions or norms to help clarify the nature of interactions among former and new spouses, noncustodial, custodial, and step-parents as well as stepchildren, mutual, and nonresidential children. Each stepfamily evolves its relationships in unique ways. It passes through a long period of disequilibrium and transition, which may last from two to five years. If its members move too rapidly, resistances can be expected.

The complexity of life in reconstituted family systems also results from being embedded in a very large social network encompassing relatives as well as former and new in-laws (and friends). The subgroups of the network may compete or fight with each other, may try to replace each other, or may offer a great deal of (emotional) support and assistance. If there is conflict between the subsystems, many members of reconstituted families experience conflicting emotional bonds and loyalties. Children may not know where they belong. Many problems also result from family boundaries being either too loose or too rigid.

In remarriages there are usually greater age differences between the partners. The spouses face the same tasks as in all early marriages; that is, they have to establish routines, develop their own rules, set up decision-making and conflict-resolving mechanisms, and the like. They monitor the development of their relationship very closely. At the beginning, second marriages normally benefit by comparison to the first ones. However, according to a study of 181 individuals four years after separation (Furstenberg and Spanier 1987), remarried divorcees do not report a significantly higher level of well-being in comparison to those living alone or in single-parent families. Moreover, if marital problems arise, ghosts of the past may return to haunt them.

The spouses either pool their financial resources or keep their incomes separate. They sometimes experience a great financial drain

if former spouses and children living with them have to be supported. Financial matters revolving around child support, alimony, and wills frequently are a matter of conflict. Especially stepfathers often believe that they shoulder an unfair burden, if one or both biological parents of the stepchildren do not contribute to child-related expenses. Sometimes the problem arises over whether the noncustodial father or the stepfather has to pay for college education.

In some cases the new spouses dampen conflicts between former partners and help them to work out problems. However, there may also be disagreements between the remarried individuals with respect to the ex-spouse. The new partner may also feel powerless to affect arrangements (e.g., with regard to custody or visitation) between the former spouses. Moreover, he or she often experiences rivalrous feelings for the ex-partner. Competitive feelings may be a great problem in the case of coparenting or timesharing, as many stepparents find it hard to accept a very close relationship between stepchildren and nonresidential parents as well as the latter's great influence (and rights) with respect to child rearing. Conflicts may arise regarding the use of words like "Mom" and "Dad." Sometimes the remarried partner subtly encourages a rivalrous relationship between the new and the former spouse. The latter may also be used as a scapegoat or recipient of displaced feelings. Certainly the former spouse often becomes jealous, too. He or she may try to interfere in the new spouses' relationship or in the stepfamily. In a few cases, conflicts even lead to new legal fights. However, according to the aforementioned research results (see pp. 24–25) the problems mentioned before seem to be rare: "Finally, we should note that national data do not support speculations that stepfamily life is afflicted by problems created by the presence of too many parents. Typically, no more than two adults remain actively involved with the children following divorce" (Furstenberg and Spanier 1987, p. 44).

After the ex-spouse's or their own remarriage, nonresidential parents usually disengage further from the life of their former spouse and their children. If noncustodial parents remarry, they often keep their new partners away from their children at the beginning, in order not to upset the delicate truce achieved with the custodial parents. Later on, they gradually introduce them during access visits. Usually the role of the new partner is carefully circumscribed. The custodial parents may resist the latter's involvement with their children and pressure them to reject the new spouse. Thus the children may have to mediate between both sides. In many cases new patterns of interaction develop which include the impact of all individuals involved.

Child Rearing

In reconstituted families one adult becomes a spouse and a parent at the same time. However, the stepparent-child relationship is different from the biological parent-child unit; there are no blood bonds, and stepparents have no legal rights or responsibilities to their stepchildren (as long as they do not adopt them). Moreover, the biological parent-child subsystem precedes the marital unit (and may even be closer, as, for example, the spouses frequently did not have the time to develop the couple-system) and is older than the stepparent-child relationship. Thus stepparents face a system with a shared history, intensified bonds, and a previously established way of operating.

Some biological parents try to preserve the centrality of their relationship with the children and are unwilling to share their love, affection, and loyalty. They do not support their new spouses' attempts at parenting, give them little parental authority, and often control their interactions with the children. Moreover, they form a coalition with the latter and take their side in conflicts. Some stepparents do not accept this situation, because they feel like outsiders. Thus they try to get full parental rights, which may lead to many conflicts. In other cases they do not object to becoming secondary parents, sometimes even choosing this role themselves. For example, they may resent parenting children who are not their own, or they may have married solely for the intimacy and companionship with their spouse (and even may be jealous of their stepchildren and resent sharing their partner's love with them). Some biological parents accept this situation; others criticize their spouses as indifferent and uncaring.

There may also be a weak marital and parental unit, if both spouses bring children to the stepfamily. They often compete with each other and take the side of his or her (biological) children in conflicts. In general, all members of reconstituted families have to deal with the problem of complex, conflicting, and ambiguous relationships. They have to redefine roles, give up old structures, and establish a parental and marital coalition. Papernow (1984) emphasizes: "Most crucial for stepfamily integration are moves which establish stepcouple boundaries: carving out time alone together, closing the bedroom door, consulting each other on child rearing and visitation issues. Boundaries around the stepparent stepchild relationship also begin to be built. The process may include the biological parent remaining in the background when stepparent and stepchild interact, especially when they are fighting, and the stepparent begin-

ning to ally with stepchildren against their biological parent at times" (p. 360).

Some problems in reconstituted families with respect to child rearing result from the myth of the wicked stepparent and from unrealistic expectations. For example, many adults expect instant love between stepparents and stepchildren. According to a study of 181 divorcees separated for an average of four years (Furstenberg and Spanier 1987), half of them believed that stepparents can take the place of a natural parent in a child's life and that it is not harder to love a stepchild than an own child. Stepparents and stepchildren may also have higher expectations with respect to each other—what is acceptable from a natural parent or child is often not acceptable from a stepparent or stepchild.

Many spouses who have not been married before have unrealistic expectations about family life or the behavior of children. They are self-critical and frequently feel insecure due to their lack of experience. This is a great problem especially for stepmothers, who may abruptly receive the total load of child care without being prepared for it. They are exhausted and feel overburdened or even exploited at the beginning. If both parents bring children, they are experienced in child rearing. "However, this advantage may be neutralized by the complexity of rearing two separate sets of children, the relationship with the two surviving spouses, and, often, significant financial difficulties due to the pressures of multiple households requiring financial support" (Moss 1984, p. 243). In these cases many children are concerned with whether there is enough love and affection for all of them and whether all are treated fairly.

Many problems of child rearing are caused by the clashing of different rules, goals, definitions of behavior, methods of child management, and the like, which is often the case when both spouses bring children reared according to different standards. This situation is very difficult for younger children to understand. Problems may also result from parents' having little time for their children at the beginning as they are preoccupied with their new spouses and with getting to know the relatives and friends of their partners.

Stepparent-child Relationship

In many cases both stepparent and stepchildren are suddenly thrown together and have not had the opportunity to gradually develop a relationship. Mitchell (1985), who interviewed seventy-one Scottish custodial parents and fifty children aged 16 to 18 five or six

years after divorce, reports: "A quarter of the new partners had been known to the children for many years, but one in seven had suddenly become part of the family" (p. 153). One-fourth of the children liked and another fourth disliked the stepparent from the beginning; one in six was indifferent. Of the rest, more came to like than dislike the stepparent after initially resenting him or her. In sum, one child in four thought that the acquisition of the stepparent had been the worst time in the divorce cycle.

As children did not choose their stepparents (or stepsiblings), they may feel rejected and unfairly treated. At the beginning many stepchildren fight against closeness, reject attempts of stepparents to establish emotional bonds, provoke them, and test their patience and goodwill. In general, older children and boys are less likely to accept stepparents (who may then have major problems in disciplining them) than younger children and girls (Skeen et al. 1985). Many children do not want the stepparent to take the place of the nonresidential parent. They wish to keep the two relationships separate. Frequently they fear to lose the absent parent's affection when they begin to like the stepparent. "The more the stepchild accepts and adjusts to the stepparent, the more this child betrays and is disloyal to his natural absent parent (and sometimes even the one who is present)" (Schulman 1981, p. 104). Noncustodial stepparents may also experience loyalty conflicts, guilt feelings, and pain when they begin to enjoy their stepchildren, as they feel that they desert their natural offspring (who reside elsewhere).

If stepparents attempt to replace the nonresidential parents or try to assimilate their role, they often experience great resistance from stepchildren. Kent (1980) writes: "What the new parent often fails to comprehend is that the children in the family may in fact have a natural or 'real' parent, and that that particular role is already occupied" (p. 150). Thus stepparents have to accept that the stepchildren are members of two households, which means sharing them with the nonresidential parents. As they cannot replace the latter, they have to find a new role. Often they try on various roles until they find one that fits, feels comfortable, and is accepted by the stepchildren. In general, it is better for the latter's well-being if stepparents have a positive or tolerant attitude toward the nonresidential parents and if the access arrangements are good (Mitchell 1985, Moss 1984). However, there may be conflicts and tensions if children are pressured to sever old ties, if family members are not allowed to discuss the previous marriage, or if only negative feelings are allowed with respect to the noncustodial parent.

Usually closeness, affection, friendship, and trust as well as more satisfying interactions between stepparents and children develop slowly. It often takes a long time for stepparents to get accepted and to gain authority. Only with time are cohesion and good cooperation achieved. Some stepparents make their children happy, let them feel secure, and are greatly loved. They may even be regarded by them as "real" parents. In other cases they become special confidantes for their stepchildren or intimate outsiders. Many stepparents, however, are not really ever accepted—which sometimes is not even noticed. Comparing the reports of remarried or cohabiting custodial parents and their children, Mitchell (1985) observed: "On the whole, the children had painted a blacker picture of the new parent figures in their homes than might have been expected from their parents' accounts" (p. 169). For example, some children reported that they did not like the stepparents while their custodial parents reported the opposite. Stepparents may become a convenient and safe recipient of negative feelings. They are also vulnerable to stepchildren's intimations that they are not adequate parents. If children do not get along with their stepparents, they are sometimes excluded from the stepfamily and sent to relatives, boarding schools, and the like.

In some reconstituted families sexual tensions develop between stepparents and stepchildren. As the incest taboo is lower, there is a greater danger of sexual abuse. Sometimes adolescents feel attracted to their stepparents and either compete for their attention with their biological parents or defend against these feelings by hostility, aggression, distancing, running away, or prematurely leaving home. "Stepchildren may also find that the inclusion of new children from another marriage creates both rivalry for parental attentions and sexual attraction. Children may handle their sexual feelings for a stepchild in the family by abreacting, and by developing intense, negative feelings toward the sibling" (Kent 1980, p. 151).

Another problem for children in reconstituted families is the birth of a half-sibling. For example, in a study of 80 pairs of divorcees and their current partners (Ahrons and Wallisch 1987), a new child was born in about 15 percent of the cases within three years after divorce. Sometimes the birth of a mutual child acts to bind the reconstituted family together. It may also be a compensation for the loss of children living with the former spouse. The birth of a new child often is a serious blow to the self-esteem of his or her half-siblings, who may feel left out and less important. They frequently see him or her as a threat to their position in the family and may react with feelings of jealousy or disturbed behaviors.

Later Marriage

Later marriage is the third substage of the remarriage phase. However, it is not really part of the divorce cycle, as matters of separation, divorce, custody, visitation, alimony, and the like usually are of no more importance. Therefore it will only be mentioned briefly. This substage begins when the reconstituted family has achieved stable relationships, patterns of interaction, and modes of operating, when roles and authority structures are defined and accepted by all family members, and when the family system has been stabilized. Many reconstituted families, however, do not reach this substage; according to estimates nearly 60 percent of all remarriages end in divorce. There even seems to be a greater willingness to terminate relationships than during first marriages. Thus many adults and children reexperience their family's breakup and pass through the divorce cycle once again (cp. Furstenberg et al. 1983, Furstenberg and Spanier 1987).

CONCLUSION

"A 'successful' divorce begins with the realization by two people that they do not have any constructive future together. That decision itself is a recognition of the emotional divorce. It proceeds through the legal channels of undoing the wedding, through the economic division of property and arrangement for alimony and support. The successful divorce involves determining ways in which children can be informed, educated in their new roles, loved, and provided for. It involves finding a new community. Finally, it involves finding your own autonomy as a person and as a personality" (Bohannan 1973, p. 488). A successful divorce also means offering children the opportunity to maintain their relationship with both natural parents. It involves not following the model of biological families in case of remarriage, not expecting instant love between stepparents and stepchildren, as well as giving them enough time to develop a relationship.

It is evident that separation, divorce, and remarriage are highly individual experiences. Thus all persons involved tell different accounts of "their" divorce and may also name different complaints, problems, and difficulties (Kitson et al. 1985). For all family members divorce and remarriage are connected with intrapsychic and interpersonal conflicts, negative feelings, and adjustment problems. Many develop symptoms, which usually disappear when the worst is over

but sometimes become chronic. For many family members divorce is also a growth-producing experience.

The high figures of divorce and remarriage suggest that a very high percentage of the population passes through the divorce cycle. This means that the commonly used models of the family life cycle are not valid for these cases. For them new models should be developed that incorporate the phases of the divorce cycle. For example, one of these integrative models may have the following stages: Courtship → early marriage → family with young children → predivorce phase → separation and divorce → single-parent family phase with visiting noncustodial parent → courtship (in presence of children) → early (re-)marriage with older children → later marriage with young (mutual) children and with older half-siblings leaving home → and so on. It is evident that this family cycle is much more complex and complicated.

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