Divorce Therapy: An In-Depth Survey of Therapists' Views

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In-depth interviews were conducted with 21 highly experienced therapists on the criteria of a constructive divorce, the obstacles to achieving such a divorce, and the strategies and tactics of divorce therapy. The primary criterion of a constructive divorce was the successful completion of the process of psychic separation and the protection of the welfare of minor children. Therapy may focus on the decision to get divorced and/or the negotiation of the terms of a divorce settlement.

Three types of therapeutic strategies were identified: reflective interventions by which the therapist orientates himself to the marital problems and attempts to gain the trust and confidence of the partners; contextual interventions by which he tries to promote a climate conducive to decision-making; and substantive interventions intended to produce resolution in terms the therapist has come to believe are inevitable or necessary.

The nascent state of divorce therapy as an area of therapeutic specialization is noted. The problem of diagnostic criteria for divorce, the relationship between therapists and lawyers, the nature and consequences of therapist impartiality, and the degree to which therapists should mediate the terms of divorces are considered central issues meriting further study.

The rapid rise in the incidence of marital dissolution is well documented. In 1975 there were more than one million divorces in the United States, double the number that occurred a scant ten years earlier (10). It has been conservatively estimated that if the divorce rate continues to rise, M.D., Richard A. Gardner, M.D., J. B. Hayes, M.D., Lesh Horowitz, M.S.W., Arnold Lazarus, M.D., Wardell B. Pomeroy, Ph.D., Vera Pauns, Ph.D., Robert Ravich, M.D., Hilbours Rohlfs, Ph.D., Olga Silverstein, M.S.W., Laura Singer, Ed.D., Jennifer Turberg, Ph.D., Paul Vahanian, Ed.D., Tilla Vahanian, Ed.D. The interpretations and conclusions drawn from these statements are, of course, our own. No inference should be made that the respondents are necessarily in agreement with us.

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The investigation took the form of a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. An effort to locate highly expert practitioners was made through professional organizations, personal contacts, and the referral of one respondent by another. The interviews lasted nearly two hours. They were tape recorded for later transcription.

The interview was in two parts. The first involved a general discussion of the topics mentioned above. In the second, respondents were asked to discuss in detail (but without revealing information that would permit identification of the client) a case in which they felt they had been particularly successful.

The average age of the respondents was 53 years, they practiced mainly in and around New York and Boston. Most characterized themselves as specialists in marital and/or family therapy, and all had more than five years' experience in which divorce work was at least part of their practice. On the average, approximately 20 per cent of their professional time is spent specifically on divorce cases. They serve a predominantly middle-class, college-educated clientele with a median income of $30,000, and an average length of marriage of twelve to fifteen years. Approximately 50 per cent of the divorcing couples with whom they work are Jewish, 30 per cent Protestant, and 20 per cent Catholic. Fifty percent of the couples have dependent children.

The respondents' views are presented under three major headings: criteria of a constructive divorce; obstacles to a constructive divorce; and strategies and tactics of therapy in which divorce therapy typically occurs.

The modal case was relatively long (median of two years), involved sessions of approximately one hour per week, included both spouses, and, at one time or another, some form of contact with a variety of other individuals (most often children and lawyers or other therapists). There were, however, numerous variations on this modal theme. Thus, therapist contact with a case varied from three months to nine years; sessions occurred less than one a week or more than twice
term to describe what it is that our respondents do for those in the process of divorce. Although several respondents used the term divorce therapy (or divorce counseling), this rubric was not always accepted. On several occasions it was criticized as too narrow to describe what was considered to be either a general practice in marital therapy or a concern with individual growth through any therapeutic channels that seem indicated. For convenience, the term divorce therapy will be used in this report.

The Process of Psychiatric Divorce

Talking about divorce, I think, really misses the point. Because you're not talking about divorce, we're talking about needs—needs not to be alone, and needs to be related. Needs to be attached and needs to avoid anxiety.¹

The work of the divorce therapist occurs in an often treacherous psychological climate, a climate that owes many of its distinctive characteristics to the phenomenon of psychic divorce. Numerous terms were used to allude to psychic divorce: “decoupling,” “individualization,” “differentiation of self,” “emotional divorce.” Whatever nuances of meaning may differentiate these phrases, all rest on a distinction between what may be called “parallel” versus “passionate” marriages. Parallel marriages are those in which the partners have not had any intense psychological involvement with each other. Most often these are relatively brief marriages involving young people who have no children. They may have been marriages of “convenience” (e.g., a means of escaping the parental home) or may reflect an underlying problem in both mates in forming intimate attachments. In any case, as divorces they produce relatively few fireworks and are accomplished with relative ease.

Passionate marriages are another matter entirely. The vast majority of couples seeking divorce therapy have had marriages of the passionate type. Generally, these are marriages of relatively long duration out of which children have been born and in which there has been an intense, deeply emotional attachment between the partners. In the view of the respondents, the rupture of such attachments, although it may be desirable, and even wished for, can only be accomplished with pain and difficulty. As one respondent noted, “In our culture most people marry for romantic-passionate reasons, and the divorces are passionate affairs as well.”² Psychic divorce is the term that describes the more or less predictable course this “passion” takes.

The concept of psychic divorce, while it is a fundamental one, was rarely articulated in all its complexity by any one respondent. We have, therefore, constructed a composite account of the process. While it is unlikely that this composite would be ascertained to in every detail by each of the respondents, it will serve to convey the dimensions of the phenomenon and the challenge it poses to the work of the divorce therapist.

¹ As divorce, the most problematic of the passionate marriages are those that owe their intensity to a deeply neurotic component in the original marital attraction, specifically to an unrecognized expectation in one or both partners that the marriage would heal a deep childhood wound.

² Quoted comments have generally been chosen as those best summarizing the views of the respondents as a group. The identity of the speakers has been omitted to focus attention on substantive matters and to emphasize our desire to sketch the range of therapeutic views rather than the profile of individual therapists.

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The process of psychic divorce has these general characteristics:

1. Within broad limits it is unavoidable and unmodifiable (although self-awareness and/or professional intervention can mitigate its more extreme manifestations).
2. The feelings that mark the process are in addition to, although they may not be easily distinguishable from, what other feelings may also be occurring. From the perspective of the emotions, the process of psychic divorce adds insult to what may or may not already be emotional injury (e.g., the sense of hurt at being rejected for another).
3. Throughout the process, decision-making and rational planning are impaired, at certain points markedly so.
4. The process occurs in discernible stages. These stages embody powerful swings in mood and in quality of marital relating. On balance, the more painful moods and types of relating predominate.
5. Although for marriages of the passionate type the process of psychic divorce is inevitable, the successful completion of the process is not. Thus, legal divorce may, and frequently does, occur in the absence of psychic divorce. The worst examples of post-divorce legal battles, bitterness, and general mayhem may be most often ascribed to a failure of psychic divorce.

Stages of Psychic Divorce

The stages of psychic divorce include the predivorce decision period; the decision period proper; the period of mourning; and the period of reequilibration.

The Pre-Divorce Decision Period

Strictly speaking, this is not part of the process of psychic divorce. It is, however, the preliminary skirmish, from which the parties may emerge onto the field of divorce already badly shaken.

1. A stage of increasing marital dissatisfaction and tension on the part of both
spouses but often felt more acutely by one
than the other.

2. Attempts at reconciliation. These may include frantic efforts to recapture a sense of mutual caring and the seeking of advice from friends or relatives. Psycho-
therapeutic help may be sought here or at any subsequent stage.
3. A clear decline in marital intimacy. One or both spouses may take a lover as a psychological "insurance" for the impending separation.
4. A break in the facade of marital solari-
dity. It is now public knowledge that the marriage is in serious trouble; there is open fighting. Lawyers may be contacted. Physical separation may occur at this or at any subsequent stage, or it may never occur (even, in extreme cases, after the divorce).

Stages 1 through 4 may last for weeks, months, or years. In some cases the process neither moves to the next stage nor attains resolution in the form of a return to marital harmony.

The Decision Period
5. The decision to divorce is firmly made by at least one partner; a sense of relief, perhaps exhilaration: a difficult, but liberating, step has been taken.
6. Anxiety and panic at the prospect of separation. "Can I survive alone?"
7. A stage of renewed marital intimacy. In reality, a mutually dependent clinging and unwillingness to face the underlying rupture because of separation anxiety.
8. Renewed outbreaks of marital fighting revealing the true nature of the im-
mediately preceding stages.

Stages 7 and 8 may be repeated several times. The entire decision-to-divorce stage may also be marked by what one respondent labeled the "marital flip-flop," as the partners take turns alternately pushing forward and opposing the divorce.

9. Final acceptance of the inevitability of divorce. Renewed anger, now expressed in conflict over the terms of settlement.

"I promised you that I was going to give
you half the money in the bank; well, I
changed my mind.

The Period of Mourning
This is a complex and critical period. It is
during this period that the terms of
settlement may be agreed upon.

10. Feelings of guilt and self-reproach
for having caused the breakup. An acute
sense of failure and diminished self-worth;
loneliness and depression are typical. Sev-
eral respondents noted that mourning
a spouse lost through divorce is in some
respects more difficult than mourning a
dead spouse, since the partner in divorce
is alive and there may be a strong tempta-
tion to reestablish ties.
11. Anger at the spouse. This signals a
return to equilibrium and an upswing in
self-regard.
12. Acceptance of the positive as well
as the negative side of the marriage. Rea-
listic sadness.

Period of Reequilibration
This is a period of heightened self-
growth and diminished dwelling on the
marriage. If the mourning process has
been successfully completed, this stage
will increasingly take on the characteris-
tics discussed below under Criteria of a
Constructive Divorce.

In short, through much of the process
of psychic divorce, both partners are viewed
as being buffered by strong emotional
forces over which they have little control;
their behavior, whether loving or hostile,
may belie their actual feelings and is, in
any case, an uncertain guide to their deep-
est intentions. The partners are unpredict-
able, and their ability to plan construc-
tively for their own needs and those of
their children is reduced.

It is perhaps because of the vagaries
of psychic divorce that every once in a while
there surfaces in the respondents' remarks
a certain bemusement about their chosen
work.

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They came to me for what seemed to be a
marital problem, and about the third or
fourth session I learned that they were di-
vorced. As a matter of fact, they didn't go on
a honeymoon when they got married, they
went on a sort of honeymoon when they got
divorced. They celebrated by going away
together. See, people do strange things—and
how the therapist is supposed to follow and
understand all those strange things, I don't
know.

CRITERIA OF A CONSTRUCTIVE DIVORCE

What distinguishes a successful divorce from
an unsuccessful one? If therapeutic
assistance in terminating a marriage is sought,
what should it accomplish? In the
broadest sense, a constructive divorce is
one in which the process of psychic divorce
has been successfully completed. There
was consensus that psychic divorce has
occurred when certain conditions prevail
with regard to the attitudes and behavior
of the former spouses toward one another,
the welfare of children, and the level of
functioning of each of the ex-mates as a
newly single person.

The Attitudes and Behavior of the For-
mer Spouses Toward One Another

A good divorce, like a good marriage, is a
mutual enterprise. Both partners must
wish to end their relationship just as they
once wished to start it.

One member may be sadder than the other
about the disruption of the marriage or feel
more distressed, but I think a constructive
divorce is when both people realize it is the
best solution for the two of them—not neces-
arily the most wanted solution, but the best
solution—the only possible solution.

Where one member of the divorcing couple
still feels that it could have worked or that,"if only,"—some other kind of magic could
have kept it going—I think there's bound to
be bitterness.

Mutual acceptance of the need to divorce
should find concrete expression in active
negotiation over the terms of settlement,
particularly in cases involving dependent
children and the division of accrued mate-
rial assets. Such negotiation should be
undertaken both with a healthy sense of
one's own needs and in a spirit of equity
and fair play. Failure of one or both part-
ners to take an active negotiating stance
suggests psychological nonacceptance of
the divorce or guilt about it. The conse-
quences of such passivity are that realistic
needs are not met and the post-divorce
readjustment is made more difficult. Ac-
tive participation of both partners also
acts to promote a sense of ownership of
the settlement, thereby increasing the
likelihood that whatever agreements are
reached will be honored.

It is important and interesting to note,
however, that the respondents as a group
were relatively indifferent to assisting in
negotiations over practical matters. (Only
two, for example, mentioned an equitable
financial settlement as an important cri-
terion of a constructive divorce.) The pauc-
ity of interest about the practical side of
divorce reflects, in part, the belief of many
of the respondents that difficulties in ar-
-ranging practical issues are only symp-
toms of more profound—and "real"—con-
flicts.

I think that the issues are emotional and
that they get played out in terms of money;
they get played out in terms of status;
they get played out in terms of a lot of
things. In a good divorce, those things just
don't come up as issues.

We shall return to this important matter
in our consideration of strategies of inter-
vention.

The successful divorce should also leave
each partner with a balanced view of the
other and of the marriage and with a
sense of psychological closure.

The good outcome to me is one in which the
individual, without either self-blame or
blaming the other, has been able to look at
the marriage and retrospectively say, 'Here
were the good things, which were nice, and they are part of me, here are the things that went wrong, for these and these reasons.

In the post-divorce period it is desirable that the former partners be able to work together cooperatively when the situation requires it—whatever their feelings toward each other may be. The need for such cooperation is greatest for couples with minor children.

It’s worked out in such a way that he will not wring on payments, and they conduct themselves very civilly. She doesn’t like him; she says he’s a real bastard, but they do meet occasionally to discuss business matters and things regarding the children, and they’re very civil about it.

While post-divorce civility is an asset, few respondents were in favor of continued post-divorce involvements between ex-spouses beyond those necessitated by co-parenting. Seemingly pleasurable post-divorce interactions were seen as suggesting an unconscious wish to “hang on” to the marriage.

There are many couples who are divorced and still maintain all kinds of contacts—even without children—of telephone calls or of problems with alimony or in terms of friends, of sharing friends, or of keeping them involved in the process. So that there are divorces that are not divorces; and I think those are the most destructive.

A minority viewpoint, expressed by two therapists, was that friendship between ex-mates was desirable when it could be achieved. Said one:

Sometimes they can become friends for the first time in their lives. It’s a strange thing: I mean, I’ve heard people say, “You know, we have never been so open with each other.” Because, what more is there to lose, and they can sometimes say truths to each other they hadn’t said before. It may simply be that there is a kind of recognition: “We really aren’t going to make it with each other. You’re going one way and I’m going another. But that doesn’t mean I have to hate you for it or you have to hate me for it. We can hold each other’s hands.”

One unambiguous sign that psychological divorce has not occurred is continued court battles. They get divorced legally, but the fight continues. I think that’s really where I came into divorce counseling—when after the legal divorce, the emotional divorce doesn’t truly occur, and the anger is so great that they proceed to sue each other. They nominate in court instead of fighting it out in bed. So often they get the satisfaction of battle—they get their orgasms by going to court.

The Children

Kids are always hurt when their parents break up; there’s no such thing as, “Better have a divorce for the sake of the children.”

No, the kids are always hurt. We try to hurt them as little as possible.

Whether or not each of our respondents would agree that children are always hurt in a divorce, this comment captures the prevailing view of the sample that children of divorce, particularly very young children, are at considerable psychic risk. The idea of a child’s vulnerability rests on several major notions: (a) For optimal psychological growth, children need two parents, one of each sex. (b) Because they are cognitively and emotionally immature, and perhaps also, for biological reasons (c), children are poorly equipped to handle any significant estrangement in their relations with parents. For the child under the age of six or seven such an event signals, in fact, a major life trauma.

The risks to children are heightened by the temporary but often considerable impairment in the caretaking ability of the parents, who are undergoing one of the great stressful periods in their own lives.

Even people who are absolutely determined that they’re not going to use their kids will do so in some form. For example, the father picks them up on Sunday. He’s run out of places to take the kids. You know, after a while he does. And then the kids are crying. They’re little; they don’t have their toys with them. And then he takes the kids home, and the mother says to the kids: “What’s your father give you today? Another hamburger? Another hot dog? He didn’t give you a full course meal? Who’s he daging now?” Even people who are determined not to do it are going to do it in some form. Then the kids become message carriers. Even if the parents don’t use the words, the kids can pick up the feelings.

More devastating to children can be the emotional minefield warfare between the parents in which the children become primary weapons. It is psychologically easier and publicly more acceptable to give vent to feelings of anger, humiliation, and diminished self-worth by attacking the spouse in one’s parental role, than in the unflattering capacity of rejected husband or wife.

The fighting goes on for years, after the real part is over; the wife brings the husband to court again for additional alimony, for additional child support, and eventually even to start some sort of counter-action—and the kids pay a terrible price for that. That is the main criterion for a bad outcome. The adults get bruised in the process. I think they can usually handle it. But the kids are pretty helpless and if they get caught up in it, I think that’s really the worst sort of outcome that can happen.

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The constructive divorce then, is one in which psychic injury to children is minimized, principally through the maintenance of a good co-parenting relationship between the former spouses. In particular, children should be free of the apprehension that loving other parent will jeopardize their place in the affection of the other.

These kids should feel that they can love one without having to feel antagonistic to the other, that it’s not an act of disloyalty to love both; and those kids should feel that in an emergency they’ve still got a mother and father and they can count on them.

The children’s relationship with the noncustodial parent was mentioned by several respondents as having special importance. One therapist, for example, felt that the success of her assistance consisted, in part, in the working out of post-divorce living arrangements that took into account the children’s need for both parents.

One issue was who was going to move, that was a major issue. The other was what was going to happen to kids and how they was going to happen. It was dealt with by deciding that the kids went with her, to her apartment. And they would be close enough to walk over and visit their father whenever they choose to. And they spent a lot of time with him. And also feels free to let them do that and not interfere with the relationship. I mean, that’s a very big thing with my. I work very hard at working this through for the children, exacting that they should be allowed to have a separate relationship with each parent.

A constructive divorce is also one in which children have mastered the painful experience they have been through, and, if possible, grown in the process. Absence of the fantasy that they were the cause of the divorce was seen as evidence that the worst of the children’s difficulties have been resolved.

I believe that every person who has divorced
The Self

The minimal criterion for a constructive divorce is the absence of strong, unrelenting feelings of failure and self-disparagement. The truly successful divorce, in addition, entails increased self-understanding, the ability to form satisfying new intimate relationships, and a heightened sense of personal competence. In a word, "growth." This was the single most reiterated theme in the interviews.

Most often, an increase in self-knowledge referred to what one respondent termed a "victory over a neurotic choice of a mate." The primary purpose of such a victory was to avoid a subsequent identical marital choice—the "same mistake twice" or thrice syndrome. (Although the ability to form new intimate relationships was considered important, few respondents went so far as to suggest that the sine qua non of healthy postdivorce adjustment was remarriage.)

You can't really tell whether the divorce, or the therapy associated with it, was successful until you've seen what kind of relationship the divorced person forms. If they get themselves into the exact kind of neurotic bind, then the divorce hasn't solved anything. But if they are able to form healthy relationships, it has.

The specific components of self-understanding that inculcate against the same-mistake-twice syndrome are insight into one's unconscious conflicts and distortions and an appreciation of one's contribution to the dysfunctional behavior patterns in the old marriage. It is an important therapeutic strategy to elucidate these matters over the course of treatment (see Contextual Interventions below). A one-sided view of the marital breakdown was taken as prima facie evidence that something far short of an optimal divorce had been achieved.

Another kind of destructive divorce is when there is so much animosity between two people that both of them cling to the view of the other as the evil one, and there really is no recognition that each has played a part in—has made a contribution to—the situation.

Increased feelings of personal competence may be a direct result of terminating a psychologically abusive marriage.

The man was very dependent on his wife—she had an income from stocks and bonds—and unquestionably this was one of her attractions for him. But she had little respect for him, tended to side with his children against him, and was mildly paranoid. He was really selling his soul to the devil for money, and his extracting himself was a healthy sign.

In other cases, the growth in self-mastery comes from an active process of coping with the demands of the divorcing process or the postdivorce period.

He was one of the people with whom I've worked who found lawyers at the University who were concerned with the rights of children; he became knowledgeable in finding these people for himself. This was a man who in many other areas of his life was a very competent man, but in terms of his personal life there'd been a lack of dependence and helplessness. So that being able to do some of this was part of his growth—to fight for the custody of his children, to face that.

OBSTACLES TO A CONSTRUCTIVE DIVORCE

The major obstacle to a constructive divorce is, as we have noted, the turmoil of psychic divorce. That is not the only obstacle that may exist, however. Additional complications may arise because of certain characteristics of the marital relationship and from the involvement of third parties, particularly the involvement of lawyers.

Characteristics of the Marriage

The single most frequently cited predic- tor of a difficult divorce was one spouse's eagerness to end the marriage coupled with reluctance to do so on the part of the other. The interviews leave the impression that in the clinical practice of the respondents such cases are very common.

Typically, unequal motivation to divorce was linked not only to a changing balance of affection but to a realistic imbalance in postdivorce prospects. A divorced man of thirty-eight or forty, for example, may be just reaching the peak of his professional and financial attainments. Such a man may have reason to believe that, in the event of divorce, his social and sexual horizons can, with some minor time-out for readjustment, be easily and gratifyingly extended. Not so for his homemaker wife with custody of their two minor children. She may have cause to suspect that her postdivorce social and financial situation will be far less easy to arrange and far less satisfying. When, in addition to differing levels in postdivorce "marketability," the less marketable spouse has been rejected for a new lover, the barriers to a constructive divorce can be formidable.

The precise effects of an unequal desire to divorce may be difficult to predict, but certain recurred patterns were noted. Frequently, the partner who wishes to end the marriage feels guilt at abandoning the spouse. A frank discussion of the desire for divorce is therefore made more difficult. A series of escalating but misplaced marital conflicts may then occur. Several respondents also noted that much of what is ostensibly conjunct therapy designed to save a marriage is actually a covert form of divorce therapy, resulting from the desiring spouse's desire to assure his guilt ("I tried my best to save it") and, perhaps unconsciously, to provide the mate with a "lover" in the person of the therapist.

Once the initiator finally broaches the topic of divorce, continued guilt, combined with the equally strong desire to leave, may produce a virulent form of the "settle- ment at any cost" mentality. At the same time, the settlement terms demanded by the spouse who wishes to keep the marriage may escalate. Such escalating, and often unreasonable demands, may be motivated by feelings of humiliation combined with anxiety at the prospects of a bleak and uncertain future. They may also be a means to prolong the marriage and ultimately prevent the marital breakup.

An opposite pattern was also noted. Guilt in one spouse at leaving the marriage may be expressed as anger directed at the other. In the reluctant partner, diminished feelings of self-worth may inhibit the ability to bargain constructively and effectively, or worse, produce an abject acceptance of almost any terms dictated by the other. Under such circumstances, a settlement may be quickly arrived at. Its inequitable and ultimately unworkable nature, however, may not become apparent until several years and several court fights later.

overdependence on their wives and the painful prospect of diminished contact with their children, than of a poor postdivorce social or financial outlook.
FAMILY PROCESS

Chances for a constructive divorce are also much reduced for couples in which one or both partners have a heavy investment in casting blame or in bringing up long-nursed grievances, for "Virginia Woolf" couples who experience gratification in wounding one another and are thus committed to a pathological fighting process; and for couples in which one partner plays a dominating, aggressive role in marital disputes, while the other adopts a passive, submissive stance.

There was also wide concensus that for divorcing couples with minor children the potential for a destructive divorce is greatly increased. First, there must be planning for the children's welfare—their immediate needs as well as those ten or fifteen years in the future. Such planning is complex and difficult even under the best of circumstances. The emotional circumstances during a divorce are not, of course, the best. For many parents there are also extensive feelings of guilt at the damage they feel the divorce will do to the children's emotional development. Guilt may result in defensive anger at the mate, or uncritical acceptance of any child-care proposals, however ill-conceived. As has been noted, children also provide a psychologically inviting opportunity for both spouses to emphasize their feelings of anger and bitterness toward one another in a socially acceptable manner. It may be difficult to de-escalate a conflict of this kind since its true roots are unacknowledged.

The effect of wealth or its absence on the divorcing process was one aspect of the marriage on which there was no consensus. Two positions were articulated: One view was that either poverty or wealth can produce complications. If there is very little money the partners may have great difficulty in negotiating a settlement because the small economic pie makes it difficult to arrange trade-offs and the clear reduction in circumstances that looms ahead produce anxiety and a corresponding increase in self-preservation. If there is much money, the high financial stakes may ruin the climate in which negotiations take place.

In one couple I treated, the guy was a millionaire; he was following his wife while they were separated and having infrared pictures taken of her with men, so the flash wouldn't come out. This is the kind of thing I was trying to avoid, but he said to me, "Look, Buster, there's a half a million dollars at stake, if I don't protect myself with this information."

Large sums of money may also provide increased opportunities for the expression of revenge-seeking and the desire to punish.

The second view was that in and of itself money has no predictable effect on the divorcing process. When money does become an issue, it is because "something deeper" is involved.

I think money is very often used in our society and in marriages as a way of expressing needs, controls, expectations, wishes—and it continues in the divorce process. And it sometimes is used as a way of punishing or exacting payment for pain. I think where people have had no conflicts around money prior to the divorce, they don't have them in the divorce process. The kinds of quarrels that go on around money have nothing to do with the realities of money and how much there is to be shared or distributed. It has to do with the feelings people have about money.

Third-Party Involvement

The ability of relatives and friends to hinder the divorcing process was a minor theme in the interviews. Several respondents discussed situations in which outside parties made things worse—the boyfriend who exerts on the unhappy wife, the mother who fuels her daughter's resentment against a husband—and there were some who felt that relatives or friends, however well-meaning, could rarely be objective. There was also agreement that of all out-side parties, the client's own parents loomed largest as complicating factors in the divorce. However, it was not the actual megalomania of parents that was the cause of difficulty but the and unrealistic anticipations of how the parents would react to the divorce.

The place of premarriage as enemy of a constructive divorce was reserved, in the respondents' view, for the divorce lawyer. Although the respondents' attitudes toward the lawyer's role in divorce can best be described as ambivalent—positive relationships between therapists and lawyers do develop—the major majority of the therapists expressed a wary, critical view of the legal profession.

Three major criticisms of lawyers reappeared continually. (a) Under the present legal system lawyers are part of an adversary process and thus under a professional obligation to defend their clients' interests and attacks those of the spouse. From the therapists' perspective as agents of a constructive divorce, this is the least desirable posture imaginable. (b) Lawyers are untrained in psychology, and in family and marital dynamics in particular. Consequently, they may easily become unwitting pawns in the escalation of marital conflict. (c) The lawyer's objectivity may be compromised by financial considerations, since his fee is contingent on the amount of time and energy required to produce a final settlement.

Two of the respondents also mentioned cases in which they had been subpoenaed by one spouse's lawyer to testify against the other spouse. Such legal action not only violates in a direct manner the therapist's already guarded impartiality but also raises the unresolved and highly problematic issue of confidentiality between therapist and client in divorce counseling.

I once got caught in my early years in a custody case. That was, first of all, a losing position to be in, and, second, it seems to me that, really, nobody knows very clearly what the role of the therapist should be in relation to two people as opposed to one person. There's confidentiality, and that's pretty clear when you're talking with one person, but when you're talking with two people, what is the confidentiality? And particularly if you're in a situation where people are separating, you begin to get mixed up. What was said when you were alone with them, and together with them?

To what degree are the obstacles to divorce perceived by our respondents in their clinical practices characteristic of the over one million divorces that occurred in the United States in 1975? In particular, is the process of psychic divorce inevitable, or is it an extreme, pathological reaction of the few who seek psychotherapy when divorce impends? In the absence of any epidemiological studies of divorce, (akin, say, to Mental Health in the Metropolis for individual psychopathology) it is not possible to answer these questions. Nor, by the same token, can we say how frequently the criteria of a constructive divorce are met by the divorcing population as a whole. Research on the effects of effectiveness of divorce therapy—neither studies of divorce nor the social and legal policy on divorce. The respondents' views on the goals of, and obstacles to, constructive divorce provide, however, an important backdrop against which to understand the strategies and tactics of the intervention they employ.

STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

Divorce therapy, as reflected in these interviews, has two distinct foci: helping clients decide whether or not to divorce and assisting in the negotiation of a final divorce (or separation) agreement. The tactics by which these two goals are pursued are extremely varied, but all of them may be subsumed under the heading of either reflexive, contextual, or substantive strategies.

Reflective strategies are those behaviors
by which the therapist attempts to orient himself to the marital conflict and to establish the groundwork upon which his later activities will be built. As the term implies, reflexive strategies are designed primarily to affect the therapist rather than the parties: to make the therapist the most effective instrument of intervention possible under the circumstances.

Contextual and substantive strategies, on the other hand, are aimed specifically at the conflict and the parties to it. In a concrete sense they are what the divorce therapist "does" to help resolve a marital impasse.

**Contextual interventions** refer to attempts by the therapist to affect the climate surrounding the dispute and, in particular, the socio and ground rules of interaction. The purpose is to create conditions that will allow the couple to do their own decision-making and negotiating. If one thinks of the therapist as an instrument for assisting at the "birth" of a settlement, then one might describe contextual strategies as a "mid-wifery" kind of divorce therapy.

In contrast, **substantive interventions** refer to strategies by which the therapist takes an active and direct hand in promoting specific agreements on matters of substance or attempts to pressure or manipulate the parties directly into resolving their differences on substantive issues. Substantive interventions imply that the therapist has a point of view about the conflict and what should be done to resolve it. Pursuing the obstetric analogy, one might think of substantive interventions as the "Caesarean" approach to divorce therapy.

It is important to note that the distinction among these three strategies hinges on the therapist's purpose in making a given intervention, rather than the extent to which he gives advice or directly manipulates the clients to behave in a particular way. A therapist may be quite "substantive" in the sense of telling the client what to do—to consult a lawyer, for example—but the intervention would be classified as contextual if the therapist's purpose was to reduce the level of emotional tension, rather than to convince a reluctant client that divorce is necessary and inevitable.

**Reflexive Interventions**

1. **Building Trust and Confidence**

A pervasive theme in the therapists' conceptualization of their role was the importance of developing in the clients a sense of trust and confidence. A concern with this issue continues throughout therapy but is likely to be central to the therapists' behavior in the initial stages when therapist and clients are new to each other. In a sense, this is the most subtle of therapist strategies, conveyed as much by the therapist's tone and general bearing as by his concrete actions. Among the specific tactics by which a sense of trust and confidence may be fostered are included explicit statements of reassurance and support, the judicious use of self-disclosure, and the maintenance of confidentiality. While there was a general desire for the preservation of marital secrets, respondents accept and even encourage confidences but at the same time attempt to provide constraints and rules for "secret-telling."

I tend to see them alone for two sessions and then bring them back together. When I'm seeing them alone I take it very explicit that they are free to tell me things they want kept confidential, and I will respect that. The advantage is to get them to open up and begin to look at themselves, because if they're constantly worried that their spouse is going to hear this, then they aren't going to open up. I make two explicit exceptions:

- Since the mid-sixties the case involves both spouses, either in conjoint or concurrent sessions, we have employed the plural, "clients," throughout. It is clear, however, that many interventions are employed when only one spouse is in treatment.

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- First, I want the freedom to tell the partner that the things he is telling me could be discussed right now by all three of us sitting here together, and I make it very plain that I'm clued in to what is sensitive and what is free. Second, if there is some sensitive material that I think the other person needs to know, I might urge him to tell the partner. I won't do it myself, but I might urge him to.

2. **Diagnosing the Marital Situation**

Before he can intervene effectively, or, indeed, know what interventions are needed, the therapist must educate himself about the nature of the situation confronting him. The key issue on which information is needed is whether or not the marriage is headed for divorce.

Three aspects of divorce and divorce therapy make the task of accurate diagnosis particularly problematic.

(a) The prevalence of client misdiagnosis. In a large number of cases, the clients' initial self-diagnosis is incorrect or grossly misleading. Perhaps most common is the request to "save" a marriage that is actually an implicit request (at least on one spouse's part) to help end it. Less frequently, the initial request is for help in divorcing. Here too the probability of client misdiagnosis is high.

(b) The nascent status of divorce therapy. That few couples initiate treatment by explicitly asking for help in ending their marriage was often explained as a reflection that the true psychological problem is whether or not to seek a divorce. If that difficult decision has been made, people were said to contact lawyers rather than therapists.

Another explanation, however, has to do with the professional status of divorce therapy itself. A review of the literature conducted in conjunction with this study found only a handful of publications on strategies of intervention in divorce. In comparison, the literature on marital therapy is extensive. We have already noted the lack of agreement among the respondents on whether such a thing as divorce therapy, as distinct from marital or family therapy, exists. Moreover, although all respondents are highly expert, on the average only 20 percent of their time is spent on divorce work. We were unable to locate any practitioners for whom divorce therapy is the preponderant or exclusive area of practice. These, we believe, are all signs that they are dealing with a specialty that has not yet achieved full and independent status. To some degree, then, the diagnostic issue arises because couples who have made a firm decision to divorce, and who therefore represent no diagnostic problem, do not present themselves for help in dealing with the practical and psychological problems of separating. Quite simply, they are unaware that such help is available.

(c) The ambiguity of criteria for divorce. How does the therapist know that, regardless of the couple's presenting complaint, they are or should be headed for divorce? The interviews provide only sketchy answers. To some degree this may reflect our initial naiveté. Had we known at the outset that determining the status of the case was one of the central commun-
drama of the respondents' work we would have asked more specific questions about the criteria that alert them to the probability that divorce therapy, rather than marital therapy, is required. Nonetheless, some of the respondents did touch on the diagnostic issue. From these remarks we may infer that the paucity of criteria for divorce is due to a true lack of consensus: who should get divorced and who should stay married, after all, is a highly complex and idiosyncratic matter. In addition, most respondents hold the view that for practical, ethical, and psychological reasons only the clients can make the decision to get divorced. The respondents' motivation to formulate such criteria is therefore low.

Having said this, we may briefly note some of the criteria that were mentioned as evidence to the therapist that he is, or will soon be, dealing with a divorce, whatever the couple's assumed view of the situation may be. These criteria are admittedly sketchy. This is clearly an area in which more clinical and empirical work is needed.

1. Repeated unilateral or mutual belittling of therapist efforts to reduce the level of marital distress. This is evidence that one or both parties no longer has a genuine interest in remaining in the marriage.
2. A destructively high level of marital conflict threatening the physical or psychological integrity of one or both spouses.
3. A marriage based on a deeply neurotic wish that is either self-destructive or at fundamental odds with reality. Of the tactics for diagnosing the state of the marriage, the preferred one is simply observing the marital interaction at first hand. In the early stages of treatment the therapist may be content to do so passively.

In the beginning, I listen to the story. As a matter of fact, I never make any interven-
tions the first couple of sessions. I don't want to affect the process—let it come out spontaneously. I listen to him, and then I ask her how she reacts to what he is saying. And then I listen to her.

In other cases the therapist may structure the interaction so as to maximize information.

They can talk about it, but now you want to see it in operation. And I will sometimes do that. A phenomenon that I have been inspired to try in the room, is to see if they can do it. I'll pay a lot of attention to what they juggle up in between them, and in talking about it. But it's things they do in front of me that are more important.

Friends, parents, and other relatives may also be consulted to expand the therapist's understanding.

3. Maintaining Impartiality

Of all the strategies of intervention, maintaining impartiality was the one on which there was the greatest agreement. A therapist who has lost his impartiality was perceived as having made the most serious of professional blunders. The therapist must maintain impartiality both toward the spouses as individuals and toward the prospects of their divorce or continued marriage.

You get to remain totally open, objective, and unbiased; as soon as you start taking sides and getting into an adversary situation with one party against the other, you're gone. Forget about any constructive work at that point—unless you can recognize what's happening and go back and correct it.

An extreme example of a highly structured approach to diagnosis is the use by two of the respondents of the Rorschach Test. The pattern of reaction that results from the couple's "play" is said to be a diagnostic aid and in some cases highly predictive that divorce will occur (11). The game is itself an adaptation of an experimental procedure developed by the second author of the present study (4).

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If someone comes in and says, "Listen, I'm finished and I don't want to work on it; I want a divorce," then, if they want my help at that point, I will help them to make some kind of a decision. But I don't say, "Listen, I think this marriage stinks, and you really better get out." That's a value judgment I don't bring into a session.

Impartiality is not synonymous, however, with an absence of a point of view. The therapist's commitment is to his own conception of reality and the best interests of all concerned. In defense of this commitment the therapist may be obliged at times to differ very sharply with one or the other spouse.

You know what I have written here of my four o'clock patient? "Document the wife's errors. She doesn't know where she went wrong." When I met with her I said, "Tell me, did you make any errors?" She couldn't see any. "You're a bastard. I have been the model wife. You name an error for me."

And I said, "I'm going to ask your husband when I see him on Friday to tell me those errors he sees, and when I meet with you we will discuss what he sees as your errors." They're in the stage of her being bitter, bewildered, angry, blaming, and that's why I'm trying to show her, "Look, you're not a saint, and he's not a bastard."

The stress on impartiality is clearly related to strategic considerations: i.e., the task of producing meaningful alternations in a relationship cannot be accomplished if either party perceives the therapist as biased. There are other characteristics of divorce work, however, that appear to accentuate the respondents' concern with impartiality, even to the extent, at times, of leading them to deny that they have goals of what should be done when, in fact, they may have them.

The emotional strain and upheaval of couples in the process of getting a divorce is one such factor. In the view of the respondents, such couples are particularly likely to want a decision as to who is "right" and who is "wrong" and cues as to whether to end the marriage.

I think that the original goal of every couple who is on the verge of divorce and comes to a therapist is to lay blame on the other. So they come originally for you to sit as a judge and tell the other guy that he was wrong and all the terrible things she's doing to me. That's their original goal— to be proven right.

The emphasis on therapist impartiality may also be a function of the respondents' highly developed awareness that they operate in an area of interpersonal conflict that, by its very nature, is apt to touch uncomfortably upon their own unresolved childhood and family conflicts.

One of the major pitfalls in working with a couple or family is that you begin to form such strong countertransferences that you become identified with one member of the family or one partner of the couple. Therefore, part of my function, part of the job, I do on myself, is to think very carefully about what I am doing and what kind of contract has been set up—about my own unconscious role; it becomes very important to deal with it and to think about it and to be aware of how I'm responding.

Finally, the prominence of the theme of therapist impartiality also appears related to the highly active role to which nearly every respondent subscribed.

I am a very active therapist; I don't sit passively; I can't imagine doing family ther-

Appositive non-directively.

A therapist with a highly activist stance is more likely to be impressed with the importance of "impartiality" for the simple reason that his role conception puts him at a higher risk of losing or appearing to lose his stages of treatment.
FAMILY PROCESS

I've often heard husbands come around and say, "Would you sign an affidavit to the effect that my wife is really unstable and I deserve to have the children?" And I point out that's not where I come in. "I'm the family agent. I'm not going to do something that's going to screw her up. You have to convince me that this is to everybody's advantage. Go to your lawyer. We'll sign affidavits. I'm not a lawyer, I'm a psychologist. I'm an agent of the family." That's the kind of thing you stress again and again.

The therapist may also safeguard his impartiality by inviting clients to openly criticize or question him. One respondent's amplification of his reasons for inviting the parties to evaluate his behavior illustrates well the close relationship between an intense concern with impartiality on the one hand and a highly activist conception of the therapist's role on the other.

There is an occupational disease that we all suffer from—it's called omniscience. And another occupational disease is called omnipotence. And in a case like this, when you're mediating, where you're dealing with realities and angry people and all kinds of things like that, there is the danger that you may feel you know all the answers. And that what you say ought to be done is the thing that must be done. And if they won't do it, then you dish out, speak them, kick them out, or something. I think these are very great dangers. The one is handled by careful analysis of one's own countertransference to both parties. The second can be handled, I believe, by a great flexibility in letting the parties give in to your proposals. In other words, I would say, "It seems to me the only thing to do is this-and-so. And I think that's what you ought to do." I rarely say that. I usually say, "Well, putting A and B and C together, it seems to me as though the path to be followed is thus-and-so. What do you think?" And I state at the outset that the people sitting before me always have the right to make any statement that I make and ask me why I make it. And I have to present what thought process led me to that conclusion. If it's an error, as it sometimes is, they can correct it, if I allow this kind of openness. That is a counterpilty to the omnipotence fantasy we're apt to have.

The therapist's impartiality may be protected not only behaviorally—that is, by what he says during therapy—but also structurally—by his decisions about who should participate in counseling sessions. The strong preference for seeing both spouses, and the common use of conjoint therapy to marital groups are all, at least in part, justified on the grounds that doing so helps keep the therapist "honest."

I try at the beginning to see people together. And I don't engage, for example, while I'm doing that, in individual sessions—unless it's by agreement all of us. And usually, if that occurs, I will balance it off with the other, too. I will also not get drawn into telephone communication with one person, which I think is an alliance-seeking tactic that is often used.

A respondent who works frequently in conjoint therapy with her husband explained her rationale:

Working together as therapists, each of us can make sure that somebody gets supported. It's very important. My husband react very badly to hostile, aggressive women, and he's going to find himself giving it to her. I, on the other hand, can soften that; I can say: "Hey, wait a minute, Fred," because I don't react to that way that to kind of woman. I say, "Mary was just attempting to get across to John the strength of her feeling on this; it really is very important to her."

The therapist's impartiality toward the issue of the couple's divorce or continued marriage is protected by making two decisions clear: (a) the decision-making responsibility is in the client's, not the therapist's, and (b) the aim of treatment is the growth and well-being of each spouse as an individual.

"I can't take your burdens on my shoulders. These are your problems, not mine. You can give me a new way of looking at things, new ideas, or new suggestions about how you interact with each other, but you have to do it.

I do not allow people to say, "We feel," and "we think," because the "we" hides differences. And I insist that each person is responsible for himself. His first obligation is to himself, then to the mate; then to the children; then to the family of origin; and, last of all, to society and the world.

Contextual Interventions

While reflective strategies were most often discussed in connection with the decision to get divorced, contextual and substantive strategies were discussed in both phases of divorce therapy. Accordingly, contextual and substantive interventions have been divided into those occurring in the decision-making phase and those occurring during the settlement phase.

The Decision-Making Phase

Several respondents took exception to our use of terms like "constructive," "verifiable," or "civilized" divorce. To the respondents, such phrases suggest that the breaking of once deep emotional ties can be a relatively simple matter, a proposition that, as the concept of psychic divorce illustrates, contradicts clinical experience.

A husband and wife who were married to each other and had a lot of shared experiences—they can only separate violently and savagely. I think, in a sense, anger is a necessary part of the process. It's unrealistic when it's not. I think a friendly divorce is a little bit phony.

The therapeutic task is not to deny or circumvent but to reduce the level of hostility to more manageable levels.

I consider the first task of a therapist to lessen the emotional intensity, because unless you do that, you're not going to get anywhere. And I consider divorce therapy to be an extremely difficult, very tempestuous kind of therapy that is always on the edge of termination. The couple, for example, can have an argument right before a session, and if one thinks that the other wants the therapy, "I'm not going back to that doctor." The need to get back at the partner is more important than working things out in therapy. It is very tricky. I can never tell from one session to the next whether it's going to be the last one.

Respondents' tactics for attempting to reduce the emotional pitch were of two kinds: tactics involving direct interventions during sessions—what we have referred to previously as behavioral tactics—and activities involving the manipulation of the context and environment in which the couple interacts—what we have called structural tactics.

1. Reducing the level of emotional tension: Behavioral tactics. A major source of tension and escalating hostility is the tendency of one or both partners to feel victimized by the other. A variety of tactics may help defuse the situation when this occurs.

(a) Clarifying the real source of the anger. The educative function of the divorce therapist is an important one. Since a certain amount of the anger the spouses express is directed toward each other in either more constructive feelings (such as lowered self-esteem, grief, or anxiety) or an overreaction to the spouse based on an unconscious distortion of the present situation, if the therapist can help clarify these matters, the heat of the marital battle may be significantly reduced.

(b) Shifting the focus from other to self. The average couple will be talking about the other. "What he did to me"—"What she did to me." And you've got to try as much as possible to rechannel the individuals' attitudes and feelings. "What am I doing? What am I contributing to this relationship? How am I acting? When this happens, what do I do?" We know what they do—but what do I do in the situation?

(c) Relabeling an accusation. I try to de-label the behavior as much as
possible. For instance, a guy tells me that his wife never leaves him alone, that she's constantly ready to go, and she's driving him out of his mind. I'll say something like, "What did you do to deserve such a lovely lady?" I de-label the sting of the epithet—the sense that this is a terrible way to be, that she's demanding.

(d) Encouraging positive interaction. When one partner retreats out, let's say, in a kindly, concerned way toward the other, and then the other sees that as an attack, I'm in there trying to clarify the way I saw it. What was there that made the other person see it in his way, when it's clear that if you look at it in terms of what was happening at the time, it was really an attempt to do something in a very positive kind of way. So I try to emphasize the healthy and respond very positively to that kind of thing—sort of watch for that.

(e) Focusing on substantive issues. The resolution of practical matters seemingly remote from the "real issues" may have an immediate calming impact on the marital dialogue.

When you eliminate many of the practical problems, it defuses a lot of the emotional response. I always try to eliminate the obstacles in the practical area before we get into any of the deeper dynamic aspects, because those can only be handled when you don't get interference and static from the practical problems.

(f) Reducing anxiety through behavioral techniques. One respondent described the use of cognitive desensitization with a man whose virulent opposition to his wife's request for a divorce was based on his jealousy of her new lover. The idea of the other guy produced very high anxiety; so I used a simple desensitization process: just sitting with him and getting him to picture very vividly the wife and some other guy in various acts of intimacy; having him simply relax and at the same time cognitively say, "This takes nothing away from me," until he was able to picture this with equanimity. And then he proceeded. He was then quite keen to go through with the divorce.

2. Reducing the level of emotional tension: Structural tactics. Among the contextual modifications the therapist may introduce to reduce the destructive levels of hostility are modifications in the format of therapy sessions, physical separation of the parties, and regulation of the clients' contact with lawyers.

(a) Modifying the format of therapy: Couples groups. Approximately half the respondents discussed employing this procedure during some part of their work with a couple. A couples' group may inhibit destructive fighting by "embarrassing the partners into more socially restrained behavior and make them less acquisitive of one another by giving them perspective on the common stresses of marriage.

(b) Modifying the format of therapy: Co-therapy. The value of co-therapy for protecting therapist impartiality has been noted. Impartiality is, of course, itself a means of lowering the emotional temperature. Co-therapy may also contribute to a hospitable emotional climate by making treatment less "psychiatric," thereby reducing the defensive tendency to seek judgments against the spousee. It may also provide a useful model of constructive methods for resolving differences.

For us, the whole business of modeling is a very important aspect—that my husband and I can disagree with each other, that one of us can back down gracefully; if we disagree with each other, we don't have to get into a great fight. We don't have to because we allow each other to have different opinions on matters, and couples will sometimes pick this up. Also, we listen to each other.

(c) Enforcing physical separation. In cases of physical assault or where verbal hostility has become so extreme that constructive problem-solving is blocked, a physical separation, either in terms of the therapy sessions, the living arrangements, or both, may be suggested or even required. Respondents spoke of ordering violent husbands out of the home as a condition for continued therapy and suggesting that a couple heavily invested in blaming each other begin by negotiating a "structured separation"—Will dating others be permitted? How often will they see each other? Will extra-marital sex be permitted?—so that "they no longer can play the game if it weren't for you."

(d) Regulating contact with lawyers. Although the respondents generally viewed lawyers as a major source of destructive conflict in divorce, the implications for therapeutic intervention drawn from this belief differed widely. One conclusion was that no constructive therapeutic work can occur if lawyers are involved. The task of the therapist is to prevent such involvement.

I try to help them see that their lawyers are doing them a terrible disservice. On the one hand, they use their lawyers as weapons; on the other hand, the lawyers foment more conflict and hostility. I might say that I do not counsel people who have already gone to the point of getting lawyers. You can't do meaningful counseling at that point because they are no longer interested in solving problems. The lawyers say, "Listen, mention this, because it'll compromise your case," and once you have that kind of contamination you don't have treatment. And it's a force to think that you can conduct any meaningful counseling when you have that kind of external contamination.

Ruling lawyers out, however, was a decidedly minority preference. Several respondents prompt clients to have an initial legal consultation as an aid to decision-making about the fate of the marriage. Legal consultation may also serve to reduce the level of tension and conflict by removing anxieties due to ignorance; by introducing a lawyer who is committed to a constructive, equitable divorce; and by serving as a corrective to fantasies of revenge and destruction.

Occasionally people come in to the treatment setting with fantastic ideas about what they're going to get if the opposing spouse doesn't give in and do what they say. I don't give legal advice—so sometimes it's necessary for them to get an individual lawyer in order to determine realistically what can be done in the specific situation. This frequently will help the total situation, because when the individual is brought back to reality and confronted with the facts—"No, you're not going to be able to do this, and, no, you're not going to get that, and you just can't hit him over the head for fifteen years because he didn't do what you wanted him to"—this sometimes makes it easier to work.

(e) Getting payment in advance. One respondent noted that a very effective aid in producing a workable emotional climate may be to insist on each in advance.

In many cases I sense right away that I'm going to have trouble with one or the other of the partners. You know what I do? The second they come in and want my services—they put a check on the table buying a certain amount of my time—and my time is expensive. This guarantees continuity of their participation in the work we do.

3. Clarifying the sources of marital dysfunction.

A couple comes in and they say: "We've been thinking about divorce, but we don't know..." So I say, "Look, let's have a period of exploration before either of you decides to leave. When you understand yourselves better and the situation better, then you're in a better position to make a decision about the fate of your marriage."

The educative function is focused on two areas: (a) permitting understanding about current patterns of marital interaction, and, particularly, each spouse's own role in destructive marital interchanges, and (b) explicating the historical roots of the marital difficulties in terms of each
spouse's own psychological development.

(a) Promoting understanding of current patterns of marital interaction. Understanding current dysfunctional patterns is facilitated by structural arrangements such as conjoint sessions, marital groups, and the use of audio or video playback. The goal is to keep the couple's interpretations "on display" as much as possible to encourage the development of "observing egos." For example, in a couples' group, the therapist may focus attention on one couple for half an hour and then invite the others to comment on what they have seen. Video or audio playback may be used to point out particularly dysfunctional marital interactions. The couple may even be given the tape for at-home training in self-observation. Another respondent discussed arranging sessions between one spouse and the new lover in order to help the client see, in a concrete and compelling fashion, that identical patterns of interaction are occurring in the supposedly idyllic and "totally different" relationship with the new partner.

(b) Exploiting the historical roots of marital conflict. It's important to find out just exactly who they're getting divorced from. Often, it has to do with things still being worked out in the family of origin. For example, if a woman has a brutal, tyrannical father, she's absolutely determined that no man is ever going to push her around again. So she marries a nice, sweet, passive guy; but then when they come in for therapy later on, she can't stand his weakness and passivity. Unless she does something about her relationship with her father, she's not going to be able to make either a rational choice about this divorce or about selecting another mate.

It's the kind of guy who came in saying, "Oh, I never had any problems with my parents; I loved them all the time; they're the greatest people that ever lived." When gradually we began to scratch underneath this very hard facade, we found the fear of his parents not loving him, anger toward them, or their inability to give him what he wanted. Since he was a little boy, he has been asking for the same things that his wife was asking from him. If he never got it from his parents, he wouldn't have much of a capacity to give it.

The historical roots of marital dysfunction may be clarified by client-therapist discussions and the "lesson" taught directly via therapist interpretations:

It's rather common for me to say something like this during the course of the divorce counseling session: "Look, the problem with you"—turning to one or the other spouse—"is that you've been raised with this desire to be treated like a prince or princess, as the case may be. And you've had this incredible need to be served; and your whole trip really seems to be that of being served. And you equate that with love; you haven't quite sorted out the difference between being loved and being served.

A minority of the respondents discussed therapy sessions with the client's family of origin as a more ambitious method for disentangling the past from the present. One respondent, in particular, placed heavy emphasis on this approach:

I do it toward the end of therapy when I feel that people have changed and they're ready to start dealing with their family. And I do a great deal of rehearsal before they bring their family in: "What do you want to take up with your family?" And some people say, "Well, I don't have any issues with my family; that was too many years ago; I get along okay with them." "Alright, let's go over the history again." And then, of course, people have thousands of issues with their family. And then they're prepared, and I turn the session, by the way, over to them. I'm sort of a traffic manager. They may start out, "You know, Dad, I never really felt close to you," that kind of thing. I find it especially important to do this in divorce therapy, but remember: said that a lot of people terminate prematurely. The family-of-origin work, I think, is the most important aspect of the work that I do.

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The Settlement Phase

While the distinction between the decision-making phase and the settlement phase of divorce therapy is useful for descriptive purposes, it raises a critical issue on which there was sharp disagreement. Should the therapist, in fact, play any significant role in arranging the terms of settlement?

Five of the respondents ruled out such a function as inconsistent with their training and the primary goal of divorce therapy—to help clients make the difficult decision to end or maintain the marriage. These respondents became involved with negotiating issues of settlement only to the extent that unacknowledged emotional conflicts in the client are viewed as blocking effective problem-solving. In these instances, therapeutic efforts are needed to explore and resolve the emotional problem. In the absence of such emotional conflicts, substantive differences between the spouses were viewed as solvable without third-party assistance, except for the technical advice of lawyers.

The flavor of opinion in this group may best be conveyed by some typical comments:

People who can already decide to differentiate and separate really need very little help. I'm not a lawyer, and I can't help decide how to separate an estate or make legal commitments for the children. I absolutely don't want to get involved in the financial settlements; that really doesn't concern me unless it gets into the dynamics of the case.

Eleven of the remaining respondents, while stressing the psychodynamic aspect of their role, acknowledged that there was a place in their activities for helping couples negotiate terms of settlement. In the interviews, however, they did not detail the nature of this assistance to any great degree. To what extent this is attributable to the failure of interviewers to probe sufficiently is difficult to estimate, but our impression is that, for the most part, the mediation of concrete issues is considered to be of peripheral concern to the resolution of psychological and relationship dynamics.

Three respondents stand apart in their explicit, detailed concern with working to arrange the terms of divorce. Strategies discussed under the settlement phase, whether contextual or substantive, rely heavily on their comments.

1. Establishing a favorable climate for negotiations. Reducing the level of emotional tension is a fundamental strategy that underpins therapeutic intervention from beginning to end. Once direct negotiation have begun, the level of tension may rise again, stimulated by the complexities of working out an agreement, as well as by the anxieties produced at the intensified prospects of psychological separation that the agreement so concretely represents. Hence, controlling the emotional climate may take on renewed salience as a therapeutic task. Many of the earlier tactics for so doing may be repeated, but this time with an eye to facilitating negotiations. Two tactics with particular relevance to the negotiating phase of therapy may be noted:

(a) Stating norms of equity, reasonableness, and cooperation. When they decide to get a divorce, then they get involved with lawyers for whom it is an end-and-end battle to do the best for their clients under a set of rules that have nothing to do with the couple's rules. That can become very bitter and nasty. I think I can help the couple to maintain a perspective on their continued relationship in the future and that there are reasons to cooperate as well as compete. I take a position: "Look, this doesn't have to be the kind of fight that ends in bitterness. It can end fairly and equitably and more or less to everybody's satisfaction."

(b) Discouraging vengeance and revenge-seeking. I try to help people appreciate the futility of...
FAMILY PROCESS

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The therapist may also interpret the client to the lawyer:

Frequently I am able to give a lawyer an insight into what’s happening with a couple—where they’re at, how they could perhaps support the process—because frequently they’re tremendously unsophisticated and do not know what goes on between people.

To make up an example: Say I get into the whole question of money with a woman who has gone to a lawyer and wants a divorce, and it turns out that her whole family background is one of being frightened and abandoned; they were poor and the father walked out on them and this is evolving the abandonment fears she had before. So when she tries to grab on to the husband’s money, the more the lawyer knows about where this came from the better he can help work it through with her.

Overall, however, collaboration between lawyer and therapist was mentioned infrequently. While this is undoubtedly a reflection of the pessimistic attitudes toward lawyers that the respondents held, four or five of the therapists mentioned that they were lacking in information as to which lawyers shared their views about the divorcing process but would find such information useful.

Substantive Interventions

The Decision-Making Phase: Orchestrating the Motivation to Divorce

The more successful divorces—1 mean, the least painful divorces—are ones in which the two people are at equal points of readiness to split. I think for both partners, when one is more ready than the other, it is much more difficult. For the one there’s going to be guilt for deserting the other who doesn’t want to be left, for the other there’s the pain of being left. Arriving at equal readiness is one of our tasks as marital therapists—to help people time a separation in such a way that they both move to a more or less balanced point of readiness and acceptance of where they’re going. So that neither one of them feels too ashamedly abandoned.

Orchestrating the motivation for divorce emerged in these interviews as the most distinguishing characteristic of therapeutic work with divorcing couples. Once the therapist embarks upon this form of intervention he has most clearly ceased doing marital therapy and has begun divorce therapy proper.

Orchestrating the motivation for divorce is a strategy that rests upon three major and related conceptions of the divorcing process:

1. For most couples the motivation for divorce is a highly ambivalent one. The sources of this ambivalence may include the social stigma attached to divorce; fear of offending and disappointing one’s parents; a sense of personal failure at a prescribed cultural task; guilt about possible damage to children and/or to a spouse who still want the marriage; loss of living alone and functioning autonomously; and the inevitable emotional turmoil of the psychic separation process.

2. In spite of initial ambivalence, in most divorce cases seen in clinical practice one spouse wants out of the marriage much more than the other.

3. A constructive divorce is unlikely if the motivation to end the marriage is not approximately equal in both partners.

Once the basic need for, or probability of divorce becomes apparent, the task of the therapist becomes one of shoring up the motivation for divorce wherever it is weakest and strengthening it whenever it begins to flag too markedly under the stress of separating. Six major tactics by which these goals are accomplished can be identified: weakening attitudinal impediments to divorce; arguing in favor of divorce; disputing negative assertions about self; enforcing physical separation of the spouses; increasing marketability; and enlisting the support of family and friends.

1. Weakening attitudinal impediments to the divorce. Various fears, realistic and unrealistic, may keep a couple from
broaching the issue of divorce or from pursuing it steadily once it has been raised. Therapists may smooth the divorcing process by addressing these fears directly.

There's often a lot of shame related to mothers and fathers and relatives and friends. And dependent upon what we know about the parental situation, we help them see that there are ways of getting support from their parents. If they can't get it because of the hangups of that other person, then that's the way it has to be. That doesn't change anything—"you don't die from it." is a favorable statement that I'll make. "It hurts, but you don't die from it."

One respondent discussed a sequence of steps by which he gradually shifted marital therapy to divorce therapy by attacking the underlying fears that, for different reasons, the idea of divorce aroused in each partner. A schematic account of the kind that follows may make matters appear simpler than is the actual case. We wish primarily to focus attention on the "orchestrating" quality of the therapist's role in producing a mutual readiness to divorce.

(a) Repeated efforts were made during joint sessions to solve marital problems and enhance the marriage. All such efforts were sabotaged by one or the other spouse.

(b) A separate meeting with the wife was held during which the therapist asked directly whether she had considered divorce.

Yes, in fact she had, and he had threatened to kill her and had actually come after her with a gun, and she was just terrified. Therefore, she put divorce out of her mind, and she felt imprisoned.

(c) The therapist raised the possibility that he might be able to reduce the husband's rage at the idea of divorce and aim the therapy in that direction in a constructive, protected manner. Would the wife be interested? Her response, "Definitely."

(d) Separate sessions were held with the husband to uncover the source of his deep-seated rage. Why is he sticking around? Why is he putting up with it? And all this is of thing. Not saying he wanted a divorce but saying, how come he's never thought of divorce. Never. And it was becoming very clear to me that he would see himself deprived of the children. That was the main thing.

(e) Attempts were made to reassure the husband about his parental role.

The intervention that was really concrete and specific was my saying to him, "Look, even though the two of you may get divorced, I want you to remember one thing: you will always be the biological father of these children. No other man can possibly take your place as the father"—giving him some kind of identity, some separation, because his feeling clearly was that the divorce spelled the end of everything.

(f) A return to joint sessions during which the possibility of divorce was discussed and the prospects of a continuing post-divorce alliance was used to control the husband's anxiety.

"I see the divorce is over, and you people have been able to do what few people can do, which is to have an amicable relationship as friends. And you go over; you know she's married or has another guy, and it doesn't bother you. Of course that man is not the father of those children, and you're really only going over there primarily to be with your kids, to pick them up, and to see her as a friend. And whatever she has going with that guy is immaterial."

(g) Continued strengthening of the parental alliance by emphasizing to the husband the wife's importance as mother to their children.

Then he got into another of those death fantasies—that she would die, and he would have the children, and his mother would look after the children, and she'd raise them properly. And then we got into, "What would that really be like?" And he began to see very clearly that his mother didn't do a very good job on him and wouldn't do a very good job on his own kids—and that his wife was doing a pretty good job. That was a very important breakthrough there.

(h) A return to separate sessions with the husband to dissipate another emotional roadblock to divorce—his intense jealousy of the idea of his wife with another man. This was accomplished through the desensitization procedure described earlier.

2. Arguing in favor of divorce. While attacking the fears that are holding up the divorcing process, the therapist may also become a subtle or not-so-subtle advocate of divorce. The most commonly described tactic for advocating divorce was an appeal to self-interest combined with an articulation of the drawbacks of the marriage.

The task was to help get her angry enough—instead of pleading—"I need you"—to recognize: "I deserve something better. Why shouldn't I? I'm genuinely loved by a man, instead of having you, who's really wanting to be with somebody else." The task so often in marital therapy is helping people to build sufficient self-esteem so that when they're making the decision or the choice, they have in mind with a greater sense of what's in their own best interest—and not out of fear. The therapeutic goal was for her to recognize that, even though she at first cried bitterly and understandably about feeling so abandoned, she could come around to the view that there was plenty wrong with him; she had idealized this man to the point that he was quite unreal. Because he was not giving her all that many good things. And so her view changed from the feeling that "I'm being betrayed and abandoned" to "I don't really need you any more than you need me."

3. Disputing negative assertions about self.

I, as a professional, know this is what is going to get in your way. You're going to say, "I failed. What can we do to combat it?"

Although many respondents spoke of the importance of being supportive and caring of clients in the throes of a divorce crisis, the nature of this therapeutic assistance was most often reflected in comments about the importance of contradicting negative self-statements rather than in direct praise or encouragement. Depending on the source of self-doubt, the therapist may directly challenge the notion that the failure of the marriage was due exclusively to one spouse's shortcomings (the other spouse also played an important role); that one spouse's decision to leave the marriage is a reflection of the other's undesirability (both spouses had their own problems, distortions, or needs); or that ending a marriage is an admission of failure (it may be a sign of, and opportunity for, growth).

4. Enforcing physical separation. Physically separating the parties may be used as a tool for assisting in the decision to dissolve the marriage.

The people are hanging on to each other, and yet they are obviously on the way toward divorce—or I believe that they're going toward divorce. I will suggest some movement apart that will allow them to draw back from each other—figuring that drawing back will allow them to decide either that they want to come back together or that they really want out. Instead of talking about one person leaving the house, I'm suggesting the space; a change in the space between them—sometimes what happens is, instead of doing that, they'll move into different rooms, for example.

Several respondents felt that once a decision for divorce has been made, joint sessions are no longer indicated, since such sessions may foster unrealistic fantasies of reconciliation. Given the notion of psychic divorce as an inherently ambivalent and unstable process, such a concrete representation of the new reality was
viewed as particularly desirable. (The disinclination to see the couple jointly after the divorce decision is also, of course, correlated with the view that the therapist has no role to play in the mediation of divorce settlements. For respondents who do see such a role for themselves, joint sessions in the postdecision phase are viewed as desirable and even necessary.)

5. Increasing "marketability." A client cannot be expected to work constructively on divorce if to do so implies the attainment of a condition of poverty and social isolation. An important therapeutic task, therefore, is to assist in the development of needed work or social skills. The development of such skills can also facilitate withdrawal from psychological dependency on the spouse.

I make very specific suggestions: "Who are your friends? Do you have friends who give parties? How about a political club? How about going to church?" I'm very specific about pushing them out into the world, because if they don't get out into the world, they're going to continue to feel the loss and abandonment and resentment of their spouse; and when they jump against their own real world outside, the separation and loss of the spouse ceases.

Couples' groups can also provide useful positive social feedback for a client with an unrealistically low sense of his appeal to the opposite sex.

It may be necessary for the therapist, supportively but firmly, to put the client in touch with the apprehensions that have motivated avoidance of constructive problem-solving.

A technique that's been quite useful is a future-projection technique in which I get people imagining they are divorced—time is passing—and what they anticipate. And very often if they get into it, they get into touch with the loneliness, the alienation, and so on. And then it's a matter of my saying, "What could you do to offset that? What kinds of reinforcements could you look for—

and how do you go about doing it?" And then you get a kind of modus operandi: "Well—would I advertise in a 'Singles' newspaper? Would I go to a singles bar?" And then we begin to explore the various options.

Role-playing techniques may also be used.

I'm a great believer in all kinds of therapy, of having fire drills—we do a lot of role-playing, role-play party games, and small talk.

In some instances a more blunt approach may be needed:

At one point I said to her when she was talking about whether she should get a job—she'd always delay—"You've been agreeing to get a job, talking about it, doing nothing, don't come back until you get a job." She said that she was indignant. She said, "I've never heard of anything like that; that's terrible." It was that sort of high-pressure tactic I was using.

6. Enlisting the support of family and friends. Ambivalence about the decision to get a divorce may also be weakened if the client's closest associates can be enlisted as allies.

Where a husband has left a rather dependent wife, partially as a means of controlling her, partially as a threat—if she doesn't do as he says, he's going to stay away—sometimes I utilize friends to help provide support, immediate emergency support for the wife, in order not to give in to the husband's threats, in order for the wife to maintain some kind of stability, so that the husband is not able, then, to come back, find the wife shattered psychologically and then be able to take over and be twice as bad as he was before.

The Settlement Phase

1. Making the parties face "reality." Because they are undergoing an emotionally trying experience and because there are complex matters to decide, a divorcing couple may need help in planning the terms of their divorce in a realistic man-

ner. While permitting the husband to visit the children whenever he likes may have the appearance of a generous concession on the part of the wife, wouldn't a clearly defined visitation schedule allow her the necessary freedom to begin dating again? A man may wish to contest the financial demands of his wife, but how does he anticipate gains compare with the predictable costs?

Fights over money, in particular, may lend themselves to the forceful presentation of reality:

I had one couple come in here, and they were going to get a divorce, there's no question about it. And the wife said, "Look, I need twelve hundred dollars a month and he won't give it to me." And the husband said, "But the most I can give her is six hundred dollars; that's all I can afford." "Why twelve hundred? Why six hundred?" And I pulled out paper, and I said, "Do you think that what you're going to offer and what you're going to get bears no relationship to reality? What is your rent? Let's put it down. What is your telephone bill? Let's put it down. How much do you use for groceries and for the butcher and the baker and the chocolate factory?"

Introducing a needed time perspective is another reality function the therapist may perform.

Very often people fight like hell with lawyers about the agreement when it deals with visitation. They fight over that so hard, when actually the needs of the children at this age level will not be so important five years from now. They will have their own lives; they are going to say "no" to you on occasion. I point this out—that this is for now, that she needs this structure, that life will change, other things will happen, she may get married. There are certain things that seem important now—and they are important—but they will change; it is temporary.

The therapist may also make the partners see the psychological facts of life with regard to their spouse:

Well, he's a very funny fellow, and he was willing to be very generous if she would agree not to have a lawyer make the terms. He's willing to be a very generous man if he is in control. He's afraid of losing control. So it was quite possible to help her to see that she could leave him that sense of control without being too scared that he was not going to take care of her properly, he'd take care of it for her. And he's more generous and loyal than I have been able to get him to be at any time.

However important making the parties face reality may be, the ambiguous quality of therapeutic claims of impartiality is nowhere better indicated than in a consideration of the reality-orienting function.

This function, it would appear, is a fairly common method—and perhaps the principal method—by which therapists may encourage substantive agreements that seem desirable to them and, at the same time, avoid the appearance of partiality. Not bias, but an accurate perception of matters as they are is the ostensible motive behind such interventions. Pointing to the "reality" involved in a complex divorce settlement, however, is not the same kind of reality as pointing to a chair sitting in the middle of the room. It is apparent that at times the definition of "reality" that the therapist chooses may represent an implicit but nonetheless firm value position. That therapists stress the impartial role and gloss over their more substantive interventions is ascribable, we believe, not to any generalized tendency toward deviousness or Machiavellianism, but to the considerable tactical and subjective pressures to appear impartial, sketched earlier. Blindness to one's own agenda would seem to be an occupational hazard.

2. Making suggestions for compromise. Although this is an obvious third-party function, and one that was alluded to, there is little in the interviews detailing the role of the therapist in this regard. A more common strategy for arranging compromises was trying to work through the emotional barriers to accepting reasonable
proposals or dealing with self-critical feelings that are blocking the pursuit of a viable solution.

3. Protecting the welfare of children. The one area in which respondents were not reluctant to acknowledge having goals for settlement other than those chosen by the marital partners had to do with the interests of children. One explanation for their lack of reticence may be that the risks of appearing biased are much lower here than in other areas where therapists might take a substantive position. Presumably, both parents love their children and want to do the best for them. The therapist can scarcely be accused of partiality by either partner if he shares this concern with them, even if he does not share their concept of what should be done.

The therapists’ interventions on behalf of minor children fall into four categories: preventing the worst; mediating terms of custody and visitation; handling emotions; and promoting constructive post-divorce arrangements.

(a) Preventing the worst. Several respondents took a very firm stance with regard to preventing children from becoming pawns in a parental battle. The list of abuses that can occur in such a case is extensive but may include violent fighting in front of the children; denouncing the other spouse to the children; angry and sullen handling of visitation arrangements; and the use of custody fights purely as a bargaining ploy (“I’ll give up the custody battle if she’ll ask for less money”). "Laying down the law" was the preferred tactic for handling such excesses.

There's a lot of talk now about child abuse, but there are a lot of other ways of abusing children without beating them—and these kids were taking a beating, in a real sense, psychologically. And so I lay down the law as far as I saw it—that they didn't have a right to do this to their children; that we should get on with a discussion of how to do it so that the kids weren't caught in between.

(b) Mediating terms. Preventing the worst represents minimal standards for protecting child welfare. Most respondents who discussed their role vis-à-vis children attempt to do more. Fostering cooperative negotiations of custody was one. One therapist advises that this important dimension be deferred until the emotional climate between the spouses has cooled down. Two respondents mentioned involving children to therapy sessions so that their wishes regarding custody and frequency of visitation can be taken into account.

During negotiations, the therapist may also assume the role of advocate of the present and future financial needs of the children. The therapist may suggest close post-divorce physical proximity of the parents to make it easier for children to see the noncustodial parent and may give advice on how the moment of the physical separation of the parents can best be handled to involve minimal emotional turmoil for the children.

(c) Handling emotions. Three respondents described conducting therapy sessions with parents and children together for purposes of dispelling in children notions of guilt about the parental break and the fantasy that the parents can be reunited through some behavior of the child. Joint sessions of this kind may also serve to de-escalate the parental battle by making vivid the turmoil and pain being inflicted on the children.

(d) Promoting constructive postdivorce arrangements. Tactics designed to foster the post-divorce welfare of the children include such things as encouraging regular visitation, advising against the simultaneous presence of both parents during visits to prevent fantasies of reconciliation in the child, and suggesting dating patterns that will do the least damage to the child's sensibilities.34

Since the focus of this study was on the therapeutic role during the divorcing process, little information was gathered about post-divorce interventions. It is apparent, however, that such help, usually in individual sessions with only one partner in the former marriage, is common. Post-divorce therapy may concern itself with the rebuilding of self-esteem, the working through of unconscious factors in new romantic attachments in order to permit a sound remarriage, and assistance in dealing with postdivorce adjustment in work, child-rearing, and social life.

There is also a type of post-divorce therapy in which the divorced husband and wife jointly seek therapy to solve their marital problems. The cause of the child's difficulty in these cases was conceptualized as the parents' unmet paternal and maternal needs. The child's problem becomes the means by which marital involvement of an intense kind can be continued with neither partner admitting, or aware of, the true motivation for seeking therapy. In such instances one respondent spoke of the necessity of "resurrecting the spouses in order to divorce them," i.e. of receiving the matrimonial fantasies for the purpose of successfully laying them to rest.

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Conclusion

Divorce therapy, as it is revealed in these interviews, can mean very different things to different practitioners. It seems likely that we are in a transitional stage in the emergence of this therapeutic specialty. It is our belief that there is considerable need at present for extended discussion among marital and family therapists of the kind of training that will best equip the therapist for effective intervention once the decision for divorce has been made. It remains to be seen what the final amalgam will be—what proportions will be represented traditional therapeutic training and training in the applied skills of the negotiator, the lawyer, and the accountant.

REFERENCES


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